In the second annual, casual survey of just fewer than 50 contractors around the country, it appears that lasers, track guns and benders are still giving the most bang for the buck. It also seems that manufacturers have granted some of the contractors’ wishes that were listed in last October’s issue—most notably more user-friendly scaffolding and better spray-on fireproofing. Wishes that have still not been granted are a more durable screw gun and a better tool for cutting steel studs. Maybe this year will be the year these issues are licked.

Of the 47 contractors canvassed, productivity improvements and cost reductions guesstimated were mainly in a range between 20 percent and 30 percent (15 votes), with seven folks voting in the lo-percent to 19-percent range and with six votes in the 31- to 60-percent range. One gave a 100 percent improvement, and another, 300 percent.

The Winners

Here’s what some folks are saying about the most popular tools:

“The small hand-held lasers speed up layout time for drywall and acoustical,” (Texas) “improves accuracy,” (Vermont) “allow us to send one man to a site sometimes, instead of always sending two,” (Connecticut) and “increases production 25 percent” (Nebraska). “They’re number one for time and labor savings,” says a contractor from Canada.

“The new, fully automatic screw gun is quiet, fast and extremely low maintenance, with very little cleaning needed, saving us 20 percent in terms of time and money” (California). “They free up a worker’s hands, so he doesn’t have to use both of them to load and cock the gun. He can hold his metal in place with one hand and shoot it with the other and so do about twice the amount of work.” (Kentucky). “Screw guns ‘last longer now’ (Ohio), “with 25 percent less downtime” (Oregon), and “less breakdowns that add up to 15 percent savings in time and money” (Florida). “We don’t have to do a lot of things twice, saving us about 25 percent of our time” (Nevada).

“The new airguns that work off gas mean we don’t have to unload loads of tools from the truck or drag around a compressor or worry about electricity” (Tennessee).

“Trackfast (manufactured by ITW Ramset/Red Head) increases production 20 percent when applying metal track to concrete. The material costs a little bit more, but we save on the labor” (North Carolina)—on balance, it’s pennies
saved, but it adds up” (Texas). “Shooting track is faster and easier, and the men like it” (Canada). “It increases our production by 25 percent” (Florida). “It’s three times as fast as the old single-shot fasteners” (Illinois).

“A track bending machine enables us to do curved walls, speeding up our contract work by 25 percent” (England). “It’s easier and about 40 percent faster to construct radius walls and furdowns and barrel-vault ceilings” (Arkansas). “It puts kinks into studs instead of cutting and weakening them so they have to be reinforced. It’s faster because you simply set your radius, kink your stud and there is no need to reinforce” (Virginia).

“The TrackBender™ (manufactured by Radius Track Corporation) reduces time on the job by 50 percent and maintains the structural integrity of the material, because you don’t have to trundle it” (Texas). “We use it on walls and soffits, reducing labor costs 35 percent. One of the big plusses is the certainty that you have everything exactly the same radius—very consistent quality” (Colorado).

“Our compound miter saw gives us precise cuts” (Missouri) “and reduces our labor costs about 50 percent” (Maryland).

“My chop saw reduces costs by 10 percent” (Georgia) “and has better safety features as well as gauges and dials for cut angles, which makes it easier to do the job. We have fewer miscuts, which is definitely a production enhancer, and fewer cuts on various body parts, which also enhances production” (South Carolina).

Chief EIFS Winners

Quite a few of the tools relate to exterior insulation and finish systems. “A 4-foot wall skimmer—a hot wire that you run down the wall—reduces the sanding process by 30 to 40 percent” (Arkansas).

“A side-grinder—a mechanical device for grinding and cutting the finish—has been a great help in all the remediation work we do. We can quickly and plainly do a cut at the termination and get a nice, clean edge. We use a diamond blade rather than a masonry-type blade, because people can be injured when stepping on them” (Georgia).

“An air-driven glue machine makes application of foam-to-foam much easier and saved us 20 percent in application time because it adheres immediately on spraying” (Indiana).

“A lath ripper provides a 15 percent increase in production and 5 percent reduction in material costs” (California).

