Drywall contractors are increasingly looking for ways to differentiate themselves from their competition. This contractor thinks he's found a key to his future—veneer plaster!

When Andy Amarone started in the drywall business 25 years ago, he was part of a new breed of wall and ceiling contractors. These guys didn't use plaster; they built their businesses exclusively on drywall. Contractors like Amarone helped push drywall ahead of plaster into the market-leading position it occupies today. But now that drywall has come to dominate interior construction, many drywall contractors are looking for an edge that will keep them ahead of the competition.

To meet this need, the industry has recently developed several new products. Imported Venetian plas-
ter is turning plenty of heads, for example. But Amarone is creating new opportunities for his company by going back to a type of plaster system that is not usually offered by drywall contractors—veneer plaster.

Considering today's popular culture attitude of "everything old is new again," it's not surprising that a contractor would come to see veneer plaster as an option after years of doing strictly drywall. When Amarone Drywall, LLC, a small company based in small-town Hamden, Conn., decided to expand its business, adding a few plasterers to the payroll wasn't that simple. Amarone had to learn how to do it himself.

"At first, I feared it. I was afraid of it," Amarone admits. "It was something I had never done before. But it's a much easier system than I thought it would be. I think that most drywall contractors can do it."

There are a number of reasons why Amarone chose to learn about and use veneer
plaster, but the most basic one is that veneer plaster expands his work potential. Since his company does a lot of repair and remodel work, many of his customers want plaster replaced with plaster, not drywall. Also, insurance companies are demanding this for claims; Amarone explains that the days when he could repair fire-damaged plaster with drywall are over. Veneer plaster satisfies both the customers and the insurance companies.

For new construction, veneer plaster finishes are popular in the upscale residential market because of their high-quality finish, abuse resistance, greatly reduced possibility of nail pops and enhanced aesthetics compared to drywall. With custom home construction booming in many areas, the opportunities for a contractor who can do veneer plastering are abundant.

Even with these opportunities, Amarone has tried to keep his company small “so we can do top-quality work.” It’s this attitude that is at the core of many contractors’ decisions to take up plastering. Even a top-notch skim-coated drywall job doesn’t measure up to the finish of veneer plaster, which “leaves a tremendous glass-like finish,” Amarone says. “By using conventional taping compound, you don’t get as hard of a shell.” This
means that problems with nail pops, ridging and shadowing are virtually eliminated, reducing callbacks.

Perhaps the most often overlooked advantage of veneer plaster is its time-savings. Veneer plaster finishes faster than drywall because it chemically sets and dries. As a result, the veneer finish is usually ready for decorating within 24 to 48 hours. Even better, there’s no sanding. “Using veneer plaster, I can get in and out in one day, as opposed to conventional gypsum board. That has saved me a tremendous amount of time, which saves money,” Amarone says.

**Getting Started**

Amarone, like most drywall contractors, had some experience with the hawk and trowel before he tried his hand at veneer plaster. “We’ve done a lot of work in the past with conventional joint compound,” he explains. “We caught on relatively easy”

Veneer plaster application isn’t really much more complicated than hanging drywall. Amarone Drywall uses the two-coat veneer plaster system from USG. An alternative to this is USG’s one-coat veneer plaster system, in which the interior finish is applied directly over the gypsum base panel. The main differences between the systems are quality and cost. The two-coat system costs more, of course, but it has a better monolithic look unmatched by any other finish except conventional three-coat gypsum plaster.

Since doing veneer plaster doesn’t involve any expensive equip-

Veneer plaster certainly isn’t going to replace every drywall job for Amarone Drywall, but it is giving the company more options to win bids, especially for residential work. Most of the veneer plaster jobs Amarone has completed since learning the system have been smaller residential jobs. These can frequently be finished in a single day, saving Amarone considerable time when compared to doing the same job with drywall. “The time that I save by not having to go back to the job is one of the ways I gain on my profit margin,” he explains.

**Selling the System**

One of the main challenges of selling any plaster system is cost. While drywall is less expensive than either one- or two-coat veneer plaster, this system is a significant upgrade to drywall that many educated homebuyers will equate with value. The additional cost of veneer plaster comes with additional durability and abrasion resistance, a more monolithic finish and increased sound-deadening properties. Many homeowners have found this leads to increased resale value. As a result, they are willing to pay the difference for the veneer system.

Veneer is a bit more expensive to use, about 25 percent more than conventional drywall, but “I’m able to get the extra dollars needed to do this system,” Amarone explains. “It has been profitable.”

Perhaps the most compelling marketing advantage of veneer plaster is the variety of architectural designs and finishes that are possible with the system. When finished with drywall, arches, cornices, vaulted ceilings and other “critical lighting” areas usually need to be skim-coated with joint compound and precisely sanded to achieve a high-quality finish. Not only is this time consuming, but it can be difficult to pull off. Veneer plaster, however, can easily be worked to produce the desired ultra-smooth finish on these areas, often much faster than drywall. Veneer plaster also can be used to achieve virtually any textured finish, including using lie-gauging finishes and the addition of aggregates like silica sand (an Amarone favorite).

Architects and builders can take advantage of these attributes to give homeowners more than just smooth, flat-walled rooms. But to do that, they need a contractor who is capable of working with veneer plaster. As Amarone will tell you, he’s glad that
he can be that contractor. Although “always busy” with drywall jobs before he learned veneer plaster, he’s making more money on the veneer jobs and is building even more veneer business. He still recommends using drywall, but now realizes there is more than one way to finish a wall.

As consumers continue to change their tastes and look for distinction and quality in their homes, he sees a future in being able to provide whatever the market demands.

And now that he is a “cross-trained” contractor, able to handle both drywall and veneer plaster applications, Amarone isn’t afraid of anything, least of all, the future.