Opening New Doors in the Residential Steel Market

With the Proper Training and the Right Tools, Today’s Work Force Could Make a Difference

By Stephen M. Moss

Is steel real? You bet it is! The problem is finding qualified “hands” to make it happen. Liken what’s transpiring now in the construction industry to what Lee Iacocca had to deal with in turning around the Chrysler Corporation some years back. Iacocca inherited a narrow-thinking, ill equipped, poorly trained, unmotivated work force that thrived on maintaining the status quo. His approach was simple and straightforward: “Lead, follow or get out of the way!” were the words I think he used. You know the rest of the story. Re-engineering, re-training, re-tooling and rethinking brought Chrysler back from the grave.

What that has to do with construction today in the United States is that, try as technology will, shades of a narrow-thinking, ill-equipped, poorly trained work force are alive and well--and thriving on the status quo.

What Will Change the Market?


But that doesn’t seem to jive with some of the status quo mentality that permeates the construction industry. The work force is not eager to change. Why should it? What’s the incentive?

In Europe, the incentive is tradition and craftsmanship, and it has been for hundreds of years.

Here in the United States, it’s all price. Cheaper is king, no matter what.

Retraining? Well, what kind of retraining has been offered by the makers of steel studs, the makers of screw guns used to put up the steel, the screw distributors that supply the screws to fasten the steel? Even the drywall manufacturers, associations and unions could be of measurable assistance in composing palatable educational video solutions to retrain their constituents. But we just aren’t seeing that happen. Seminars have been offered by private individuals to add a little illumination to “the dark mysteries of steel,” how to get it up and keep it up, but the turnout is spotty at best.

The bottom line is that builders cannot find qualified workers to build with steel because they themselves don’t know how. They’ve been building out commercially with steel for years. So what’s the big deal? Turns out the “nail-pounding piece workers, hangers and
framers” just can’t seem to get a comfort level going regarding the use of a screw gun, pocket laser level and screws. What they should know, what they need to be approached with and taught is that there are tools and user-friendly technology currently available that make the conversion not only simple but far more time (labor) effective.

**Automation May Be the Answer**

The blessings that come with automation, however, also can be a curse in the eyes of unions and hourly workers. With these automated tools, productivity and efficiency go up, but hours spent on the job go down. For example, putting up drywall with one of the new automated screw guns like the Rocker7 from Grabber Construction Products has been known to cut “rocking” time in half.

Small-size and medium-size repair and remodel contractors love these new add-on Rocker tools because they are very easy to operate, they fit most existing screw guns and they sell for under $20. The Rocker also comes in a model specifically designed for steel stud framing, which makes life easier for those making the conversion from hammer, nails and wood.

Quik Drive Tools in Tennessee has a tool available for subfloor attachment when working with steel. The saving grace of these new tools is that the screws for these tools come in pre-punched plastic strips or coils (as in the Quik Drive subfloor tool). This means no more “hanger’s hand” that left the left hand of the drywall hanger bleeding, infected and otherwise in shambles from metal cuts, splinters and punctures from manually “fingering” screws.

Screws are more expensive when purchased in these new screw strips, but it’s not the cost of the screws, rather it is the cost of labor that makes a meaningful impact on bottom-line efficiency.

Smart contractors will send their workers to working seminars to learn steel construction. Same for unions. Ask your metal, screw and drywall suppliers for how-to videos. The tools are there. All you need to do is provide the training and incentive. *CD*

**About the Author**

Stephen M. Moss is with Grabber, Concord, Calif.