By Kenneth Woolf

Anyone who has monitored trends within the industry during the past few years is aware of the decline in new construction activity and the increased emphasis on building renovation. Of equal importance in assessing the industry trends is the considerable percentage of the renovation work being conducted in facilities that are occupied by ongoing commercial businesses.

An example is the retail industry, where stores must remain open during normal business hours. This makes it necessary to complete renovations at night, when the work will not interfere with sales activities. In projects of this type, and with increasing frequency, the ceilings are not replaced with new tiles. Instead, the old ones are restored. Therefore, contractors and dealers who limit themselves to only new tile installation and sales are losing out on profitable business that is not only available but in demand.

Some studies have concluded that the market for acoustical ceiling tile restoration is equal to or greater than the market for new tiles. Even if one were to question the precise accuracy of these studies, the fact still remains that it reflects a huge, untapped source of ceiling business. The restoration of old, discolored yet structurally sound ceilings represents business that most ceiling contractors are not aware of, nor are they certain of how to become involved. The purpose of this article is to provide some basic information that enterprising contractors and dealers can build upon.

When an aged and discolored ceiling tile is restored, it receives a completely new surface finish using a special acoustical coating that was specifically designed for this type of application. Even though the tile is sprayed in place (allowing the grid to be refurbished at the same time), once the material has dried, the tile is not stuck to the T-bar as would be the case with traditional paints. The better acoustical tile coatings on the market actually improve the Noise Reduction Coefficient and are also Class A fire retardants. These materials can be tinted, which satisfies the need for decorator colors.

Ceilings are restored in occupied space in one-third of the time required for removal and replacement. The installed cost to the building owner is about one-half, while the per-square-foot profit for the contractor is greater than new tile installation. The application procedure is a spray-painting process. What makes the difference in the end is the materials that are applied.

What Is Acoustical Ceiling Restoration?

Does ceiling restoration compete with new tile installation? In general, the answer is no. Ceiling restoration contractors promote their services in a market where new tile replacement is not usually a viable option. Whether it is a retail store, bank lobby, shopping mall or office building, the amount of time required to carefully cover merchandise, furnishings and floors, remove the old tiles, and cut and install new ones, is far greater than what is typically available between the hours of closing at night and opening in the morning. In con-
trast, in fully merchandised retail stores, 15,000 to 20,000 square feet of ceilings are commonly restored in one night. In addition, some building owners cannot afford the cost of new tiles and their only legitimate alternative is ceiling restoration.

For these reasons and while there may be some exceptions, the market for ceiling restoration is not that of new tiles. Many ceiling contractors do both. They can install new ceiling systems or they can restore old ones. Similarly, dealers who sell new tile also inventory restoration products. As an example, the same grid cleaner that the restoration contractor uses to ensure a solid bond on the T-bar’s slick finish is also used by the ceiling contractor who is replacing tiles and needs to clean the old grid system.

**Why Not Use Conventional Paint?**

Anyone who is experienced in the industry is well aware of the negatives associated with traditional paint on acoustical ceilings. The tiles remain stuck to the T-bars after the paint has dried. Removal of the tiles usually results in breaking and replacing them with new ones, leaving a checkerboard effect. When the tiles try to expand due to changes in humidity or temperature, they buckle because the edges are fixed to the T-bars. Paint radically reduces the acoustical properties, can negatively effect the tile’s fire rating...
and does not hold its white color long when applied over a dirty surface.

In contrast, the better acoustical coating for ceiling tiles actually improves the NRC, is a Class A fire retardant, does not stick the tile to the T-bar and maintains a high light-reflecting capability for as long as or longer than a new tile’s coating would under the same conditions.

How to Select Ceiling Restoration Products

Contractors/dealers should be suspicious of product claims that are not substantiated by independent laboratory test data. If the manufacturer claims its product does not impair the acoustical quality of the tile, independent acoustical test data, utilizing the appropriate ASTM test, should support that statement.

Similarly, test results should reflect positively on such issues as flame spread and smoke developed readings, combustion toxicity, light reflectance and even longevity (aging) characteristics.
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If the manufacturer cannot provide this type of documentation, buyer beware.

Another barometer of measure is the length of time the manufacturer has been in business making these types of product. The charlatans seldom last more than a few years, and those who have simply copied someone else’s product lack the creativity to implement a successful marketing plan. The more years of experience a manufacturer has, the more likely they have been successful and will have an answer when a problem arises on the job.

Legitimate product manufacturers can assist contractors in marketing their ceiling-restoration service by providing materials and direction. Once the contractor has become technically proficient, manufacturers can (and do) refer business to them as a local applicator.

How Profitable Is It?

After the learning curve has flattened out and each member of the crew knows what he is to be doing, material and labor costs average between 22 cents and 27 cents per square foot. On the average, non-union contractors charge between 45 cents and 65 cents per square foot. This provides a gross margin of profit that justifies a marketing effort to attract this kind of business.

Acoustical ceiling restoration represents a large market that is, for the most part, untapped. It is a market that is apart from the one for new tile installation. Ceiling contractors who are presently forced to walk away when a potential job cannot be done in the available hours or is beyond the existing budget could propose to restore the old ceiling and salvage a job. Ceiling restoration is quite profitable, and the material manufacturers are able to provide support for marketing and technical training. Care should be taken to utilize only products that are fully documented by independent laboratory testing.

About the Author

Kenneth Woolf is president of ProCoat Products, Inc., in Holbrook, Mass. PPI is the manufacturer and distributor of the ProCoat line of acoustical restoration products and supplies. A registered engineer and management consultant, Woolf is recognized as a pioneer in the field of acoustical tile restoration and is frequently called upon as a consultant, author and speaker in the field.