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 or tool better than the contractors who roll up their sleeves every day and get dirt on their hands at jobsites around the world—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 as many as 40 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—it’s 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 the Buck.
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.

There are hundreds of tools in use throughout the construction industry, some of them already so well designed that it is hard to see how any great improvement can be made to them. However, every manufacturer must constantly innovate and improve its products if it is to remain a vital force and player in its market.

This informal report card, based on a survey of 30 contractors from around the country, gives an “A” to those manufacturers who introduced small lasers recently—you brought a lot of relief to many contractors. Those manufacturers who introduced better track guns and benders also have made life easier for the folks on the jobsites (see the chart on page 71).

The small lasers that have hit the market seem to have increased productivity by an average of 30 percent, with one contractor saying production had doubled as a result of their use.

“The lasers we had before were big and bulky,” says a Missouri contractor. “We had to bolt them to a column. These small, hand-held ones just sit on the ground. They’re self-leveling, they plumb horizontally and vertically, and can be carried in a hand-held toolbox.”

“It’s much easier to operate these new battery-powered lasers, instead of having to use a power outlet or power box of some kind,” observes a Hawaiian.

The new compact lasers also cost less,” observes an Iowan. “It’s twice as fast and more accurate,” claims a contractor from Massachusetts. “It’s not just an increase in speed and efficiency that I’ve noticed from these new lasers,” notes an Alabama contractor, “but better quality of work.”
“Despite the poor skill-level of the work force,” agrees a Texan, “these new lasers enable the workers to get the layout right the first time because they have a line on the floor. That cuts out re-work and makes them considerably more productive.”

Proving that handheld lasers have changed the face of the industry, an Indiana contractor announced that “We have guys here who won’t even walk onto the jobsite if there isn’t one of those small lasers around. We used the chalk box and strike the lines before, but now lasers are everywhere.” A contractor from Colorado sums up the mood with: “Lasers have been a godsend.”

**Tracking with Customer Needs**

The runners-up in popularity with the folks in the field were screw guns and track benders.

“The self-feeding screw guns have been developed well and are cost effective now,” says a Michigan man. “The screws and clips used to be so expensive that it wasn’t worth bothering with them before.”

“The new guns that we use to attach steel stud four-track to the concrete are the best,” claims an Indiana contractor. “You can shoot multiple rounds now, instead of having to load after every single shot. The manufacturers have brought out cartridges that hold 10 shots and 10 pins that we can fire randomly. That saves us a lot of time, about 50 percent compared to the old shotguns.”

“I reckon we save $100 on each jobsite because the shots and pins are cheaper, and because it’s a lot easier to use these new track fasteners,” insists a Georgian.

Shooting from the hip, a Missouri contractor had something
to say about the different new track fasteners on the market now: “Power-actuated track fasteners are driven by .22 shells and are not only more dangerous but much slower to use than these new gas-charged guns. You can shoot the gas-charged ones 1,000 times before you have to reload, and you don’t have to take the time to clean them, etc. I would say they increase production 50 percent as a result.”

As for the track benders, a Floridian says, “We’ve found a track bender for radius work easily increased productivity by 70 percent compared to the old-fashioned notching method.”

An Illinois contractor agreed, figuring the track bender reduced installation time by 30 percent. A Minnesotan says their “track bender paid for itself on the first job, as it took only a third of the time to install product compared to the conventional way.”

A Michigan contractor went further when he claimed that the “track bender is highly valuable. We don’t use it often, but when we do, costs and time spent on the job are cut three- to five-fold.” In addition to doubling production, the track bender has helped an Arkansas contractor “create more accurate radiuses.”

Not everyone was happy with the track bender they had purchased, however. “Bang for the buck would put the $3,000 track bender we bought at the bottom,” complained a contractor from Colorado. “We didn’t have many opportunities to use it, and when we did, it was difficult to set up and use.”

When told about the Colorado contractor’s difficulties, the Floridian reckoned “he bought it for a wrong application. The instructions are pretty explicit about the limitations. It won’t do arches, but it does bend track along the weak or minor axes. The tool paid for itself after just one job.”

