What Are the Most Effective New Tools?

Contractors and Distributors from Around the Country Share Their Opinions of the Tools and Equipment They’ve Found Work Best

By Michael J. Major

Where can you find out about the hottest new tools on the market that can both increase your productivity and decrease your costs? One obvious source is from the manufacturers who make these tools, and Construction Dimensions magazine, which brings you ads, notices of new items and new-product roundup features. The manufacturers can best tell you about their own products, but they can hardly be expected to be disinterested observers.

So for this article we’ve taken a different approach. We’ve randomly called a few suppliers and several contractors across the country to ask their opinion. The suppliers are a step closer to the contractors, and so get direct feedback as to the products they really respond to. But the contractors themselves, of course, are the best sources of what tools really work best for them. We’ve tried to pin down the respondents in terms of their favorite tool’s brand name, manufacturer, and city and state, and this has been done in most cases, the few exceptions being when the source didn’t have a particular bit of information at his fingertips, or when the product was relatively generic. Almost all the tools have been purchased in the past year, except in a very few cases when the respondent couldn’t think of anything special purchased in the past year but had high praise for something purchased a little beyond that time frame.

A survey like this cannot hope to be inclusive, and there are no doubts many fine new products just couldn’t make it onto this particular list. But the following responses, however random, do have the advantage of being authentic and unbiased.

So, within these parameters, here are some of the most effective new tools on the market, broken down into the categories of equipment, hand tools and software.

**Equipment**

Only three of the 20-plus items mentioned by the respondents fit into the category of fairly sizable equipment, but they are all real time-savers.

Electric platform lift: The HEK lift is the favorite new tool of Ron Jefford, estimator, Horton Drywall, Maumelle,
Ark. This is a large working platform, 30 feet long, that can be used for either interior or exterior work. Moreover, two to three can be fastened together to cover a whole side of a building. “It’s mobile, goes up and down, and since it’s electric, it’s easy to operate,” Jefford says. “It’s the equivalent of scaffolding but much more efficient.”

**Panel lifter.** This panel lifter for drywall, as described by Bill Schultz, field superintendent, Jahn & Sons, Inc., Cedarburg, Wisc., consists of a three-legged stand, with a mast coming up the center, and the top like a TV antenna on top of which lie the drywall. This device cranks the drywall up as high as just under 12 feet and presses it into place so all you have to do is screw or nail the fasteners. Schultz is not sure of the manufacturer but says this product is available from most of the drywall suppliers. “It’s a great way to prevent back injuries,” Schultz says, “for it saves workers from leaning back to shove the panels up in the ceiling. It’s a very swift tool.”

**Foam cutter.** A real efficient time saver, also mentioned by Schultz, is the foam cutting hot wire machine made by Wind Lock Corporation, Leesport, Pa. This device has a hot wire strung between two sides of a handle, which, when pulled down, cuts EIFS in an accurate and convenient manner.

**Hand Tools**

There is a variety of hand tools whose sole purpose is to substitute mechanical power for muscle power, thus allowing workers to strain less while producing more. By far the most popular tool we came across was the laser level. There are many different types, but we stopped after hearing about the first three.

**Laser levels.** “These are real time-savers,” says David Hamilton, president of A. E. Conrad Company, Inc., Minneapolis. “They’re used for laying out partitions or ceilings, and have turned what was a two-man operation into a one-man task. They shoot out a beam to 100 years, and instead of marking just one individual point, it marks several, so they’re much more accurate.” Hamilton adds that he utilizes a number of different brands from different manufacturers, and that they’re all basically comparable. Com-
petition among the manufacturers allows him to continually get good value for bargain prices.

Joe Bolis, shop foreman, Lundquist Associates, Denver, utilizes his laser levels for interior walls. He also doesn’t fur on a particular brand, but says good ones sell for about $700. “These are most innovative tools,” he says. “They shoot three laser beams straight up and straight out, but can also do a perpendicular. They’re a lot faster and more economical than the old way of working with plumb bobs and water levels.” Bolis says they are handy 2 x 3 inches, battery operated and used by his company for grid work and brackets.

