

BY TAMELA ADAMSON-McMULLEN CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

# BRANDED by **COLOR**

RETAILER PHILIP RENO'S  
EXPERTISE IS HIS  
BEST SELLING TOOL



● G&R Paint Co. is located in San Francisco.

**P**hilip Reno, owner of G&R Paint Co. in San Francisco, remembers a piece of sage advice he received as he was starting out in business. “My older brother, who was in marketing said, ‘Don’t ever forget that you’re the brand. That’s how you’re going to succeed,’” Reno said.

It was an “aha” moment for the independent retailer, who has made a name for himself ever since, especially in the area of color.

“Color was something I was intuitively good at,” Reno explained, “so I played to my strength. It seemed like a natural thing to do when it came to branding my store.”

A former painter, faux finisher and colorist, Reno was a customer of G&R Paint before he purchased the struggling business in June 1997. Upon taking the reins, Reno realized that while his competitors sold paint, not many of them were doing all that much with color. To Reno’s way of thinking, paint and decorating retailers primarily are in the business of selling color, and he became determined to go to market on that premise.



● Philip Reno, owner of G&R Paint Co., is intuitively good with color.

Because of his painting background, Reno discovered that he was in a unique position as a dealer to help customers with their color

selections. “I’m not taking anything away from other dealers, but when you’ve put paint on for years and years and years, you intuitively know what people are talking about when they describe a problem because you’ve lived it. There’s no substitute for experience,” he explained.

Contractor customers in particular seem to appreciate that they can depend on Reno to give them solid advice. Contractors now account for 65 percent of sales, and many are long-time customers. “I was a painting contractor myself, so it’s almost like a brother-

hood,” Reno said. “I’m happy to tell them the truth, whatever it is, and they respect that.”

A year and a half ago, Reno con-



● Philip Reno works with a customer at the sales counter of his San Francisco store.

tracted with a well-known Bay-area colorist, Nan Kornfeld, who has further enhanced the store's color

reputation. Kornfeld offers in-store assistance to customers but also makes on-site visits through her own



● G&R Paint features quality paint products.

color consultation business. "Kornfeld has created tremendous value for my business," said Reno, calling her "a spectacular colorist."

G&R Paint's expertise is further reinforced on the store's website and in blog entries on the site, such as this one that Reno wrote on May 20, 2009: "One of the first things I advise a client to do is to hold the paint chip directly in front of them at arm's length. This gives a more accurate read on the paint color. Colors will generally appear lighter when viewed horizontally, this is due to the angle at which the light is bouncing off of them," Reno wrote. The website can be found, aptly enough, at [www.philipsperfectcolors.com](http://www.philipsperfectcolors.com).

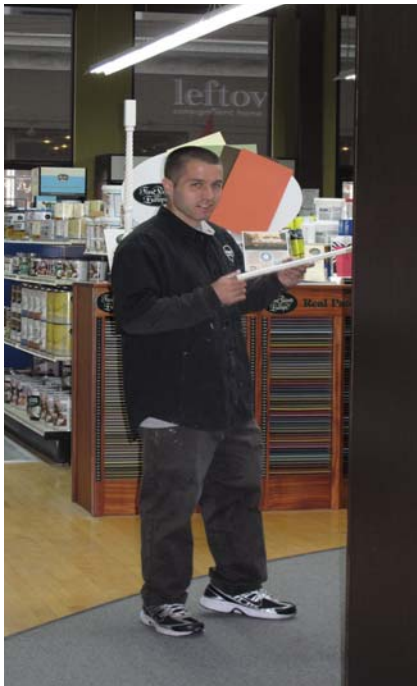
### Philip's Perfect Colors

That same name Philip's "Perfect Colors" graces Reno's proprietary, environmentally friendly paint line, and probably nothing has built the Reno brand more effectively.

The palette started out modestly enough. Reno recalled that he used to paint out four or five of his custom colors on a board and then hang the board behind the counter so customers could see them. Over the years, the call-outs—and customer demand for them—grew until Reno had a full palette of colors.