Software provided the biggest gain this year for two contractors. “We spend the same amount of time estimating, but can handle more jobs now. We provide more information to the general without having to spend so much time compiling it. Changes to the specs are easy to plug in. Instead of spending our time in tedious, take-off work, we’re spending it on the analysis” (Arizona).

“Our computer system now lets us track everything. We’re able to get better information from it, which makes us more competitive. With the old system, we’d have to wait a month for information, or it just wasn’t available” (Colorado).

Other Runners

For those who want to reach higher places, “Scissorlifts save you having to set up scaffolding” (Connecticut) and “small, step-up scaffolds are 100 percent better than a ladder because you can move around and have a larger working area” (North Carolina).

“Taping angle tools save about 25 percent on time and money” (Missouri) “speeding up our production by 10 percent” (Colorado).

“We just bought a new drywall finishing tool that has increased productivity about 10 percent” (Virginia).

“A tool that shoots pins into metal and
concrete decks has upped our productivity 20 percent” (Arizona).

“The fireproofing Tommy gun allows us to get 20 percent more material onto the building and steel with fewer people and less effort” (Indiana).

**Gripes and Groans**

As usual, we asked the contractors what areas of their trade were still too inefficient or irksome, and which someone could make their fortune finding a new or better tool to improve efficiency or ease of use. Chart C (at left) lists the more common complaint areas. Topping the list (seven complaints, all from Southern states) was a request for better personnel.

With four votes, a programmed robot was the first preference. A man from Tennessee wants “a good workforce that speaks English.” A contractor from Indiana wants “a monitoring device to put on your men so you know where they are.” Of course, these are half-joking requests, but we all know that many jokes contain a little bit of truth. Simpler to resolve are some of the following areas in which improvements are requested.

**No Ceiling on Improvements**

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“Lasers have come a long way and are production enhancers, but they are still quite expensive, and the optics could still use improvement” (South Carolina).

Along the lines of a complaint last year about wallboard being too heavy to move easily, two contractors are asking for ways of moving the panels. “We lose 20 minutes a day dragging sheets around within a building” (Texas). “Moving a sheet at a time takes a lot of time and physical labor. We need some way to transport large amounts of drywall around a building” (Vermont).

Two contractors had a beef about industry software not being up to the functionality and user-friendliness of other software on the market.

“Technology has entered the drywall industry, but the software still needs a shakeout. There are a handful of estimating packages, and they all need to be streamlined to be on a par with
other software and to be able to talk to each other. The market leader is kludgey and too hard to learn. Another package that I use is easier to learn, but it doesn’t have the versatility of the market leader. If I were doing my own thing, I’d focus on estimating software as a niche. Project management has always been a big area for folks to focus on, but the estimating side needs some attention” (Massachusetts).

“We need a program that is tied in to the architect’s plans, which can show the field superintendent and the job foreman how to do something when they don’t know. They could point to a certain area on the screen and it would show the details. If the information wasn’t there, it would then revert back to the architect and he could figure it out and get back to them, thereby saving time and labor” (Indiana).

For EIFS, the following suggestions were made. “I’d like to see an application tool that made EIFS easier to fasten than the hawk and trowel method” (Indiana).

“We do a lot of EIFS work, so tools that make it easier for us to detail with mesh and plaster products are always beneficial” (Wisconsin).

A contractor from Florida is an idea man who has a couple of suggestions for EIFS-application equipment: “How about a mobile mixing unit for EIFS that one person can tilt, move and then set up to mix 15 gallons of base coat at one time? Maybe something attached to a dolly with full-barrel tires like an all-terrain vehicle with the drill motor already in place. A small-scale version of what the gypsum-floor people use for popping the liquid floors, with everything measured automatically.

“We have a lot of waste, otherwise, with people cracking bags open and then eyeballing and guessing at the mixtures. A laborer might be in a bad mood or a hurry one day and will mix too much of one way.

“If you could pour your basecoat material in and then open up a valve, you wouldn’t be limited to whatever a 5-gallon pail can hold. If you were to mix half a bucket of base coat and then fill it halfway with the cement and halfway up with the acrylic, you’re over the top of the bucket. You can’t mix it because it’ll be spilling all over your feet. So you have to mix three-quarters of a batch at a time and eyeball it. It’s very wasteful.”

