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Apple Inc. opens 20,000 s/f store on Boylston St. in Boston

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The Green Monster replica on Boylston St. has been dismantled at last, and underneath is a giant profit machine, clad in tempered glass. It's Apple Inc.'s newest retail store. At about 20,000 s/f, it's Apple's biggest store in America and second biggest in the world - smaller than the store on London's Regent St. but larger than Apple's outlet on West 14th St. in Manhattan.

At ground level, you'll find dozens of Macintosh computers, from the tiny Mac mini desktop to the hulking Mac Pro servers. A glass staircase spirals upwards to a second level full of iPod music players and iPhones. At every step, you'll find lots of friendly, capable salesfolk. Many carry wireless point-of-sale devices that let you swipe a credit card and purchase anything you see, right on the spot.

But head to level three, and you'll find Apple's most significant retailing innovation - service, and lots of it. Indeed, the entire floor is dedicated to customer support and education, much of it free of charge. You can sign up at the Apple store for free training courses on every aspect of Macintosh software. Haven't bought a Mac yet? Take a few courses anyway; each is an opportunity for Apple to make one more pitch.

If your Apple product isn't working quite right, go to the Genius Bar, where trained technicians will answer your questions. You can even make an appointment at Apple's website. Then there's the One to One program. For \$99 a year, you get the services of an Apple personal trainer once a week for a customized tutoring session.

You'll find these services at every Apple store, but few can serve as many customers as the Boylston St. site. Apple vice president Ron Johnson, said that the new store's Genius Bar is designed to handle 1,000 customer inquiries per day.

The store also features Pro Lab, a new series of free eight-hour courses for advanced training in topics like video and audio production. The big Manhattan store began running Pro Lab courses last year; Boylston will be just the second Apple store to carry them.

Your typical big-box electronics retailer would go broke offering this level of service, said J.P. Gownder, senior analyst at Forrester Research in Cambridge. That's because these retailers sell products from many different manufacturers. If they offered special courses on using, say, Dell computers, they'd have to do the same for Hewlett-Packard as well. "They're selling so many disparate brands," Gownder said. "They can't really push any brand over any other brand."

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