Henry St. Hilaire, owner, Central Connecticut Acoustics, Wallingford, Conn., has a specific laser level he sticks with-Minute Marker made by Spectra-physics, Dayton, Ohio. “The reason we buy this brand is that it is made for acoustical ceilings only, and that’s all we do. The other lasers may have five or six different uses, but we have only one use, so that makes it relatively inexpensive. The lasers cut down on our labor by about 10 percent, so a job that maybe used to cost us $2,000 would now cost $1,800.” Almost every mechanic uses one to level ceilings in large areas, such as shopping centers, and even small areas.

Sanding sponger. “A simple product, but one appreciated by contractors, is a sanding sponger,” reports Susan Holley, manager, customer service, Building Materials Wholesale, Birmingham, Ala. This product, made by 3M, Minneapolis, is shaped like a sponge, and has 80 grits on one side and 100 on the other. It’s good, as says Holley, “for getting up corners.”

Electric sander. “Every time we lend one out, the contractor comes back and buys it; it’s a very hot seller,” Holley says, this time referring to the electric sander made by Porter-Cable, Chicago. “The electric sander works faster, controls the sanding and sucks up the dust,” Holley explains. “Especially if you’re doing remodeling work where there’s furniture or equipment around, you don’t want dust flying everywhere.”
This praise is seconded by another wholesaler, Lee Ballard, store manager, Capital Building Supply, Vienna, Va., who offers the Porter-Cable model numbers 7810 and 7899. “Everybody has problems with dust, especially the pollution/health aspect. But the rotating sanders on this tool simply suck the dust up through the vacuum.”

**Autofeed screw guns.** Ballard also has good words to say about Makita’s autofeed screw gun, which holds 50 screws at a time. “It’s fast, easy to use, durable, requires low maintenance and makes the job go at least 25 to 30 percent faster,” he says.

Elwood Stanton, warehouse manager, Capital Interior Contractors, Inc., Richmond, Va., reports that Black & Decker’s screw gun, model 2125, “has a durability much greater than what we’ve used in the past. We’re a drywall contractor involved with interior and exterior framing, and have never found a gun with enough torque to attach the heavier studs. This gun has that feature, and is durable enough so we don’t have to use a separate gun.

Also happy with the Porter-Cable screw guns are the workers at Interior Systems, Inc., Boise, Idaho. But, as explains risk manager, John Fahrer, the merging of Black & Decker with DeWalt means replacing the former models with the latter. Fahrer says, “It takes a while for workers to get used to something new and feel good about it,” but adds that the increased power of DeWalt’s new guns, moving from 12-14.4 volts to 18 volts and a 5.4 to 6.2 amp motor, is making for a more powerful tool that is accelerating the acceptance process.

**Drywall cutter.** A Porter-Cable power tool, model 7499, that Fahrer also finds valuable is the wallboard cutter that replaces the hand keyhole saw for cutting small holes in drywall. “The workers seems to like it, especially in view of the fact that it has special fitting that keep the dust from getting into the motor,” he says.

**Countertop trimmer.** Fahrer also has praise for the Porter-Cable model 7319 tool used for trimming countertop laminate. “The higher amp motor in this tool, 5.4 as opposed to 3.8, costs a little more money, but works well for heavy-duty countertop trimming and is adaptable to cutting out windows and doors.”

**Gas-operated fastening tool.** Attach this tool, Trackfast, made by ITW Ramset, Wood Dale, Ill, to the top of bottom track of concrete or steel, and you have a fastener that, says Jeff Mirgon, operations manager for Compass Construction, Inc., Amlin, Ohio, “is speedy, efficient, easy to use, safe and not exceptionally noisy.”

**Ceiling tile cutter.** As opposed to the manual method of cutting tiles, this tool, called Tegrat, made by Vinal Industries, Ipswich, Mass., electronically measures, cuts or lays tiles in 10 seconds or less,” reports Anebel Hernandez, vice president, sales, All-Interior Supply, Inc., Hialeah, Fla. It costs $900 and provides perimeter or lining cuts in the field.

**Cordless saw.** This cordless power saw has found favor with contractors, says Hill Grant, branch manager, Kel-Welco Distributing, Inc. Omaha, Neb. Grant says that this tool, made by the Milwaukee Power-Tool Company, Brookfield, Wisc., is an all-purpose reciprocating saw that weighs only 8.25 pounds but is
powerful, with an 18-volt battery system, a 1-inch blade stroke. The saw also works at variable speeds.

