



Understand brand marketing to spend wisely  
on your next refrigerator, range, or dishwasher

BY SEAN GROOM

**W**hether you're building a new kitchen or updating the appliances in your old one, you'll quickly discover a dizzying universe of proliferating product lines and models with only slight differences between them—leaving you wondering how to get the best value for your dollar.

The multitude of appliance brands and models available today is no accident. Manufacturers purposely target narrow market segments by both price and cooking interest. Each appliance brand or collection aims at a focus-group-tested and divided market, often with a backstory or character traits assigned. GE, for instance, breaks kitchen users into four types: *aspirer* (passionate but learning), *enthusiast* (passionate with ability), *laborer* (ambivalent with ability), and *reluctant* (without enthusiasm or ability). The features bestowed on a model depend on the consumer segment it targets, overlaid with a “good-better-best” marketing strategy. For example, Bosch has its 300, 500,

and 800 series of appliances. GE has its Profile, Café, and Monogram collections, and it recently added the Artistry series.

Another strategy is for a large holding company to market different brands targeted at different types of customers. Frigidaire and Electrolux, for example, are the “value” and “upscale” brands of the same company. And Whirlpool Corporation sells products under at least five different brands—Whirlpool, Maytag, KitchenAid, Amana, and Jenn-Air.

In the Whirlpool family of brands, Amana is targeted at customers whose first priority is efficiency. KitchenAid is aimed at serious cooks who can't—or won't—spring for Whirlpool's premium Jenn-Air brand. GE has targeted its Café series at aspirers and its Monogram series at enthusiasts. The difference in features is noticeable, although it's the cheaper Café models that often have more features because they're aimed at helping people learn to cook. These features make

# REFRIGERATION

If you make energy efficiency a priority for any appliance, it should be the fridge. That's the Department of Energy's take as well. This September, the DOE will roll out new energy-use requirements for refrigerators and freezers, lowering maximum annual energy consumption by about 25%. In practical terms, today's Energy Star requirements will become the new baseline. In the fourth quarter of 2014, almost every manufacturer will have introduced more-efficient models. (Those meeting the new standard will have a black background in the center of the familiar yellow Energy Guide sticker.) You might consider delaying your purchase if you want the most-efficient appliance or if you think the price of current models will drop. (Manufacturers were able to use the older regulations until Sept. 15, 2014, so some less-efficient fridges will remain on the market.)

Refrigerator prices generally increase with the number of doors and the degree of integration with surrounding cabinets. A higher price also gets you more capacity and ice-and-water dispensers. Inside, however, the glass shelves and plastic trim in a mid-priced refrigerator are similar to what you'll find in a Sub-Zero built-in that costs four times as much. What does vary is the ease of access to bins and shelf-height flexibility, but that isn't always consistent with price. Hands-on testing is the only way to see what works best.

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If efficiency is your primary concern, you'll save a lot of money on a refrigerator. Basic, small (16 to 20 cu. ft.), top-freezer models without features such as ice makers or water dispensers top the efficiency list. They are available for less than \$700 and consume 335 to 360 kwh/yr of electricity, which costs about \$40. They offer basic shelf flexibility, two crisper drawers, and at least one door shelf that holds gallon-size containers.

Bottom-freezer configurations place the most-used groceries at eye level. Prices start around \$1100 for 20-cu.-ft. fridges and approach \$2000 with an installed ice maker, stainless-steel doors, and an extra 3 cu. ft. of capacity. Side-by-side configurations are available in this price range, but they don't do well in terms of energy use or refrigeration performance.

**Basic fridge, better design.** GE's Artistry fridge (\$990) is a fairly simple model with basic storage. The side-opening bottom-freezer door makes access awkward, but a high-gloss enamel finish, gently curved stainless-steel handles, and an arched door offer a unique style.



