



## Tool Time in Germany



PHOTO COURTESY KOELMESSE

The 2010 International Hardware Fair returned to Cologne, Germany, and picked up where it left off: focused on tools.

**C**OLOGNE, GERMANY — Attendance numbers are an imperfect gauge of a trade show’s impact, but let’s start with them anyway. An estimated 56,500 trade visitors attended the four-day [International Hardware Fair](#) held here in early March; that’s down about 10% from the biennial event’s 2008 figure.

A better measure of an event’s impact is buried in the one-on-one meetings — both planned and unplanned — that fill a trade show’s exhibit-floor hours.

At the [General Pipe Cleaners](#) booth, where a high-tech video-enhanced pipe-cleaning unit was among the products on display, David Silverman presided over a steady stream of what he called productive conversations. “The meetings we have right here in our booth are the kinds of meetings you’d expect when you make a special trip to Europe,” he said. “This is a great show for us.”

General Pipe Cleaners was one of about 30 U.S. companies that exhibited in a block called the USA Pavilion. Here visitors’ companies were promoting a sheet metal cutter attachment ([Malco Products](#)), wet/dry vacs ([Shop-Vac Corp.](#)) and LubriMatic Green lubrication ([Plews/Edelmann](#)), to name a few.

The USA Pavilion has been organized by the [American Hardware Manufacturers Association](#) (AHMA) for 25 years. Companies come for a unique view of the worldwide hardware market in one place, according to Tim Farrell, AHMA CEO. “It never ceases to amaze me that in a lot of cases, people will have really planned for a successful show, made a lot of appointments, but inevitably, they’ll come across people unexpectedly from places they never dreamed of, and it will lead to something,” he said. “That has always been the case.”

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Mobau in Bedburg



Watch the IHF Demo Day video at HCN TV  
[homechannelnews.com](http://homechannelnews.com)



## Tool Time

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Dean Hardwick, of Seattle-based Hardwick & Sons Wholesale Tools and Hardware, would agree with that assessment. Hardwick was among those walking the aisles. One of the areas where he took particular interest was the high-quality vise manufacturers. He also used the show to reconnect with existing suppliers.

Another visitor walking the aisles was Manfred Maus, the semi-retired German retailer credited as one of the founders of OBI, Germany's No. 1 player. He thrust a business card from "Orient Home" into the hand of a reporter, describing the home improvement and furniture concept as one to watch. "Everything under one roof," Maus explained. "If the customer renovates, he needs furniture, and the furniture has to harmonize with the paint or the wall coverings or the carpet."

When asked for product innovations, Maus said he was still looking for something really outstanding — "There are a lot of small things, details and a return to quality."

Some of the products gaining attention were a multi-function ratchet tool from Wera that doubles as a hammer and uses the Colossus of Rhodes as a marketing icon. American companies [Cosco](#) and [Little Giant](#) were among many names displaying ladder innovations of many varieties. Show organizers pointed to multi-functional tools,

dampening techniques for locks and fittings, and new retailer-friendly concepts in DIY product packaging. (See *New Product Spotlight* on pages 3 and 4, and watch the *Demo Day* video [here](#).)

For American observers, the show also served as a stage for the differences between the American and European variations on home improvement. One man particularly well-suited to comment on both worlds is John Herbert, a former Home Depot executive and current general secretary of the [European DIY Retail Association](#).

One difference is in the way the American booths tend to be more aggressive when they go after leads during shows. "When you walk by the American stands, they're all trying to catch your eye," Herbert said. "To me, the U.S. is still the capital of capitalism."

Also impressive, he said, was another observation of American business — the way the team from Mooresville, N.C.-based [Lowe's](#) systematically covered the show. "They walked every gangway, they looked at every booth," he said. "The way that one



Cambridge, U.K.-based Carbides showed its true colors with Diamond Mini Hole Saws.

company has so intensively and systematically operated has impressed me immensely. I couldn't imagine any German company or European company doing that so thoroughly as they have done."

That's not to say the German retailers aren't performing heroically, under some difficult business conditions

— including the famous six-week holidays for employees. In a fragmented market (he pointed to 14 significant home center players), Herbert described the German chains, in general: "These are companies owned by people who are passionate about what they do," he said. "They are not guided by the rules of the stock exchange."

In all, there were 2,868 suppliers at the International Hardware Fair, down 14.6% from the 2008 fair, when the organizers tried a combined trade-and-consumer approach. This year it reverted to the all-trade strategy.

There was a decidedly Asian flavor once again. The country with the largest number of exhibitors here at the sprawling Koelnmesse convention facility was China (884), followed by Taiwan (410).

The fair "has exceeded the somewhat subdued expectations held by many participants in the run-up to the event," said J. Wolfgang Kirchhoff, managing partner, Witte Werkzeuge GmbH, and chairman of the Hardware Fair Advisory Board.

