Do Contractors Prefer Automatic or Manual? Purchase or Rent?

This article is part of our continuing series on building systems and the preferences of AWCI contractor members. In the final analysis, no one knows a system better than the contractors who roll up their sleeves every day and get dirt on their at jobsites around the country—so we interviewed several for their honest feedback. Because we’re asking foremen and supervisors to “name names,” they are rewarded with anonymity for their honesty. And, considering that as few as 12 and only as many as 30 or so contractors are interviewed, we want all readers to know that the findings in this article are not statistically relevant and are not meant to represent any kind of trend—just the opinions of a small sampling of the industry. This may not be an in-depth, definitive study but it does serve as a barometer for those who are interested. Advertisers are not involved with this in any way; all the responses are genuine and not swayed by any outside influences.

TESTING TAPING TOOLS

Although the 30 contractors we interviewed agreed that manual taping tools were better than power tools when doing close-quarter work, such as cornerbeams or ceiling work; and although everybody agreed that automatic tools made jobs with a long, straight run of board much easier—not everyone agreed that power tools were worth investing in (see the chart on page 30).

One hand-tool-only contractor from New-Hampshire favors his Goldblatt tools because “Our jobs are on the small side, and it’s a pain to set up the automatic tools for the smaller jobs. Plus, why mess with the cost of either renting or buying power tools?”

And strangely enough, none of the three

By Steven Ferry
contractors interviewed in Georgia, home state of Ames®, use power tools. “I don’t see very many people around here using power taping tools for some reason,” said one. “I guess we have a bunch of traditionalists here,” adds another. “My boss, at his previous company when he was doing 200 jobs at one time, had a Bazooka®, but we just went back to traditional finishing, and all our ing, you can do the job. There isn’t a lot of difference in the tools as long as you buy from a good manufacturer. There’s some cheap stuff out there, but who buys it?”

Power tools have made a lot of progress over the years, as a Californian pointed out, “They have made them much easier to take apart, clean and maintain, as well as easier to use and longer-lasting.”

Improvement, of course, is a relative term. Four contractors still feel more needs to be done to make maintenance and clean-up easier. “The biggest problem is the maintenance and clean-up of power tools,” says a Pennsylvanian contractor. “That’s my pet peeve, because I see disabled parts lying in the warehouse and I am told, ‘Well, it’s broke. It wasn’t cleaned quickly enough, and now it doesn’t work.’”

A contractor from Massachusetts says, “Ames power tools take too long to clean.” Another Pennsylvanian contractor says, “we only use automatic taping tools on larger jobs because it takes too long to clean them.” A contractor from Vermont went one step further when he said, “We don’t use any automatics. They’re messy and heavy to use, and there’s a lot of cleaning involved. The guys feel they can do the job just as well using hand tools.”

The complaint about automatic taping tools being too heavy was echoed by two other contractors, one from Texas who said, “Maybe they could make them out of a lighter aluminum.” A Nebraska contractor had a similar point to make, “Power taping tools are physically very demanding and extremely hard to push.”

Durability was an issue for three contractors: “TapeTech®’s tools are expensive, and I like to get the most I can out of my dollar,” explains a Washington contractor. “They seem to do a great job, but they have a short life.” Adds a Vermont user, “It would be nice if a corner or something else didn’t break off if you drop one.”

One solution, of course, is to rent power tools, as an Oregonian pointed out: “If our guys damage them or they break down, we can just take them back and get a new tool.”

“The usual cry for a lower-priced power tool came from a Nebraskan, while two other contractors (Virginia and Minnesota) said there was nothing wrong with the tools, but “If they could run themselves, then I wouldn’t have to deal with the people behind them!” and “I need robots to run them!”

On a more positive note for the industry, even though it isn’t a taping tool, one contractor from Virginia was very impressed with a new product on the
market: “We’ve just started using the new Grabber bead on several jobs, and it works very well. We’ve saved a bunch of money because it’s easier to use and requires less mud on the bead. We have eliminated about 50 percent of the work because the carpenters now only have to install the bead beforehand about 5 to 10 percent of the time.

Who Wins?

There’s really no contest when it comes to the preferred brand of taping tools used by most contractors finishing drywall around the country.

Although at least a dozen companies manufacture automatic and hand tools for taping, and they may all have products as good as Ames, Ames got there first, not only making the market, but owning it. Whether or not Ames has a better product, it’s lead basically boils down to marketing smarts—think “taping tools,” and most people think of Ames. And, since Ames owns TapeTech, the brand mentioned almost as much as Ames, then more than two-thirds of the 30 contractors surveyed rely for their tools on Ames and its subsidiary.

The Stanley-Goldblatt® name came in third, with a strong showing in the northeast.

As a couple of marketing gurus from New York put it, “After World War II, Heineken was the first imported beer, so four decades later, what is the No. 1 imported beer? The one that tastes the best? Or Heineken? There are 425 brands of imported beer sold in America. Surely one of these brands must taste better than Heineken, but does it really matter? Today, Heineken is still the number one imported beer, with 30 percent of the market.”*

A contractor from Oregon, who has been in the business a long time, explains how Ames cornered the market: “Ames invented taping tools, a real smart thing to do. But the smartest thing they did was refuse to sell them. For 20 years, until their patent ran out, the only taping tools available were rental ones. When the patent ran out, Premier and others started copying and selling the Ames products, while Ames
began selling through TapeTech. We bought three or four sets and they worked pretty well for about six months. Then they began to need attention and were no longer such a good deal. Rental turned out to be the best way to go after all, so we are back to renting Ames.”

So it’s not surprising that the most common reason for selecting a brand is that contractors have always used it. “We’ve never tried anything other than Ames,” says a Floridian contractor. “We started with them and have stuck with them because we’re happy with them.” Adds a Texan, “We’ve used their tools for as long as I have been involved in this industry, some 30 years.” Another contractor, from Colorado,

It’s not surprising that
the most common
reason for selecting a
brand is that
contractors have
always used it.

And that applies
to beer as well.

sums it up with, “I know who they are and where they are.”

While Ames and TapeTech appear to have the market sewn up, the other manufacturers could give them a run for their money, because the data don’t apply only to beer.

About the Author

Steven Ferry is a free-lance writer for the construction industry. He is based in Dunedin, Fla.