With Philip's Perfect Colors, Reno is able to offer something not found anywhere else at mass market. All of the colors in the line are "full spectrum," meaning each has some blue, red and yellow regardless of the predominant hue. Black as a toner is omitted since it doesn't reflect light. The resulting paints are complex and luminescent, Reno reported, with rich pigments in quantities beyond the industry standard.

To create the paints, Reno uses the low-VOC base coating and European tinting system from his main paint line, known for its quality resins and finely ground pigments. "I wouldn't put my name on something that I didn't feel was the highest quality," he said.



● **Employee D.J. Lewis stands in full light to work on a color match.**

Philip's Perfect Colors includes 108 custom formulations, many created for G&R Paint's customers. For instance, there's Sally's Green, which Reno describes as an earthy, grounding color; Laura's Gold, named after a client who wanted a specific shade of honey yellow; and Kaitlin's Blue, a soft, gender-neutral color created for a pregnant customer who wasn't sure if she was having a girl or a boy.

Today, Philip's Perfect Colors is G&R Paint's signature draw and comprises 15 percent of all paint sales. The line is only available at the store, although Reno sells it on the store's website, where he has published color samples and descriptions. "So if you want a color in the line, you have to come to me to get it," Reno said, adding, "I've often said that it wasn't the stupidest thing I've done."

The paint line attracts customers from all over California as well as Internet sales from around the country. On a recent Saturday close to quitting time, a new customer drove nearly 70 miles from St. Helena, Calif., and placed a 76-gallon order. Without the line, "This is a sale we never would have had," Reno said. "No one would

ever drive that far to a paint store."

Once in the store, customers can see how the colors look in application. In 2003, Reno moved G&R Paint from its original cramped space to an impressive 7,000-square-foot location around the corner with cathedral ceilings. Reno took advantage of the larger space by painting the interior in colors from his collection, from Orchard Green and Pumpkin Pie to Robin's Egg and Ryan's Red. The paint scheme has become a major selling point for the line.

Philip's Perfect Colors isn't the only one-of-a-kind brand in the store. Reno also sells the "Ann Hall Color Design Collection," created with an area colorist who also was a customer of the store.

A full-spectrum colorist like Reno, Hall was hired by clients to create custom colors in their homes. Hall during her career became a local celebrity for the amazing colors she produced onsite. Impressed with her work, Reno encouraged Hall to create a line of colors that they could market together. Hall has since passed away, but her legacy lives on through her color collection. "She was a dear

person and a colorist of the highest order," Reno said.

According to Reno, Hall's collection works well with Philip's Perfect Colors. "Ann did the same type of full-spectrum mixing with her colors, so there's a perfect synergy between her palette and mine," Reno explained. "They sit next to one another in the store, almost like yin and yang, male and female. It's been a perfect complement.

"I mourn her loss every day, but I'm glad we have something that we can continue to talk about that has her name on it," he said.

One of Hall's standout colors was featured in an article in *Home Beautiful* (March 2010 issue). The color, Ann Hall No. 39, is a chameleon blue-green color that Reno calls "the most beautiful color in the world." Because of the article, the collection has gained national attention, and the color has become a hot-seller.

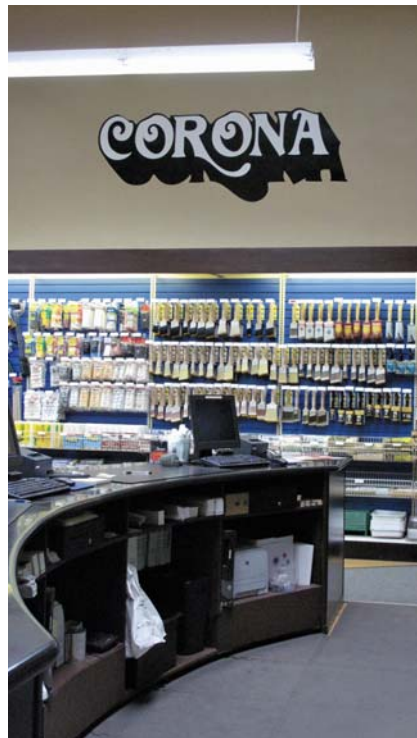
"We constantly get requests for that; I just shipped some out to Iowa yesterday," Reno reported. "It gives us a unique profile and customers we would never have had otherwise."