**Other Mentions Deserve a Mention**

A few other products have improved production in a cost-effective way. A Californian says his “new plasma cutter has been invaluable for cutting heavy gauge steel joist studs, making jobs go much faster. Before, we had to lift and cut the studs on a saw, which takes forever. Now we cut them right on the ground. Assuming a reduction of five minutes per cut, we save about eight hours on a typical job under $100,000.”
“The new right-angle drill enables us to do some close work that we couldn’t do in any other way before,” declares a Colorado contractor.

“We bought one of those thickness sanders that came on the market in the last couple of years, because we also build cabinets,” states a contractor from Missouri. “A typical job that might have taken a day, now takes half an hour with the machine.”

**An Inventor’s Work is Never Bone**

When asked what aspect of their work was still a bear, and which some tool still needed to be invented or improved upon, some contractors said they couldn’t think of anything—it had been a long day or a long night, or they were happy with all their tools. “If I could get a computer to hang wallboard, I sure would love it,” joked a Georgia contractor. “They have pretty well come out with everything else already.”

A handful said that if they could think of something, they’d be making money off patenting it. One guy wanted a tool to make people pay up faster, and another wanted one that would answer the phone so he didn’t have to listen to all the BS—a sentiment that others no doubt share.

A third of the contractors, however, did have suggestions for tools to improve efficiency and ease of use, so this section is for manufacturers especially to take note.

Even though a Kansas contractor was happy with his new scaffolding, one contractor from Massachusetts, who was sore from a citation he had just received from OSHA, felt that scaffolding could use improvement. “We need some way to lock and unlock a stager’s wheels while on it. Under the OSHA law, we’re supposed to lock the wheels, but nobody does. You couldn’t possibly be efficient or stay in business if you kept running up and down all the time to lock or unlock the wheels. Either you’d have to have somebody on the ground dedicated to handling the wheels, or the guy would work four hours before falling off the staging from fatigue. That’s not a story that OSHA will listen to, but nei-
ther can we make a living installing ceilings at $1.25 a foot while complying with OSHA guidelines that cost $2 a foot.”

“I’m an old drywall hanger with back problems,” explains a Colorado man. “Every drywall hanger I know has back problems by the time he is 30 or 35. So I’d like to see something that saves backs. It would be nice, of course, if they could make the board lighter without making it less dense, then we wouldn’t be picking up so much weight, and that would certainly help avoid back problems. They’ve come up with lightweight mud, so why not lightweight wallboard?”

“If someone could think of a way to separate hand tools in tool bags,” suggests a Colorado contractor. “There just aren’t enough slots in tool pouches for all the hand tools we carry.”

“I would like to see a material that could be used to return furred-out masonry walls or drywall and furring channels to windows, to turn 90 degrees,” says a contractor from Alabama.

“A better tegular edge-cutter,” would suit a Hawaiian contractor. “We use saws and routers, and they are fine, but we always end up cutting by hand.”

“I’d like to see some kind of mechanical rasp to reduce the foam when working with stucco,” says a contractor from Kentucky. “We rasp it all by hand right now with a board sander, which takes probably 50 percent more time to do than it would with a mechanical tool.”

“We do a lot of spray-on fireproofing that is very equipment- and labor-intensive,” says a Missouri contractor. “If they could invent a smaller machine that does the same quantity of work, that would be very useful.”

“A screw gun that lasts longer,” is the request of a Maryland contractor.

“At one time they had a grinder for wallboard cleanup that let you feed in the scraps,” recalls a Massachusetts man. “I don’t think it ever took off, but perhaps someone could resurrect a more efficient version.”

“Someone needs to invent a guard for the chop saw that won’t bend or break too easily, or jam shut,” notes an Arkansas contractor.

“We want a tool for cutting steel studs that’s faster and quieter,” says an Illinois contractor. “We use chop saws and cut-off saws, and they are time consuming and very loud—I am sure their decibel rating exceeds what OSHA prefers.”

When all is said and done, we’ve come a long way since the days of hammers and nails on construction sites. That’s something we can all be grateful for, and something that manufacturers, their R&D departments especially, can take a well-earned pat on the back for.

About the Author

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