The first French-door models had a bottom pullout freezer and split swinging doors on the refrigerator. Newer four-door versions have a wide refrigerator drawer between the armoire-style double doors and the freezer drawer. With lots of visible sealed drawers that have adjustable humidity, French-door models are great for storing fresh food. Energy consumption is about 200 kwh/yr more than with a top-freezer model, but these fridges offer LED lighting, digital controls, a large amount of flexible storage, and filtered-water dispensers. Counter-depth models are also available in this price range, as well as various air-freshener technologies that promise to make that open box of baking soda unnecessary.

**Savoir faire.** LG's French-door refrigerator (LFC22770ST; \$1800) offers great visibility and access to refrigerator items as well as a 10-year warranty on the compressor. Multiple temperature and humidity sensors and airflow channels regulate temperatures.



**THRIFT**

\$700 to \$1600

**CONSIDER**

Frigidaire,  
GE Artistry,  
Whirlpool

**VALUE**

\$1600 to \$4000

**CONSIDER**

GE Café,  
GE Profile,  
Kenmore,  
KitchenAid,  
LG, Samsung,  
Whirlpool

## REFRIGERATION

Integrated and built-in refrigerators are the most expensive. These are 84-in.-tall (traditional fridges are 70 in.), large-capacity, counter-depth units that are available in a variety of door configurations, including refrigerator- and freezer-only “columns.” Water dispensers, if offered, are often inside the door to accommodate panel inserts. With dual evaporators and sometimes dual compressors, temperature and humidity regulation is typically excellent, but energy performance is all over the map.

**Split personality.** Sub-Zero’s refrigerator and freezer columns can be installed side by side as shown here (IC-24R and IC-24FI; \$6490 and \$6650) or in separate areas of the kitchen. Available with polished stainless-steel doors or outfitted with panels for an integrated look, they have wonderfully beefy, smooth-operating hinges and magnetic seals on all four sides of the door to ensure freshness. The interiors, however, are not that different from a \$2000 fridge; there’s only so much you can do with glass and plastic.



### CONSIDER

GE Monogram,  
Jenn-Air,  
Liebherr,  
Sub-Zero,  
Thermador,  
Viking



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A higher price gets you better humidity control between freezer and fridge from dual evaporators or dual compressors, which means foods will keep longer. You’ll also find LED

lighting and mechanical air cleaning in models priced above \$2000.

Internet connectivity has also made its way to refrigerators. Whirlpool’s 6th Sense-enabled models allow you to change your

refrigerator’s temperature from your smartphone. LG’s ThinQ system promises, among other things, the ability to track refrigerator inventory and expiration dates. When a future version tracks inventory after

scanning receipts or product bar codes, this could save time and money. For now, though, the amount of data that needs to be entered into your smartphone makes it highly impractical and unlikely to be used.



cooking fun, easy, and engaging for the neophyte. Monogram is clearly a descendent of the commercial kitchen. In the words of GE product manager Steven Hopmann, “Monogram is about refined elegance and superlative quality.” Monogram appliances look and feel more robust and cost about 35% more than those in the Café line.

There’s a cachet associated with a luxury brand, so appliance manufacturers tend to position their wares toward the upper end of the market. Even though its three major-model series span the kitchen-appliance category, Bosch claims to target only the top 20% of the market, the idea being that its “good” models pick up where others’ “best” models leave off. Brands also try to appeal to aspirational luxury: LG and KitchenAid position themselves as premium brands, as do Sub-Zero and Wolf, even though they target wildly different budgets.

GE’s new Artistry series bucks this trend somewhat. The idea is simple, affordable appliances with design touches that are pleasantly retro. It will be interesting to see what hold this brand establishes in the market.

### At what price value?

All of this raises questions of value: At what point are you paying for the reflected glory of the brand name? Does price really indicate quality? Just how much better, for example, is a Bosch 800 series dishwasher than one from the 300 series? What exactly separates a \$3500 LG refrigerator from a \$7500 Sub-Zero? They’ll both keep your food cold, right?