More than 80% of the exhibitors at the International Hardware Fair came from abroad to find new business partners in Cologne and to cultivate their global contacts.

AHMA's Farrell looked at it this way: "To an ever-increasing degree, companies don't have a choice whether to be internationally focused," he said. "That's just the industry today and whether it be selling or sourcing, or really anything else. It's all taking place in a global marketplace today." ■



Lederer, of Germany, presented its hardware in an unconventional display.



## New Product Spotlight



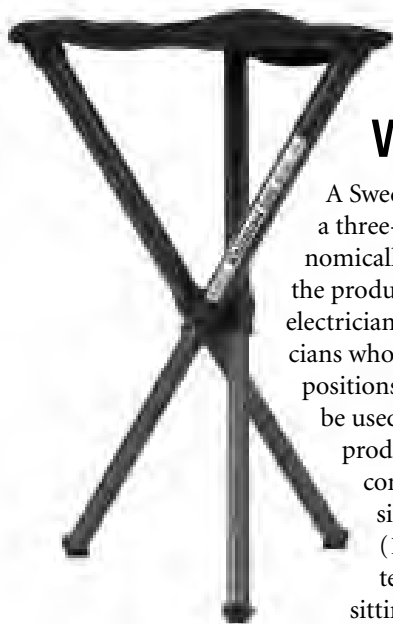
### Rotation laser

The mechanism inside this precision rotation laser from **Stabila** is protected on all sides by sturdy metal bows and a shock-absorbing soft-grip casing. The new tool, a successor to the company's all rounder LAPR100, combines all the important laser functions in a single unit: rotation horizontally and vertically, three-stage scan, plumb line and 90-degree angle. The self-leveling pendulum rotation laser Type LAPR 150 easily changes from horizontal (pictured) to vertical positions. ([stabila.com](http://stabila.com))



### Koloss

At the 2008 International Hardware Fair, the **Wera** booth attracted crowds with its mythically named Zyklop, a swivel-headed ratchet tool. This year Wera again borrowed from Greek mythology with the Colossus-inspired Koloss ratchet hammer. Field research showed that workers often abused their tools, using ratchets as striking tools. Wera combined both functions in one tool. The Koloss ratchet mechanism is designed for durability and also features a fine-tooth 6-degree return angle for performance in tight quarters. ([wera.de](http://wera.de))



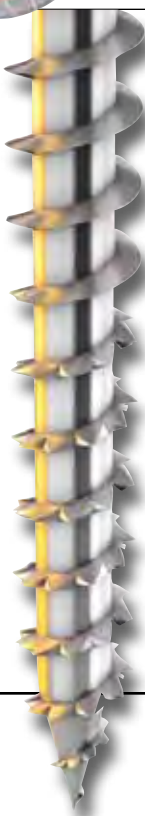
### Walkstool

A Swedish invention, the Walkstool is a three-legged stool with a big, ergonomically designed seat. In Cologne, the product was promoted as an aide for electricians, installers and service technicians who can use the stool to avoid stress positions on the job — but it can also be used for many other occasions. The product, from **Scandinavian Touch**, comes in six models of various sizes — from 45 cm to 75 cm (18 in. to 30 in.). The stools have telescopic legs that adjust to two sitting positions. ([walkstool.com](http://walkstool.com))

### Zeus 990 Vision

Greek mythology again meets hardware innovation in Cologne. Here, the product is a durable, innovative level called Zeus from **Kapro**. Described as the “toughest level in the world,” the Zeus 990 Vision has a horizontal solid acrylic vial that is magnified for better readability, and it incorporates illumination for work in low-light environments. Air-cushioned shockproof endcaps add durability to the tool, which comes with a lifetime vial warranty. ([kapro.com](http://kapro.com))

