Ceiling Restoration:

Ceilings Are Profitable Again...
And the Market is Unlimited

By Ken Woolf

The reason the acoustical ceiling restoration market offers so much potential is best explained by its very nature. When it comes to acoustical ceiling tiles, billions of square feet per year are installed and that has been going on for many years. Yet, after aging and discoloration has taken place, ceiling replacement becomes a consideration only as budgets and conditions dictate. They are usually replaced with new only when they have been broken, when another style is preferred and/or when major reconstruction makes saving the old ceiling impractical.

Apart from the availability of adequate replacement budgets, the greatest deterrent to ceiling replacement is its impact on normal routines in the area. Would retailers close their doors to sales in order to replace their ceilings? Would office managers send their clerical personnel home while they replace their ceilings? And would health care facilities refuse to admit those in need while they replace ceilings in patient rooms? To each of these and similar questions, the answer is an obvious no. Those involved would sooner live with a discolored ceiling.

As a result, the sale/installation of new ceiling tiles has not and will not meet the needs of this market. On another note, ceiling restoration is completed in one-third the time and at less than half of the cost. That is why the tighter dollar, the emphasis on renovation vs. new construction and the availability of state-of-the-art products have made acoustical ceiling restoration a growing and profitable source of business for contractors and distributors.

Are We Shooting Ourselves in the Foot?

Initially the typical acoustical supplies distributor or contractor/installer hesitates to become involved in ceiling restoration for fear of competing with new ceiling sales and installation. Yet not one distributor reports an impact on new tile sales as a result of taking on restoration products and supplies. And ceiling contractors are not forced to walk away from as many jobs once they can offer either new installation or restoration, depending on what the conditions demand.

A Look at Restoration’s Appeal in the Marketplace

A suite of offices is to be vacated and renovated before advertising for a new tenant. In one-third the time required for replacement, the ceiling is given a new surface finish without damaging the acoustical or fire retardant qualities.

The ceiling in an operational area must be treated in order to brighten the sales and/or work environment. After the work area has been closed for the day, the ceiling is restored to a like-new appearance before the employees return in the morning.

Initially, building owners and managers who have avoided replacement are delighted to learn that their old ceiling can be restored without the use of, and with superior
results than, cleaning chemicals or damaging paints. They are even more delighted at how economically they can attain a recoated ceiling with a lifespan equal to (and often greater than) that of new tiles.

Environmentally, ceiling restoration reduces the amount of solid waste disposal. This is an issue that is of increasing concern in the public and private sectors.

**The Product Technology Exists**

The state of the art in restoring ceilings is the acoustical tile and ceiling coating. This specialty coating differs from a traditional paint in that it does not damage the acoustical value of the ceiling material and is itself a fire retardant product. However, coating manufacturers should provide independent test data to support their claims regarding effects on acoustics, tire rating and toxicity levels. Lesser quality coatings will not hold their color over time as well as the better ones.

An additional advantage is that the tiles will not be stuck to the t-bars even though, in order to coat the grid at the same time, the tiles are typically sprayed in place. Unlike cleaning, the result is a uniform color that, in most cases, is as white or whiter than the original tile surface. The coating can also be tinted to provide pastel shades.

Since the spraying of a surface coating is part of the original manufacturing process, recoating an acoustical ceiling tile is a logical extension that makes sense.

The acoustical coating is commonly applied to a ceiling in one-third the time required for replacement and for less than half the cost to the customer. Alongwith the development of the product technology, application procedures have been refined. As an example, it is common to completely restore the ceiling of a fully merchandised retail store (8,000-10,000 square feet) in one night, once the facility has been closed to the buying public.

**Where’s the Meat?**

Many wall and ceiling contractors pay off their labor and material costs and say, “Where’s the meat?” Or, “Where’s the profit?” It appears as though everyone with a pickup truck is a contractor, and they are all bidding on the same jobs. This results in a low bid that leaves little profit after expenses have been paid.

The ability to offer a service that is unique makes the difference. When a contractor offers the customer an alternative that makes sense, he or she is more likely to be awarded the job and at a rate that includes a respectable margin of profit. The following table summarizes what the contractor can offer:

**Unique Characteristics of the Acoustical Tile Coating**

1. Produces a surface finish that is equal to or better than the one applied during the manufacturing process.
2. Can be applied with any machine that is capable of spraying paint.
3. Does not require a primer to keep dirt from yellowing through.
4. No franchise or quantity purchase requirements.
5. Can be purchased in the quantities required for the specific job.
6. Will not damage the tile’s acoustical properties or fire rating.
7. When coated in place, will not stick the tile to the t-bar.
8. Can be tinted to pastel decorator colors.
9. Results in a consistent color across the ceiling, even on ceilings where odd tiles have been replaced.

**So, What’s the Bottom Line?**

There are four alternatives available to property owners: they can replace the ceiling with new tiles, they can have a conventional paint applied, they can have the old ceiling chemically cleaned, or they can restore the old ceiling with a specialty coating.

After all is said and done, the big question has to do with profit. How much can a contractor expect to earn as compared with the offering of other services?

The best way to answer that question is to compare each of the alternative services using national averages. The table below presents the average price contractors charge for each service and what they pay for the necessary materials. In the case of replacement, moderately priced tiles are used to reflect the greater percentage of jobs.

When it comes to calculating labor cost, there are variables to consider. Some of those are:
1. Union or non-union personnel
2. Facility considerations
   a. Size of job
   b. Vacated space or not
   c. Number of ceiling fixtures to be masked (sprinkler heads, exit signs, security cameras, etc.)
   d. Type and number of lights to be shielded or masked.
   e. Height of the ceiling.

Some rules of thumb are:
1. The application of a paint or the specialty coating requires one-third the labor needed to remove and replace the ceiling with new tiles.
2. The application of a paint or the specialty coating requires twice the labor of chemical cleaning.
3. The average, non-union cost of labor and materials for a specialty coating application is $0.13 to $0.18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost per sq. ft.</th>
<th>Replacement</th>
<th>Painting</th>
<th>Cleaning</th>
<th>Specialty Coating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contr. Price:</td>
<td>$0.90 - $1.30</td>
<td>$0.25 - $0.35</td>
<td>$0.20 - $0.35</td>
<td>$0.40 - $0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials:</td>
<td>$0.25 - $0.35</td>
<td>$0.04 - $0.06</td>
<td>$0.02 - $0.04</td>
<td>$0.05 - $0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
per square foot.

**Summary**

There is an unlimited market that consists of ceilings that will not be readily replaced and are in need of treatment. State-of-the-art products make it possible to cost effectively restore ceilings without damage to their acoustical or fire retardant characteristics.

Contractors, and the suppliers whom they purchase from, are in a position to penetrate that market with services and materials that yield impressive profits.

Restoration products should be selected on the basis of hard data. Reports from recognized independent testing laboratories should document the product’s effect on acoustics, fire retardant characteristics, safety (such as toxicity), and even light reflectance.

The market is there and the materials/products are available. The ceiling business is profitable and those who make the effort will reap the benefits.

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**About the Author**

Ken Woolf is president of ProCoat Product, Inc. (PPI) of Stoughton, Massachusetts, and is considered to be one of the chief innovators in the field of acoustical tile restoration. PPI perfected a coating material for acoustical ceilings and manufactures a ceiling cleaner that is also state of the art.