The Continuing Search for the Better Tool

Last month we asked contractors about new products in general. The majority of answers related to drywall tools, so we decided to dig deeper into the tools used in the drywall business, and were surprised at the answers from the 31 contractors canvassed around the country.

Although pocket lasers had a strong showing again as eminently useful products introduced on the market recently, they were not quite as obvious to the contractors in the field as the screw guns they have

By Steven Ferry
been wielding (See Chart A, page 82). As Chart B (page 83) shows, the main advantages to both lasers and screw guns is increased productivity, with lasers offering slightly greater increases, as estimated by the contractors.

One contractor from Michigan went so far as to say, “We have to use screw guns to remain competitive and stay in business. Nails are no good anymore because they pop.”

The drawback to screw guns, however, as a contractor from Minnesota pointed out, is that “they don’t save me money because the guys wreck them pretty quickly! But they do make it possible for us to put up a lot of boarded the more volume of board, the more we make.”

It seems that screw guns break too easily, “We buy more than a hundred screw guns a year,”

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 hands at jobsites around the country—so we interviewed several for their honest feedback. Because we’re asking firemen 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 finding 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 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.

complains an Indiana contractor. There is some hope on the horizon, however, according to a Wisconsin contractor, who says that “We’ve bought a newer screw gun model that is more reliable. It breaks less.”

That’s good news. As for the lasers, in addition to saving time and being more accurate, they make it easier for the folks on the site to do their job. This was actually the second most common benefit mentioned from the new tools recently introduced to the market.

“These laser plumb bobs not only increase accuracy and quality,” says a Massachusetts contractor, “but reduce worker fatigue. They no longer get worn out running up and down, getting plumb work done. It takes just a few seconds compared to the two minutes to drop a plumb bob.”

The tool that actually had the most votes for making it easier on workers was the electric drywall sander. As a contractor from New Hampshire pointed out, “The drywall sander hasn’t improved productivity, but it has improved attitude, because the men aren’t as worn out at the end of the day.”

“The vacuum cleaner gets about 99 percent of the dust out of the air,” adds a North Carolina contractor.

The tool that offered the greatest increase in productivity was the track fastener, which achieved an estimated 150 percent increase for a South Carolina company.
Also popular were automatic tapers, and new corner bead systems: “A hopper for applying tape on corner beads has saved some on installation time, but the gains are really dramatic on callback time,” claims a contractor from Illinois, “all of which relates back to our bottom line.”

“The new corner bead system they have out,” adds a contractor from Maryland, “only has to be covered with two coats of ready mix, instead of three. It goes on with the finishing, as opposed to the actual drywall. It probably costs us half as much to install as opposed to the regular metal corner beads.”

Another tool that has been found useful is “the new Rotozip tool,” according to a Kentucky man. “It is like a little motor with a drill bit on it for cutting out openings. It has increased accuracy in cutting out drywall for an electrical box, light switch, etc.”

Lastly, there are lifts and scaffolding devices, that have not only made it a lot easier for the folks on the site, but as a Louisiana contractor stated, “Scissors lifts mean we need one man less for the job.”

“These new scaffolding devices put the men close to where they’ve got to work,” notes a contractor from South Dakota, “and they don’t spend time climbing around. They’re either driving a lift or a real good roll-around scaffold, so they don’t have to build scaffolds and tear them down and so on.”

**It Ain’t the Tool—It’s the Walls**

These tools have made significant improvements for most contractors, and several were very happy with the progress. One from North Carolina says, “They just keep coming out with newer and better equipment. It’s a lot easier now than it was five years ago.”

There were naturally some diehards for whom no innovation will ever be better than what their great-grandfathers used in the Civil War (slight exaggeration). As a contractor from Indiana pointed out, “I believe the union carpenters are pretty happy with the way things are. A salesman brought in one of those screw shooters, for instance, the ones with a collated strip and attachments that you can put on any screw gun. I am sure it would have saved them time, but none of the guys wanted to use it. They don’t like new things, preferring what they’ve been doing for the last 20 years.”

Whether some embrace change or not, an industry that is alive and well will continue to innovate. Putting in their two-cents’ worth, several contractors offered up a wish list for changes.
they want to see with their drywall tools.

The most common complaint among contractors is not one that tool manufacturers can be expected to do much about—the need for a more reliable, skilled or conscientious work force (four complaints) or even better general contractors (one complaint); or having a tool that gets invoices paid on time (one complaint). But there was one concern, mentioned in last month’s article, that manufacturers are being relied upon to resolve—providing lighter drywall to prevent the high incidents of back injuries in the work force.

“The biggest bear is the board, so why screw around with all the tools?” asks a Massachusetts contractor. “We don’t need better tools, we need a better, stronger and lighter, board. It’s an awkward problem, because if we go to a 2-foot wide board, they have to be joined every 2 feet, which isn’t the answer.”