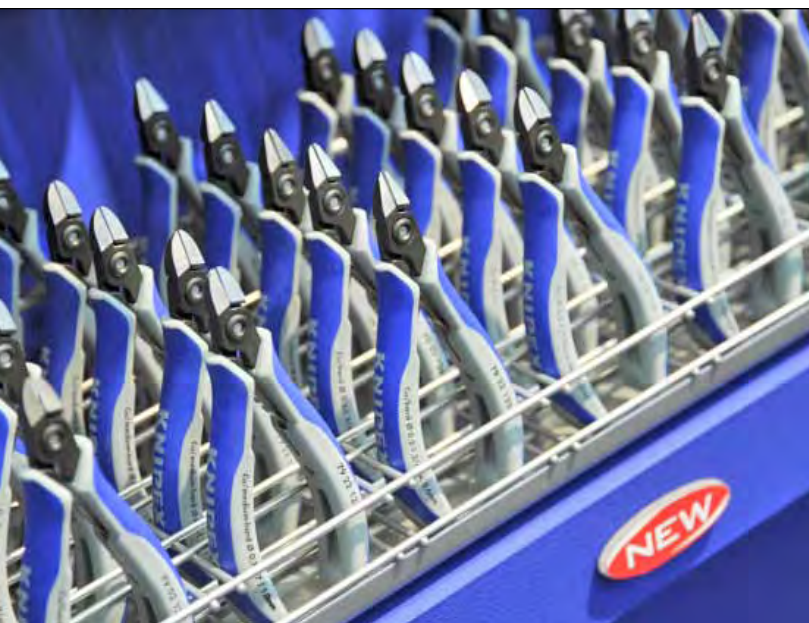




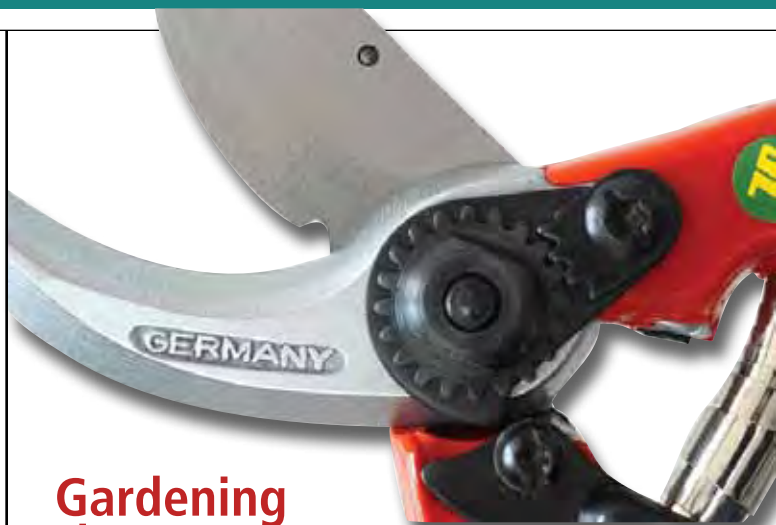
## Heco-Unix Plus

This aggressive looking fastener from **Heco Schrauben** is a variant of the Heco Unix, featuring a Combi screw head with patented milled grooves. The advantages of the product are its ability to perform in wood-to-wood and metal fittings. The Combi screw head allows for precise, flush position for metal fittings. Also the variable pitch of the thread helps avoid loose connections caused by wood creeping/shrinking. The toothed thread tip shown here slices through hard surfaces. ([heco-schrauben.de](http://heco-schrauben.de))

## Precision electronics diagonal cutters



From **Knipex**, these precision electronics diagonal cutters offer ergonomic benefits in the two-color, dual-component handles and a low-friction double spring for gentle and even opening. On the business end of the tool, the precisely ground, sharp cutting edges have a very small beveled edge for exact cutting on delicate components; or also without bevel for flush cutting. Includes round-head, pointed-head and mini-head options. ([knipex.com](http://knipex.com))



## Gardening shears

Made-in-Germany by fourth-generation family owned manufacturer **Berger**, these gardening shears feature an exchangeable blade, forged metal body and chrome-plated hook. It is ergonomically designed with German steel. The product detail here shows an integrated wire-cutting device for the cutting of thin wires. It weighs 270 g (9.5 oz.) and measures 215 mm (8.4 in.). ([berger-garten.com](http://berger-garten.com))

## ProfiStep Combi

Some of the innovations on the versatile ProfiStep rung ladders from German manufacturer **Hailo** include a leveling adjustment feature that allows for safety on uneven surfaces. A tap of the foot on the ergonomically shaped balance pedal will adjust the ladder quickly to the respective height. Additional stability is provided by the ladder's large claw feet and attachable full-surface contact feet. The sturdy design carries a load capacity of 150 kg (330 lbs.). ([hailo.de](http://hailo.de))





## Walking the Aisles: German Edition

**D**uring the four-day International Hardware Fair held in Cologne, Germany, in early March, publishing company Dähne Verlag led (in German and English) a group of show delegates to a diverse trio of German retailers. A *Home Channel News* editor tagged along.

The first stop was German leader OBI (pronounced “Oh-bee”); second stop, Max Bahr, which combined with sister company Praktiker is Germany’s No. 2 player; and third stop, Mobau Bauzentrum, an unusual combination retailer that serves builders and DIYers.

A little background: Depending on which metrics you prefer, the German DIY industry either scored a victory in 2009 or slipped slightly. Looking at companies with stores larger than

1,000 sq. meters (10,700 sq. ft.), the Association of German DIY Retailers pointed to a 0.7% same-store sales growth, and a total sales growth of 2.0%. But Dähne’s stats for the top 20 German operators showed comp-store sales down 3.3%, as total sales increased 0.4% to 27.5 billion euros.