A Washington man says, “A new and improved groove cutter
for EIFS would be useful, as the current ones are too big and bulky.”

**Other Requests . . .**

“The finishing processor we use is still too slow for the time frame most contractors have for a project. We need a product that dries faster and still sands easily, maybe even eliminating a coat” (Colorado).

“A tool that eliminates butt seams and another one that makes hanging ceilings easier.”

“An easier and less expensive tool for placing flashing under windows of existing homes would be very helpful” (Florida).

“A Missouri man requests “a tool that

“There are several taping tool systems, but each has a problem. One company, for instance, is introducing pneumatic tools that will one day be good enough to use. We haven’t had much luck with them because they keep breaking down” (Nebraska).

“We fabricate steel trusses, and I’d like to see an alternative method for fastening, other than screws and welding, that’s efficient, fast and can be done from one side of the truss” (Kentucky).

“The Trackfast is a great tool, and we need to be able to apply the same process to acoustical hangers,” says a North Carolina man.

“We need something to cut heavy-gauged steel, heavy metal studs. With existing equipment it takes too long and it’s too hard,” is a comment from Oregon.

“Track benders still need to come a long way in terms of consistency and overall performance. With so many radiuses being spec’d, a good, automatic track bender would be a definite plus. I’ve used a hand-working model a couple of times, and it wasn’t that consistent. A more user-friendly one, maybe using air to increase consistency, would do the trick’ (California).

This is hardly one for manufacturers to consider, but this comment from an Arizona subcontractor is worth mentioning: “I wish there were some way to train general contractors not to go with the lowest bidder every time. These bidders often leave out parts of the project. The problem is made worse because architects have a tendency to send out incom-
COOLER CHAT

As one contractor from Indiana put it. “You sit back and think about all the predicaments that field personnel—every one of whom is a potential incident—can put you in. At the end of the day, you may as well laugh about it, because the rest isn’t going to help.” The truth is that owners, generals, subs, suppliers, architects, inspectors, clients and every other part of life that touches the trade can be just as much a source of grief and laughter.

Our monthly Contractor Review article will therefore host this monthly sidebar titled “Cooler Chat” to bring you some of the lighter moments from working on and off site. It’s time we brought a smile to the face of the contractor from Illinois who said, “I don’t think anything amusing ever happened.”

E-mail info@words-images.com with the most amusing incident of your career.

This month, we look at moments involving tools.

“I had an OSHA inspector walking around with the project manager and the superintendent for the contractor. The inspector was talking to us when an employee on the fourth floor dropped a 4-foot level behind the inspector. We all saw it falling down but nobody said a word—just sweated. The level drove into the ground about 6 feet behind the inspector, leaving 1 foot sticking up above the ground. The inspector turned around and walked right on by it—he never even knew it happened!” (Kentucky)

“Well, in retrospect we could laugh about the time a guy screwed his hand to the wall . . . .” (North Carolina)

“Some funny things happen out there, but it’s just a typical work day—such as knocking over a crane.” (Georgia)

“A foreman told an apprentice to fetch a sky hook, and he disappeared to find one. That’s only meant to happen in jokes.” (Canada)

“We sent a new delivery person on the construction site for a pick (a stretch board). He came back with a pickax.” (Missouri)

plete drawings, leaving a lot of room for interpretation. They also add addendums to the job. We have a job bidding tomorrow, for example, that’s more than $1 million in ceilings. We’ve got two more addendums coming today, and that puts us in a tough situation.

“I would love to give the general a bid and then a week later send him an addendum to that bid: ‘Oops, I missed this.’ We don’t have that luxury but architects do, for some reason.”

While quite a few contractors couldn’t think of any improvements off the top of their heads that needed to be made, three did step out and say that tools today were as good as they needed to be to do the job.

“We’re operating so fast I don’t know how you could get much faster,” says a California contractor. Giving a slightly different twist to the idea was a contractor from Canada: “This is an old trade that has been around for a long time, and if you add something different, you just throw these men into a fit.” Presumably, they are happy with the tools they already have.

No doubt, the R&D departments in manufacturing companies will accept the compliment and carry right on researching for the better mousetrap.

About the Author
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