

## [Hire An Interior Designer -- For Free!](#)

by [Marilyn Zelinsky-Syarto](#), Posted Dec 8th 2010 9:21AM

**Can't afford an interior designer? No problem. There are plenty of places that offer free interior design advice. Here's where you can go for priceless decorating help.**

Most fashionistas will tell you that having a personal wardrobe shopper is no longer a service reserved for the wealthy; it's virtually free until you actually buy something. The same goes for free interior design services that retailers like [Pottery Barn](#) and [Robb & Stucky](#) to furniture manufacturers like [Basset](#) and [Thomasville](#) offer customers. Well, free, up to a point -- then there is often some unspoken expectation to make a purchase.

Still, free interior design services can be an invaluable and inexpensive way to get the attention of a personal interior designer.



Would you trust your home to the free interior design services of a retailer like Pottery Barn? It may be worth a try even if you don't end up purchasing a whole ensemble. Photo: Flickr, Jeremy Baker

That's how Susan Bartley, a Southern Californian homeowner, felt after using [Calico Corners'](#) free in-home design services. "We had a budget -- we are not millionaires who can hire someone

to start from scratch," says Bartley of her decision to use a retail design service. "We work hard for our money, so we took the conservative route to update our home."

Though she frequented Calico Corners over the years just to daydream about new colors and fabrics, she knew in the back of her mind that they had a free design service. One day Bartley walked in with the intention of making some changes in her living room draperies. She met a consultant almost immediately who began to coordinate fabrics for her. "At first I was a little leery of the process," says Bartley. "But we connected, and she was patient." Patient enough to work with the Bartleys over time to redecorate most of their house, from living room to master bedroom.



**family room is redecorated, thanks to the magic of Ethan Allen's free design service.  
Photos: Ethan Allen**

Interior design consultants at the retail level are hardly new, but the service is gaining popularity because of its value in this economy. [Ethan Allen](#) has had its free design consultations for too many years to count, but the company still works on making consumers aware of the service. "It's surprising that people don't always know what our free design services provide," says Christine Alba, northeast regional design manager for Ethan Allen. Ethan Allen's consultants help clients choose everything from furniture to custom window treatments, bedding, upholstery fabrics, area rugs and accents.

There are the rare occasions when a client will use the free design services without actually buying anything, says Alba, but often it's because the store doesn't have exactly what they need

at the time. "A client may not make a decision right away after a consultation, but the relationship is important, and often they will refer us to a friend or come back another time to move forward with the process," she adds.

But you can't always expect a licensed interior designer when you receive free retail design services. Most often you'll see the term "certified design consultants" as the loosely-used term describing retail associates who offer complimentary help.

Nevertheless, I was interested in Pottery Barn's free design services. The store is aggressively marketing the service, so I decided to try it out. I called two stores in Connecticut, and each was very friendly and explained the service with patience, although the website has clear information, too. I made an informal appointment with one store to go over some ideas for a tough-to-decorate living room/foyer. An associate said to bring in a camera with digital gallery of my problem space and we'd go from there.

It took two visits, but I finally connected with Michele, the lead designer in the Pottery Barn in Westport, Connecticut. Though I feared they'd turn me away when I drove up to the store in my minivan, I was pleased to find how gracious Michele was. I showed her digital images of my problem -- a foyerless living room that I've been trying to make more welcoming. In a heartbeat, she gave me a list of ideas, none of which entailed buying anything, just placing furniture differently -- an arrangement I hadn't thought of myself. I did what Michele told me to do, and the living room area looks perfect--top notch advice for free!

Pottery Barn has a special training program for design consultants, and unlike some stores, most consultants here have a background in design. They will come to your home, but only after they've spoken to you over the phone and deem the visit necessary to the redecoration. Often, pictures will work just fine. "I like to limit the first in-home appointment to an hour," she says. "Many times clients simply bring in floorplans, measurements and gallery, and we never go to the home." Pottery Barn also offers free design classes.

Where else can you go for free interior decorating advice? Here are 11 places to consider, and how exactly they're willing to help.



Calico Corners offers more than just fabric -- it custom upholsters its own line of furniture. Here, a room created from the free in-home consultation service. Photos: Calico Corners

### **1. Pottery Barn**

**What they offer:** Extensive and comprehensive complimentary interior design services that the company is aggressively marketing both online and in-store.

**Biggest perk:** In addition to design services, locations offer frequent free decorating and entertaining classes on various topics taught by design consultants.

**Good to know:** Make a solid appointment with a consultant in the store's design studio. Don't go unannounced to a store looking for a consultant, especially on a weekend when it tends to get busy. You probably won't get much help.

### **2. Ethan Allen**

**What they offer:** A full-service design consult from soup to nuts -- from furniture to drapery and rugs. If walking into a store is overwhelming, use the [interactive online tool](#) that offers a virtual room planner to give you a start. Also check out the free [Style Workshops](#) held in EA Design Centers nationwide.

**Biggest perk:** They won't twist your arm into a purchase if you use the service. In addition, they're flexible in how they'll help. They might help you choose one piece or work with you in the redesign of your whole house.

**Good to know:** Parts of the service are not for the time-crunched or the tech-phobic client. The consult may take time, and there is some cutting edge on-screen technology involved with the process.