The major problem in the drywall industry today is a lack of men who want to go into the trade,” states a Wisconsin contractor. “The workers’ comp claims are tremendous because of back injuries sustained while hanging wallboard. Someone needs to make board that is a lot lighter. Back braces help, but they are not the answer.

“I would say available manpower has dropped around 70 percent over the last 10 years. Up to about 32 years old is the limit for a proficient rocker, so that means we need young people. Not only are there less young people on the market, but less of them want to go into the trade. The main reason for this is they see the back problems and jump to something else as soon as they can. Over the last five years, 90 percent of those we have taught how to hang rock have sustained some back injury. They are not major injuries at first, but over a period of time they become major. The guys will reach down from a bad position and yank the wallboard, or not carry it properly. Although it’s actions like this that cause the problem, it wouldn’t be so bad if the board weren’t so heavy and unwieldy in the first place.”

“I know they are working on making the board lighter,” adds a New Hampshire contractor. “Maybe there is something that could be done to make it easier to get the stuff off the boom trucks and onto the dollies.”

A contractor from South Dakota agrees, saying, “I’d like to see something that would make lifting and placing drywall a little easier. That would avoid some of the back problems.”

Somewhat related was the request from a Minnesotan for a “UL-rated design for a one-hour fire-rated wall, without the fire-track system. The fire-track is so expensive and hard to get. We need such a wall to modify an existing wall, perhaps adding a piece of wallboard to the side of the wall, so it works as a slip action, and turns it into a fire-rated wall. The way it stands now, you have to cut off the whole top of the wall and put in fire-track, which is too expensive for the owner wanting to do a retrofit.

“This wall needs to be designed to fit all 50 states. Every suburb here has a different way of building the one-hour wall, and the architects make us liable to check all the local codes. Well, we don’t know the codes, and we would have to have two people on staff here just to keep up with the codes. This is a problem we all have, and no one has managed to fix it yet.”

Looking for the Better Gadget

In addition to the question of the wall-
board itself, half the contractors had suggestions or pet peeves about their tools.

“Make a screw gun that works!” exclaimed an Ohioan, echoing the sentiments of others. “The current ones jam up all the time, so you have to stop what you’re doing and try to fix it. By the time you’re done fixing it, you could have screwed it on by hand.”

A Washington contractor offered a different wrinkle on the screw gun problem, suggesting that screw guns come with the nose cone attached. Apparently, when the guys are framing, they take the nose cone off and then re-attach it to hang the board. But they often lose the nose cones. “We buy 200 new screw guns a year, and then have to buy another 200 replacement nose cones at about $14 a pop,” he says.

While on the subject of screw guns, contractors from Maryland and Nevada both called for a good automatic screw feeder.

A Minnesotan wants a sturdier wiring connection for screw guns. “With a hundred people using screw guns, twisting and turning them all day long, perhaps sometimes dropping them, too, we are finding the chords are coming loose. OSHA won’t let us re-attach them—demanding instead that we install new chords at $75 a pop. For a $100 tool, that means we end up throwing them away, which is a heck of a waste. Not a day goes by without us throwing a screw gun away, so it would be better if the manufacturers could come up with a way of keeping that end from going bad on us all the time.”

Although electric drywall sanders had their pluses, there are a couple of refinements that would be appreciated, as a contractor from Vermont pointed out: “If one keeps an electric drywall sander on the same spot for three seconds, it digs all the way through the paper. That’s probably an application problem, but it would be good to have some sort of safeguard built in.”
A Kentucky contractor added, “We need a drywall sander that does a better job of collecting the dust in high-volume drywall-sanding applications.”

Then there were the usual cries for lower prices, specifically for slip track and for the tool that bends drywall track to a radius (Virginia and South Carolina respectively).

Two contractors had words about fixing corners: “The corner bead is always a slow process,” says a Texan. “It’s always hard to get on and get it straight.”

“Several guys have mentioned that they would like to have a better tool for putting mud on outside corners,” adds a man from Kansas.

Three other, unrelated suggestions were offered as follows:

“Reduce the number of boxes that apply the second and third coats of mud, to one. They could either use one box or change the material to just one coat needed.” (Tennessee)

“If we had a guide for the routers on the electrical outlets, we could cut the hole for them properly every time.” (Louisiana)

“We need better fasteners in residential that don’t give us screw and nail pops following shrinkage and lumber movement after a year or two. We don’t need the callbacks.” (Illinois)

Whether or not manufacturers manage to solve all these issues, the most critical one seems to be the basic one of finding a lighter and stronger board. No doubt the manufacturers will be as happy as their customers when they finally succeed.

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