The good news is that, generally speaking, major brands offer quality products that work as intended. So what accounts for the variations in the scores of *Consumer Reports’* top 40 refrigerators, which range from a high of 85 to a low of 70? Almost exclusively, it’s energy consumption and ease of access to storage bins.

If efficiency is your priority, it’s easy to pick out the high achievers because all fridges and dishwashers sport the Department of Energy’s Energy Guide sticker comparing relative energy consumption. Cooling performance doesn’t vary much—especially within broad price bands—so choosing a fridge in your budget range comes down to convenience features.

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# COOKING

Many homeowners choose the range, or the cooktop and wall oven, and then build their kitchen around this anchor appliance. Typically, the selection process starts by choosing a fuel type. For equivalent models, the price difference between gas and radiant-electric products is negligible. Prices range from \$700 for a basic four-burner range to \$14,000 for a commercial-inspired four-burner gas range with a griddle and double ovens.

Electric induction cooktops and ranges cost more than appliances run by other fuel types. A few years ago, manufacturers reserved the technology for their high-end cooktops; now there are options between \$1200 and \$1800. That’s still expensive, but there’s a lot to recommend the technology: It’s the most energy-efficient way to cook, it boils water faster than other methods, it’s programmable, and it has unparalleled heat response with precise control.

The cost of cooking appliances is driven by features and touch points. Freestanding commercial-style cooking appliances made with heavy-gauge stainless steel and sturdier doors and handles cost more. Their stylish, backlit knobs look nice, but they don’t improve temperature control. Buy this type of product because it’s a style statement you want for your kitchen or because you cook a lot of complex meals.

If cooking isn’t a passion, you may be better served by traditional slide-in or stand-alone ranges that offer programmable controls and more timed-cooking features. You can now find ranges with induction cooktops for about \$1800. They’ll bring a pot of liquid to a boil, then automatically reduce the temperature and hold it at a simmer.



You can get a basic range with a radiant cooktop or sealed gas burners and an electric oven for less than \$700. Just above this price point, however, you’ll start to find self-cleaning ovens, stainless-steel finishes, convection ovens, and the placement of the lower, baking element under the oven surface for easier cleaning and safety.

Doubling the price offers convenience features such as a bridge element for griddles on radiant-electric stoves as well as several oven upgrades: steam cleaning, better convection technology, fast preheat, digital controls, double ovens, and warming drawers. You can also purchase slide-in ranges with upfront controls.

**Cleaning up.** For about \$1100, LG’s radiant-electric range offers two standard and two high-output elements, a warming element, and a convection oven with an infrared grill. It also boasts a 20-minute EasyClean cycle as well as a traditional self-cleaning mode for baked-on messes.

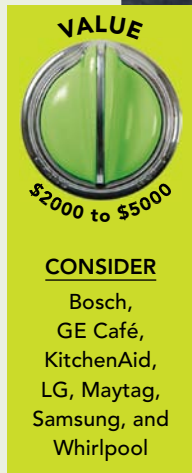
**THRIFT**

\$700 to \$2000

**CONSIDER**

Frigidaire, GE, GE Artistry, KitchenAid, LG, Maytag, Samsung, Whirlpool

## COOKING



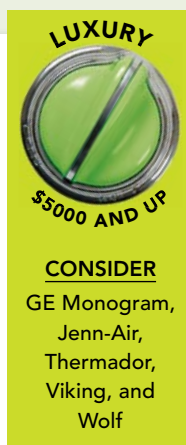
Two possibilities in this price range offer value not available at lower price points: induction ranges and separate cooktop and wall-oven combinations. If you're motivated by energy efficiency and easy cooking, induction has a lot to offer. Separating the cooktop from the oven has the practical advantage of being easier on your back, and it offers design flexibility. Wall ovens come in single

and double configurations. Double wall ovens have significantly more capacity than double ovens in a range. Among premium brands, a double wall oven and a cooktop will run between \$4000 and \$4500, but at this higher price, you can gain the comfort and safety of a horizontally swinging door with Bosch's Benchmark series (\$2900 for a single oven, \$4500 for a double oven).