Market fragmentation is a fact of life in German retailing, and there is no dominant single player. The top operators — many of which are held tightly by family-run companies committed to the long term — offer a diverse marketplace of retail ideas.

Also: German retailers run very tight operations, with margins in the very low single digits as a matter of course. You’ve got to be good to make it here.

### OBI, the big orange

It’s the nation’s leader. It’s orange. And it’s a 10,000-sq.-meter (107,000-sq.-ft.) warehouse home center format, including lumber and an impressive lawn and garden department. But from there, the similarities between Home Depot and [OBI](#) get harder to spot. For instance, an American could walk several aisles without seeing a familiar brand.

Dominating the shelves in many aisles is “Lux” — exclusive to OBI, and in fact, a sister company. It was wholesaler Emil Lux who created OBI in the early 1970s. Today there are 330 stores.

The first familiar brand to appear during this American’s tour was [Weber](#) grills — “Das original, top qualitat,” according to the sig-

nage. Some other familiar logos belonged to [Fiskars](#), [Osram](#), [Energizer](#) and [Black & Decker](#).

Oliver Weisse, sales manager for three area stores, pointed to paint and garden as two very strong categories in the Hilden, which opened in March 2009. One of the key new trends here is the emphasis on themes, as opposed to aisles. “In our store the biggest change is the structure,” he said. “We go electrical, to lights,



HCI PHOTOS

Germany’s big orange home center, OBI, is the nation’s No. 1 big-box retailer. The company focuses on themes rather than aisles, with individual shops within the store.

to wall covering, color [paint] — these are all individual shops.”

OBI had a female-friendly feel, even to the extent that the power tool and hand tool sections were subdued compared with big boxes in the United States. Another difference: the bakery cafe in the store’s large entrance vestibule looks remarkably upscale — almost as if it doesn’t belong attached to a home center. But there it was.





# INTERNATIONAL HARDWARE FAIR REPORT

## Max Bahr: "Own" brands

Situated with old-world charm in a sort of suburban town square, complete with a towering church steeple, the [Max Bahr](#) store in Frechen is 12,000 sq. meters (128,000 sq. ft.) of warehouse retailing with an upscale flavor. One of 77 Max Bahr locations

in Germany, it converted from an OBI store in 2007. Inside, another transformation is taking place on the shelves, according to CEO Andreas Mauz, who surprised the group by showing up to lead the tour.

The CEO showed an attention to detail — pointing to a catalog of sunny lawn and garden pictures, and explaining that they were photographed in Majorca or South Africa, "where the lighting is much better."

Weber and Osram were again among the familiar brands to Americans, but one of Mauz's first talking points was the company's effort to boost its "own brand" (or private label) performance from its current level of about 40% to above 50% — not an



CEO Andreas Mauz, who led the store tour, stressed the retailer's focus on developing its own brands.

easy task, he said. "It includes every employee discussion with customers," he said. "At the end of the day, they must bring the product to the customer."

One of those "own brands" is the company's Max Bahr brand, of which Mauz is going after the premium end of the product spectrum across multiple categories.

"We don't want to gamble with the quality when your name is on the product," he said. "You must have good quality."



At Max Bahr, a map title reads: "You can find it all here."

## Mobau: Builders welcome



Mobau in Bedburg brings pro and consumer business under one roof.

Here's one way to try and describe the I&M [Mobau Bauzentrum Erft](#) business in Bedburg: Take a huge open space and divide it in two. On one side, put an upscale builders' showroom with museum-quality displays, including an elaborate two-story clay roofing tile fixture. On the other side, put a well-stocked hardware store and garden center for the do-it-yourselfer. Between the two, imagine a big sunny open area and an espresso bar.

And to complete the picture, throw a building material dealer in the back.

It's a bit unusual, but that's the easiest way to describe this multi-tasking pro dealer and DIY center. The store is part of the Eurobaustoff cooperative, which has 400 German members. To the left of the espresso bar, builders bring customers for home design ideas. It's here where an American visitor sees how successfully the environmentally friendly, dual-flush bathroom technology has spread in Germany. Another distinctive German tradition is the aforementioned [clay tiles](#), which help give so many German towns their distinctive look.

To the right of the bar, the hardware store seemed popular with female shoppers, based on the checkout

lines. Once again, Weber grills and Black & Decker power tools were neatly arranged. Here the tour caught its first glimpse of Stanley, the American powerhouse.

Store representatives explained that current sales were disappointing — but an effort to expand the geographic area of its customer base was under way as a response. 🏠



The retailer's hardware offerings include tools from such American companies as Black & Decker (pictured) and Stanley.