I hear the terms primer, sealer and primer/sealer thrown around in conversation so much that it’s gotten to the point where I can’t distinctly differentiate between the three concepts. Can you help?

It is confusing. In an attempt to obtain exact definitions for the three terms, we referenced the most recent edition of ASTM Standard Definitions. That document contains synonyms for primer and sealer, obtained from the industry standard ASTM D 16 Terminology Relating to Paint, Varnish, Lacquer and Related Products.

In D 16, a primer is defined as “the first of two or more coats of a paint, varnish or lacquer system.” A sealer is “a liquid composition to prevent excessive absorption of finish coats into porous surfaces or a composition to prevent bleeding.”

Well, the D 16 sealer definition seems pretty clear and adequate. You apply a sealer to a surface to keep the finish coats of material from soaking too much into the substrate. Enough said. The primer definition, however, almost seems to imply that you could use any product to prime a painted surface as long as that product is part of a “paint, varnish or lacquer system.” Far be it from us to argue with an accepted industry document, but the D 16 primer definition doesn’t define exactly what a primer does nor does it state why a regular can of any type of paint can’t be used as a primer product as long as it’s part of a “system.” And gee, the paint industry has said for years that a topcoat paint is not a primer.

So what settles the issue? An article in the July 1997 edition of PWC (Painting and Wallcovering Contractor) magazine provides some excellent answers.

The article confirms our belief about the D 16 sealer definition by stating that sealers “are . . . concerned with sealing up a porous surface, so that the finish coats won’t be sucked into the substrate.” Fairly simple. Very straightforward.

Primers, according to the article are “a type of coat applied for a specific purpose prior to the finish coat” and are usually “designed to promote adhesion between the substrate and the finish coat and/or hide stains.” According to the article, topcoats won’t work as primers because they are “designed for cohesive-meaning it’s not going to pull apart when flexed-strength,” not adhesive strength.

In summary, a sealer seals a surface before the finish coats are applied, a primer is specifically manufactured to be applied before the finish paint is applied and typically has adhesive qualities that help the finish coat stick to the substrate, and a primer/sealer does both.

In addition, while many sealers are correctly used as primers, not all primers exhibit sealing qualities. For example, many specialized primer products have emerged within the drywall market in the past decade. In general, these products are not formulated to seal the surface of the drywall. Instead, they provide a base for the finish paint by equalizing the absorption rate of that paint when it is applied to both the joint compound finished and unfinished areas of the surface of the drywall. They don’t keep the finish paint from being sucked into the drywall paper, rather they provide a more equal base for the finish paint to be absorbed into.

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