### [3. Calico Corners](#)

**What they offer:** Calico Corners, known for the extensive line of quality upholstery fabrics, also manufacturer quality furniture. A certified design consultant will come to your home for more involved projects.

**Biggest perk:** If fabric is your thing, you've come to the right place. Overall, the stores seem to be customer-friendly and without attitude. Ask for fabric swatches.

**Good to know:** Upholstery fabrics can be costly.

### [4. Mrs. Howard Personal Shopper \(online\)](#)

**What she offers:** This retailer's blog is an elegant and user-friendly site with design ideas, and yes, it's also a store. It's almost like having an email conversation with your own interior designer.

**Biggest perk:** The blog has a comprehensive list of decorator-approved paint chips and ideas. If you are as lost about paint colors as I am, you will appreciate and bookmark this site.

**Good to know:** Mrs. Howard stores are not in all areas of the country.



One of the scariest things to do is choosing a paint color for a whole room off of a tiny chip. Why not see how it looks online with one of the free interactive paint tools that lets you "paint" a whole room? Photo: Flickr, Niznoz

### [5. Sherwin-Williams \(online\)](#)

**What they offer:** Though a few paint companies have interactive online tools to help you choose the perfect paint color, some sites are easier to navigate than others. I spent one hour on another leading site and still haven't figured out how to use it correctly. But I found Sherwin-Williams' site a snap. The Sherwin-Williams Color Visualizer tool is easy to handle, and it's

actually fun to use.

**Biggest perk:** You don't have to go through digital gymnastics or log in to get instant results. All you have to do is have an image ready that you'd like to upload, then start playing around with color.

**Good to know:** Colors on screen are not precise -- go get a paint chip once you narrow your online choices.

## 6. [Mannington](#) (online)

**What they offer:** The Virtual Decorator tool is easy to navigate, but you have to log on to create a quick profile. The tool allows you to work with flooring products and wall colors to see how everything coordinates. You can play around with everything from wood flooring to laminate to tile. It's well worth checking out.

**Biggest perk:** An easy to use tool with lots of choices to play with.

**Good to know:** As with paints, the color and texture tend to differ from screen to reality. It's difficult to design a kitchen or bath because the wall only allows for paint colors, not for tile. There's a trick (designate all walls as floors if you're doing a kitchen or bath), but the perspective gets lost and tile on the walls looks weird. I also did not see any way to use carpeting in this tool.

## 7. Home staging services

**What they offer:** Home stagers often have a background in interior decorating. They are trained to prop -- or decorate -- a house to sell fast. Stagers often work with realtors and builders, and you'll see their work in model homes. Find a room stager in your area using a specialized [directory](#).

**Biggest perk:** If you plan to sell your home in the near future, the service can be invaluable. Find a realtor who works with a stager or find an independent stager who can come to your home for a consult. Then decide if you want to put some of her ideas into action. If you want the stager to do everything for you, then you'll have to pay up.

**Good to know:** Staged homes are often not set up for real-life living. They are decorated to appeal to a home buyer's senses.

## 8. [HGTV's Rate My Space](#) (online)

**What the show offers:** Create a profile and sign in to upload gallery, then wait for others to rate your space and offer feedback. If your space is worthy, the show's producers may call you to help give your space a makeover.

**Biggest perk:** This popular and well-known site has loyal viewers who like to rate and offer friendly advice on new entries. You can upload a shot of a poorly decorated room and not worry about being heckled. It's also a great source of inspiration because you're bound to find a decorating dilemma similar to your own -- the spaces are real rooms from real homes.

**Good to know:** You run the risk of zero views, no advice or "lite" advice from non-professionals.

## 9. [Kirstin Drohan Interior Design](#) (online)

**What she offers:** Kristin Drohan, an interior designer, recently started Free Advice Fridays on her blog. Send in your gallery of a project, and she'll post help on her blog.

**Biggest perk:** You can live anywhere and Kristin will take your decorating dilemma on. In most instances, she will provide a rendering solution that will be posted on the blog to help you with

your project, too.

**Good to know:** You may have to wait a while for Kristin to review your dilemma because she's busy with a thriving studio. But it can be worth the wait.

## 10. [IKEA](#)

**What they offer:** Tucked away in their catalog on page 368 is a blurb about free "home furnishing advice." IKEA has a staff of interior design consultants that offer professional advice and personal service. It's an informal program, and it's one of many at IKEA; they'll also help you with measuring, installation and assembly. The home furnishings advice service helps with floor plans, furniture selection and will take walk-in appointments, according to IKEA spokesperson Janice Simonsen.

**Biggest perk:** Customer service at IKEA is friendly and helpful, even on weekends when they are busiest. The associates are willing to help, even if they aren't considered the store's interior design consultant.

**Good to know:** They do not offer the service in every IKEA location, and you need to call your local store to find out if they offer it -- not an easy feat.

## 11. [Ava Living](#) (online)

**What they offer:** A new way of getting free and inexpensive design help online with a tier of professional services. The "free" level offers a design critique of your room (via a photo of the room) by up to three designers of your choice.

**Biggest perk:** You get to choose which designer or designers you would like to use by reviewing their portfolios.

**Good to know:** You may get "lite" advice unless you pay up a level. Still, it's probably a good place to start as far as the basics.

**If you've used another free interior design service, or have experience with any of the ones on our list, let us know in comments below!**

If you don't want to learn how to [think like an interior designer, this article tells you how.](#)

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