Software

Just as power tools are designed to save the muscular effort of field workers, so too does software aim to save the mental effort of office workers, at the same time, of course, of increasing productivity. When you consider that just a few years ago there were no software tools, it seems a bit odd that now there are many more kinds of software tools over the actual physical tools that get the jobs done. Here are a few samplings:

**Tool inventory and management system.** Grant explains that ToolWatch, made by ToolWatch Corporation, Engelwood, Colo., enables the contractor to gain control of his tool inventory, reducing losses of lost and misplaced tools while at the same time increasing productivity. Tools are given a number and a bar code label, with that information recorded on the software, which tracks the tools as they move from job to job.

**Tool tracker.** This is basically the same sort of system, though called Tool Tracker, and made by Waterwheel, Inc. Rick Voorhorst, warehouse manager, The Bouma Corporation, Grand Rapids, Mich., says this system “is worth its weight in gold. Before we never knew where our tools were, for people were always moving on and off jobs. Now we always know. All of the tools are numbered and is issued to particular jobs and so are continually tracked. Also, the system enables us to bid tool costs into a job.”

**Design software for steel frame trusses.** Mark Nabity, president, Gray-
hawk, LLC, Lexington, Ky., explains that Mitek, in St. Louis, Mo., has long been a leader in providing software for wood trusses, but has just recently come out with a comparable product for steel trusses, with apparently only one other company also having come out with a similar product.

“This software helps us to do shop drawings and layout and engineering of light gauge steel Frame trusses,” Nabity says. “Up to now it had been very slow to get the information we’ve needed, and we’ve had to bring in an engineer and pay him just to be able to bid a project. It’s expensive and time-consuming.”

What we were finding is that we had plenty of opportunity to use metal trusses, but we were not able to respond in a timely... continued on page 66
or economic fashion because of the design issues. But now we can, so this software is very valuable for us.”

**Estimating software.** “The estimating package has really helped our guys do a better job and cover a bigger area,” says Bill Lint, purchasing agent, Allied Construction Services, Inc., Omaha, Neb. The software Lint is speaking of is Quick Bid, made by On Center Software, Houston. “This package details just how each estimator estimates each job,” Lint says. “Before, each estimator had his own way of doing it, and the production department might not always know just what he had in mind. This software requires a standardized procedure the same for every estimator.” Lint adds that this software also provides an excellent stocking list and helps him, as purchasing agent, to order the right material in timely fashion.

Also enthusiastic about his choice of estimating software is B. J. Sutcliffe, president of Acousti of Columbus, Inc., Columbus, Ga. Sutcliffe uses software from Timberline, of Beaverton, Ore. “Just by plugging in the length and width of material, it’s been an incredible time-saver, but it also provides a detailed labor and material breakdown,” Sutcliffe says.

Sutcliffe says he looked around a lot and talked with many general contractors and subcontractors, and Timberline was recommended most often. “From doing our estimating by hand to using this software we’ve probably cut down our estimating time down by 50 percent, allowing us to do more with project management. We’re a fairly small company, with just a few of us in the office, so the time we would have spent doing estimating we can now spend in the field, doing project management and making more money.”

**Estimating/networking software.** Getting good estimating software is one thing, but the next is the coordination of this estimating through computer networking, and this is what Vernon Boyett, president, Boyett Construction, Inc., South
San Francisco, is most involved in currently.

Utilizing Microsoft’s Windows 97, all estimators know what is being bid by each other. The network is set up with the job name, number, how many hours in each area, and the labor in each area. “When we’ve made a successful bid, the information immediately pops up on the screen in the construction manager’s office, so he knows he has a job immediately and can begin preparing, rather than wait for a week until the paper work gets there. It’s an early warning system for him, and enables him to communicate with the estimators rather than wait for the estimator to come to him.”

**Integrated software.** Software is not just a single tool. It’s a multiplicity of tools that work best when integrated. For instance, Curtis W. Braun, president, Braun Plastering Co., Inc., Jefferson City, MO., utilizes a 36 x 48 inch digitizer board offered by the Clearwater, Fla.-based Dewitt, which allows him to take off different materials off the blueprints and add overhead and equipment costs to determine a profit. He’s also recently acquired a laptop computer for jobsite or quick-change orders, utilizes e-mail for job meetings, and CD-ROM for government jobs.

“With the economy booming, you’re expected to do so much more in the same amount of time,” Braun says, “And you can’t do it with pencils, notepads and a couple of calculators.”

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