While most of the two-dozen contractors canvassed couldn’t think of and had never invented any tool (one said he was too busy to fantasize about new tools), some folks have had some pretty good ideas that they were willing to share.

Some might expect a Californian to say this, but one contractor from the Golden State admitted, “I dream of a tool that
allows me to work while on the beach.” He did go on to say, “But seriously, the kind of tools I’d like to see invented are lighter and more durable versions of current tools on the market that are also faster to use. A gas-powered screw gun that I can keep in my pouch, for instance. We have cordless tools that do pretty well, except they don’t last long enough and don’t have enough zap to them. Their power needs to last longer, too.”

Hold on to your hard hat, because no amount of wild horsepower could hold back this Nevadan once he got onto the subject of tools that do not go the distance. “If you look over the tools we have now compared with 25 years ago, there have been many innovative tools made available, such as lasers. Probably the most innovative tool I have seen hit the drywall trade during that time is the router. We have also seen all these self-feeding screw guns and other wacky tools filling toolboxes around the country, but these are not the things that will change the face of what we are doing dramatically. What we really need is tools that will stand up to the everyday stresses of the job site. That’s the biggest issue. Let’s get better versions of the tools that are out there already. Let’s make it so a laser isn’t so fragile, so that a router bit or a screw gun lasts longer.

“If they could take 30 percent of the weight out of a sheet of drywall, now that would be very useful. There are a lot of wild ideas as companies try to come out with the cat’s meow in innovative design that will make everything so much easier—such as drywall with the screw points marked—but it really all comes back to the old problem: drywall is heavy. It’s a young man’s trade and there is a lot of exposure to injuries. If you are going to ask a guy to hang 40 sheets of drywall a day and each weighs in at 80 pounds, he will be tired by the end of the day. Take 30 percent of the weight out of each sheet and guess what, that guy will be able to hang more and feel better at the end of the day.

“It is off-the-wall when people design stuff to save us all this money on productivity etc., when the tools don’t work. These guys must be smoking crack. I don’t want to take any actual achievements away from them, but some of the stuff just leaves me wondering who would invest in something like the automatic screw gun.

NO WAY TO MAKE IT BETTER?

“Nobody has left it alone in all these years, so they are still trying to perfect something that cannot be perfected, because the screw gun has problems right out of the gate. Namely, that drywall and stud hardness vary so much. You have to line up the gun and material so perfectly to knock that screw in properly. Yet many of the times we are trying to screw drywall onto framing that is cockeyed. So if you don’t get the screw set on the first one, you have to reload another screw. You cannot revisit that screw and get it set. Either you are taking a cordless out, or you are taking a screwdriver out of your pouch to screw that screw in. So why not use the screwdriver in the first place!

“If you have a wall that is 300 feet long with no corners or anything else, the screw gun works great. But it’s wild the amount of money manufacturers invest trying to perfect something that never can be. The screw gun is good in isolated conditions. We are a union company in a union industry and these guys are
professionals and know how to use a screwdriver.

“Yet manufacturers are trying to be innovative with screw guns when the screws cost twice as much a regular screw, and once they have been fired, they can’t be revisited. It’s the same problem with the powder-, air-, and gas-actuated devices used to drive a pin for attaching sheeting or plywood to metal studs. The stud thickness and hardness are not consistent so one can’t achieve a uniform drive, when dealing with a fragile surface such as drywall paper. Sometimes the nail is set, sometimes it isn’t. So it is inconsistent, and the pins cost 10 times the amount of a screw.

“So how can I save money by putting so many more pins on than regular screws in any given time period when the result is not consistent? Screws cost 3 cents a piece and a pin is 15 cents—you have to save a lot on labor to make up for that 12-cent difference. Screw guns are not helping us, yet manufacturers continually try to achieve consistency or perfect a design that is flawed because the substrate being attached to it is not consistent. It is not an achievable target. So how about focusing on tools that can work?”

NO WAY TO MAKE IT LIGHTER?

Another Colorado contractor echoed the Nevadans idea about lighter-weight gypsum board. “There were rumblings three years ago about a lightweight gyp board that was supposed to come out. It was real hush-hush and was meant to be in testing for a UL rating to make sure it would meet all the fire requirements. And I never heard any more about it. I can’t think of a better way to make gypsum board easier to handle and cut down on injuries. So what happened to that board? If we had it, we wouldn’t need to find a tool that could help us put gyp in place. We would also cut down on transportation costs, which I hear will help drive up the price of gypsum at the end of the year in the same way that steel prices have been rising recently.”

Until a lightweight board does come on
the market, it may not be common knowledge that the British have come up with what they call a “helping hand,” a product called Boardmate. This low-tech and inexpensive but seemingly effective tool allows one person to attach full-sized gyp board to ceilings, walls or sloping surfaces.

Another handy little low-tech tool from across the Pond for anyone who has tried in vain to stop the flow out of a caulking gun, is Durgun, which provides a reverse-action trigger that sucks it all back up, preventing mess or waste. It’s called a Durgun because people who make such messes have been known to say “Dur!” whenever they make their frequent mistakes with caulking guns and other tools.

**NOT YET ON THE MARKET**

But what about tools that are not yet on the market? An Illinois contractor is very happy that “Some of the advances in estimating software have been tremendous. It would be great to see some type of software system or handheld device that we could give to our people in the field that would allow them to take real-time data from the job site and download it directly into the office, instead of having to rely on unreliable and clumsy telephone and fax communications.”

Such a networked system would certainly speed communications and projects and avoid misunderstandings. An Arkansan offers another equally good idea “I’d like to see a double-clamp for metal-stud framing. We have many people who are good and quick at framing, but they don’t like to use clamps, even though they do keep the framing straighter and positioned properly. They would rather grab it with their hands and shoot in the track with the hand, even if it is off a fraction.

“If there were some kind of double C-clamp that would clamp on, holding both sides of the stud tight so they could screw both sides at the same time, it would only require them to fasten one clamp instead of two. They would only need to go ‘click, screw, screw’ and they’d be done, especially if the clamp had a lever to fasten the clamps in place, instead of a screw to tighten them.”

By the way, Robert Ward of Managed Subcontractors International in Rogers, Ark., would like to hear from any manufacturers who want to explore this idea, so he can explain the concept and talk
about how he, too, can become filthy rich from this idea!

An Iowan says he’d “like to see taping finishing tools that can finish corners. Other than that, we really need to master many of the tools that are out there already. There are products on the market that could be more cost effective, but I don’t know if they ever will be. By this I am referring to things like stud-cutting machines for lighter-gauge steel. On large jobs, you can justify the cost of the machine based on extensive usage, but how does one justify the cost in a smaller market area such as ours?”

SCREWS COST 3 CENTS A PIECE AND A PIN IS 15 CENTS—YOU HAVE TO SAVE A LOT ON LABOR TO MAKE UP FOR THAT 12-CENT DIFFERENCE

A Kentucky contractor came up with a bright idea for a tool that, on reflection, didn’t seem so bright: “It sure would be good to feed drawings into a machine that could then read off all the materials needed ... . But, I guess that would lay us open to the interpretations of whoever drew the plans, and the vague plans that we so often see these days. Whatever was built using those materials would probably end up looking like a pancake instead of a building.”

A couple of cool-tool ideas, some venting about tools being foisted off on the market, and a request for lighter gyp board. Maybe manufacturers will take note!

About the Author
Steven Ferry is a free-lance writer based in Clearwater, Fla.