**Separate functions for flexibility.** Whirlpool's five-burner, 36-in. gas range (GLS3665S; \$1100) has all of the functions you'd expect at this price: a high-output 15,000-Btu burner for searing and stir-frying, full-width continuous grates for sliding pots anywhere on the cooktop, and sealed burners for easier cleaning.

Entry into the world of freestanding professional-style ranges starts at around \$5000 for a 30-in. range. Each step up in width, from 30 in. to 36 in., 48 in., or 60 in., adds significantly to cost—anywhere from \$2000 to \$3500 per increment depending on the brand. These appliances aren't wallflowers—a Viking, Wolf, Monogram, or Thermador range will be noticed for its stout presence. Other than the sheer size and number of cooking burners, the most notable feature unique to this price range is the availability of steam convection ovens.

**Worth the price?** Thermador's \$14,000 48-in. Pro Grand steam range (PRD48JDSGU) is beautiful to touch, and the heavy oven doors are outfitted with dampers to prevent clunky operation. The handles fit nicely in the hand, and their solid connection to the door feels like it was welded instead of made with fasteners. Not all extravagantly expensive ranges have this solid feel.







## Consider a speed-cook oven

To maximize value and space, Jamie Gold, a San Diego-area kitchen designer, recommends appliances that can pull double duty. She suggests clients consider a speed-cook oven instead of a second oven and a microwave. Speed-cook ovens, such as GE's Profile Advantium 30-in. wall oven (PSB9120SFSS; \$2300), are smaller convection ovens that rely on combinations of microwave capability, halogen heating, and convection air movement to broil, bake, speed-cook, warm, or proof. Some models also include a steam option. A speed-cook oven runs from \$1700 to \$2500, but it takes the place of a microwave, a second oven, and a warming drawer. By comparison, a built-in microwave typically costs \$500 to \$1000, and the price differential between a single and double oven is over \$1000.

# CLEANING

Dishwashers are all about convenience. They shouldn't be heard, dishes should come out clean, and racks should be flexible enough to accommodate whatever plates, glassware, utensils, and pots you typically clean. Rated for both energy and water use, dishwashers are another place to focus on efficiency in the kitchen. Look for inline water heaters rather than exposed elements; they are a more efficient and consistent heating method. Models with turbidity sensors that evaluate the wash water for food particles can adjust cycle length as needed; fine filters with lots of surface area to trap and remove food waste reduce the amount of water used. (Filters are also quieter than motorized disposal choppers.) Stainless-steel tubs not only look better than plastic ones, but they aid in drying the load.

If you regularly load the dishwasher with hard-to-clean items such as deep pots, baby bottles, or sports bottles, look for machines with specialty jets. Whirlpool, for instance, has models with jets mounted low on the sidewall to scrub pots; GE has models with tine-mounted jets that fit inside bottles.



UNDER \$750

### CONSIDER

Frigidaire, GE, GE Artistry, LG, Maytag, and Whirlpool

The first thing you'll notice about dishwashers at the lower end of the price scale is that the tubs are plastic. This savings allows manufacturers to add convenience features at relatively low cost. However, less-expensive models have less sound-deadening insulation and louder motors than more-expensive models, and likely list a 40 to 50+ dBA rating (a decibel rating for frequencies having the greatest effect on the human ear; the lower the number, the quieter the unit runs). An entry-level Maytag dishwasher (MDB6769PAS; \$585) allows the user to load the machine without having to scrape dishes, thanks to an in-unit food disposal. Maytag doesn't list the operating decibels, so it's probably relatively loud. It has a delay wash and six cycle options, including sanitize, baked-on food, and steam rinse. This Energy Star-qualified dishwasher uses 294 kwh/yr of electricity, and a standard cycle uses 4.2 gal. of water. The baked-on food cycle uses 12.3 gal.—twice that used by Bosch's heavy-duty cycles.



