Dryvit’s Morsilli Calls On Whole Industry For Applicator Training to Save EIF Market

It requires plastering skills to trowell on the materials comprising the modern exterior insulation foam system and without a response now to training needs this craft skill may not be adequate.

Call it a resurgence of the plastering arts, but the expanding market for the E.I.F. systems can be crushed if the industry does not take immediate steps to assure enough craftsmen to apply materials.

Manufacturer Warns That New Market Will Fail Unless Qualified Applicators Are Trained Now

About the Author:
The author is founder and President of Dryvit System, Inc., the firm that introduced EIFS in the United States. Always a staunch advocate of apprentice and journeyman mechanic training, he sees a problem on the horizon if the total industry does not attack the problem of training mechanics. He pleads for a joint industry effort to put the proposition in focus and to plan properly for the next decade.

Yesterday I talked with the owner of a major applicator/contractor firm in New York State. “You know, Frank”, he said with frustration, “I’ve got all the EIFS work my firm can possibly handle. I’m turning it away and the sad fact of the situation is that the work is being converted to brick, glass, metal—converted to other materials rather than to other EIFS applicator firms.”

“That”, he concluded, “is a sad situation.” And I concur. Work is being shifted to other materials simply because the industry can’t get the skilled mechanics to do the job.

Here at Dryvit, in 1987, we are enjoying our greatest growth year. Reports I get from our distributor firms and applicator/contractor firms that we service, indicate many of them are also enjoying banner years. This type of growth could be continuous for the next decade except for one important item that could hold the industry back. That is a shortage of skilled mechanics.

I believe strongly that “products go...
where journeymen are.” This has been proven, time and time again. If the skills are not available, the price gets drive up. Other products, competitive to EIFS, and products from which you cannot profit, move in, snare the sale and perhaps a different trend begins.

Although I haven’t talked directly with them on this subject, I’m sure Dryvit competitors feel the same way and see the same things happening. They, like us, have active selling and marketing programs to promote the sale of EIFS. A shortage of skilled mechanics presents them with the same dilemma. Substitution of product. A lost profit. A lost opportunity.

I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about this important subject recently. In my own firm, I encourage our people to cooperate with and participate in training sessions sponsored by the unions (local and national). We encourage our distributors to plan and execute training sessions for apprentices and even for journeyman mechanics to further develop and refine their skills. In my files there is a huge packet of mail to Association executives urging them to be the catalyst and get a program moving that will benefit all plastering firms and the EIFS industry.

The recent completion of our mechanics training video, for example, was an expensive undertaking, but it is a necessary investment in providing the teaching tools to our distributor and applicator firms, as well as to unions and trade association groups. Our regional managers are encouraged to stimulate the planning and coordinating of training sessions which in our company we call “cover-ups.” So far in 1987, we have sponsored and helped execute 55 of them and I want that to increase in future years.

One of our premier distributors is headquartered in Chicago. Ned Wood told me recently that he discovered the other day that Chicago once boasted about 5,000 trained plasterers. Today it’s down to 450.

I can’t vouch for the accuracy of these figures but through the introduction of EIFS into the United States, Dryvit and the companies that followed, breathed new life, new opportunities, profitable opportunities, into plastering firms. It is, therefore, inconceivable to me that we as professionals in this industry don’t spend more time, actually making the effort, to nurture the supply of skilled mechanics.

The availability and training of apprentices and journeyman mechanics is a responsibility that should be shared by the manufacturer, the distributor, the applicator contractors and the unions (when a union jurisdiction prevails.)

I do not believe that any of the four groups mentioned should adopt the “limited pie” theory which is—construction is a limited pie and the more pieces means smaller pieces for
The decline of the plastering market has produced an acute shortage of mechanics with plastering skills, a serious problem for E.I.F. manufacturers who depend on qualified applicators to sustain market growth.

Only a unified, comprehensive effort to train qualified applicators will provide the necessary manpower to sustain and expand the growing acceptance of the E.I.F. systems.

everyone. Quite the reverse is true with regard to systems/products as they relate to mechanics. The adage might very well be, “The more there is, the more there is.” The more tradesmen, and the better trained they are, the more products are used and the “pie gets larger for all.”

Ned also pointed out to me another important fact. He said that unions too
often have trouble attracting good quality apprentices into their programs. Somehow the image of working with a hawk and trowel is not as macho as working with a hammer and nails, or becoming an electrician. Or is it that apprenticeship groups all over the country neglect offering apprentice programs in the trowel trades? I don’t know the answer but I do know we have the responsibility to find it.

Our second obligation, therefore, is to improve the image of the skilled journeyman mechanic.

Pride. It is an important ingredient in the success of your plastering firm and, therefore, it is equally as important in the continued growth of the EIFS industry. I know because my Dad was a plasterer for more than half a century and my home was filled with the pride that manifests itself when the wage earner boasts, “I enjoyed my work all of the time.”

All of this to me implies it’s time for action. In my travels I’m hearing too often, “We can’t get the labor.” It’s time to stop letter writing and start doing. Here’s my dream.

All of us—our business firms, our associations, the OP Union—should accept the fact that we must all work at the proposition of solving the problem. No cop outs! No passing the buck! For the EIFS industry I visualize a school for the training of mechanics to install EIFS. I visualize a comprehensive program including wet wall training and panel pre-fabrication training—both so our industry can keep busy 12 months a year. Perhaps this could be some sort of traveling training program with two-week training sessions in major areas. Fact is, I can’t recite the exact way it should happen. I can simply point out that we should make it happen and as we make it happen, we should employ public relations techniques to improve the image of the hawk and trowel trades. All of this is my dream. But if there are those of you out there who can easily see a doubling of the EIFS industry in the next five years, know that this will only happen if quality labor is available to perform the work.

In conclusion, I’d like to repeat the contents of a letter I wrote to many trade groups earlier this year. I think it sums up the situation well.

“1. . . . everybody talks about the need to properly train people in the installation and application of Exterior Insulation Finish Systems (EIFS). For some time now, it has been reported that projects in certain areas are being lost to competitive wall materials such as brick, glass, metal, etc., due to non-availability of mechanics.

“2. There seems to be universal agreement that a triangular effort (by AWCI, EIMA and OP&CMIA) could reverse this dangerous trend.

“3. In summary, everybody talks about the need for training, but no one does anything about it. I, therefore, recommend a meeting of the leaders of AWCI, EIMA and OP&CMIA to discuss the problem.”

This is a call for action!