## The 'Green' Conversation

Aside from these color palettes, Reno sells coatings lines from several other suppliers. They include a major national brand and a rather exclusive decorative line often sought by faux finishers. However, "It really draws all sorts of people, even homeowners who find out by Googling us that we have it," Reno said.

The store's offerings also include a line of low-odor, low-VOC coatings that are free of carcinogens, ethylene glycol and crystalline silica. The line promotes itself as being "safe for people, safe for pets and safe for the environment." This sets well with Reno's customers who increasingly are more environmentally minded. "The line is a great product quality-wise," Reno said, "but it's stronger point is that it has 'zero toxins.'"

Introducing the brand on his blog, Reno described how the eco-friendly



● **G&R Paint also offers a full assortment of sundry products.**



● **G&R Paint carries a line of low-odor, low-VOC environmentally friendly paint.**

coatings in the line were built from the ground up. So instead of trying to remove "bad" ingredients from already existing formulations, the manufacturer started with a unique acrylic polymer and then built the can of paint around it, using only the highest-grade and safest raw materials available.

Reno is proud to offer this product line and other "green" products. He noted that while color used to be topic No. 1 at G&R Paint, it often takes a backseat these days to customers' environmental concerns. And the fact that Reno is able to answer those concerns is branding him not only as a color expert but also as a dealer who is eco-minded.

"When I first started out, you couldn't give 'green' paint away, and now it's part of every conversation. Contractors, homeowners and every-

body else are very much interested in the VOC conversation," said Reno, noting that he continually educates himself and his staff so they can carry their end of that conversation.

Reno not only has entered the "green" conversation verbally but also in writing. He has written what he calls a "Green Manifesto" which begins by asking, "What's the GREENEST can of paint?" The answer? "The one you don't have to buy."

In the body of the copy, which includes a lengthy explanation of VOCs, Reno makes a case for purchasing wisely. "Often times in a desire to be trendy, we may choose the latest fad colors only to grow tired of them before the room really needs to be repainted. If we pick colors that have a lasting appeal, we can minimize the amount of paint used overall, thus reducing

the net impact to the environment," he writes. "Remember, it is not just the paint but also the manufacturing and shipping processes that contribute to the carbon footprint of any can of paint. Therefore, the greenest can of paint is the one we don't need to buy."

Reno believes the most environmentally sound choice consumers can make is to purchase from independent dealers who offer quality products, helpful service and expertise. This makes more sense, he said, than trying to save money at big boxes and discount stores, which often leads to the need to repaint.

Reno's environmental bent also extends to the day-to-day workings of the store, which does everything it can to recycle. As an example, G&R Paint several years ago began donating all of its mistints to neighboring artists, schools and others for use in murals, art projects and similar applications. "We used to pile up the stuff and wonder how to get rid of it. Now we get rid of mistints almost faster than we can create them," Reno said.

The store also recycles paper, cardboard, aluminum and many other materials through a comprehensive municipal policy "that makes recycling easy for us," said Reno, noting that all of his staff is on board with these recycling efforts.

California through its long environmental legislative history often has led the conversation on VOCs, hazardous materials and other issues. So it's not unusual for Reno and his staff to spend a lot of time explaining the environmental benefits and features of their products to customers, who tend to be pretty eco-savvy.

While Reno is happy to talk about environmental issues, he said he'll be even happier when they are no longer part of so many customer interactions. At that tipping-point moment, "We'll have done everything we can do for the environment," he said, "and the sole conversation will be about color again and the things we like to talk about when it comes to paint." ■