**Emphasis on convenience.** Rather than offering quiet operation and boundary-pushing energy and water efficiency, Maytag's JetClean Plus dishwasher promises "no-scrape" loading and heavy-duty scrubbing performance.

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"It used to be if you wanted a particular feature, size, or configuration of appliance, you would have to pay top dollar," says architect Russ Hamlet. "In addition to more choices, I also see better quality and, of course, better efficiency in a lot more brands. You don't have to break the bank to get good quality with the features and looks you want."

One gauge of mechanical quality—durability—is the model's warranty. Longer warranties indicate a company's confidence in the machine's internal parts. Here's where luxury brands stand out. The standard warranty in the kitchen-appliance world is one year. The relatively affordable brand LG, however, warrants its refrigerator compressors for a decade. At the upper end of the market, Liebherr, a high-end Swiss refrigerator company, covers all parts for 12 years; includes labor on the entire appliance for the first two years; and covers labor on the sealed system for five. Another luxury brand, Viking, has a three-year full warranty and longer limited warranties (10 to 12 years) on the mechanical parts of its appliances. (This may be a response to a spate of poor-quality consumer reviews in recent years. As one industry rep told me, "Google has not been Viking's friend.")

### Shop smart

Online research is great for narrowing the field of appliance choices; you can identify the most-efficient performers, view styles, sort through features, compare prices, and read customer reviews. But a digital screen is no substitute for grasping handles, opening and closing doors, and experimenting with the function of refrigerator bins, oven shelves, and dishwasher racks.

With regard to pricing, remember that manufacturers are keen to keep people in their brand family, so you'll often find hefty rebates for each additional appliance you buy. When this article was researched, GE was offering \$100 back for each additional appliance purchased; Sub-Zero and Wolf were promising a \$1000 discount when buying their refrigeration and cooking appliances together, and Thermador was willing to throw in a dishwasher with the purchase of a range. Buy one of their fridges as well, and they'd give you a free range hood. □

Sean Groom is a contributing editor.  
Photos courtesy of the manufacturers.

## CLEANING



**Solid performer.** Bosch's 300 series dishwashers share many features with the pricier 500 and 800 series. All three series are stingy with water consumption.



**Is this thing on?** With a hidden control panel and whisper-quiet operation, Bosch's 800 Plus dishwasher shines a small beam of light on the floor to let you know it's at work.



**CONSIDER**  
Bosch, Jenn-Air, KitchenAid, LG, Miele, Samsung, and Thermador

The shared wisdom of people I spoke with is that Bosch is a good choice if you're looking for value in a dishwasher—and that extends from the mid-range to the highest-priced models. Architect Russ Hamlet tells his clients to choose any dishwasher they want, as long as it's a Bosch. At my local independent appliance store, Holloways in Simsbury, Conn., marketing manager Laurie Donahue says that Bosch dishwashers far outsell other brands.

Bosch's models run from about \$500 to nearly \$2000. What does an extra \$1500 buy you? Bosch's 800 Plus series dishwasher (SHX9PT75UC; \$1999) is its quietest and most expensive. It has a flexible third rack, interior lights, an adjustable-height middle rack, and progress-indicator lights that shine a small beam on the floor. What's remarkable, though, is how many of those features are carried over to the 300 series (SHE53T55UC; \$799). Both use the same amount of water (2.9 gal.), and the 300 model uses 259 kwh/yr of electricity, only 20 kwh/yr more than the 800 Plus model. Each holds 15 place settings, has a stainless-steel tub, and is equipped with a sophisticated leak-protection system. Aside from one less wash cycle and the lack of a third rack, the most noticeable difference is likely to be sound: The 300 series runs at 46 dBA and the 800 Plus series at 38 dBA, indicating better insulation levels and probably a slightly different motor.