PRO Painter

SUMMER 2014 VOLUME 11, #2

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Make 'Em Laugh

After 41 years as a pro painter, Edmonton's Rick Fowler is still smiling

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SUMMER 2014
VOLUME 11, NUMBER 2

DYNAMIC® Quality Paintware® Since 1974

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By Steve Maxwell

Why Painting Matters

Whenever I hear anyone say something foolish like "that's just paint", or "paint doesn't really matter", I tell them the story of Havana, Cuba. It's the single most powerful example of the transforming power of paint – and painters – that you'll ever see.

HAVANA IS A SPOTLESSLY CLEAN CITY. Its stunning architecture comes from an older era of affluence and style that ran full tilt until the 1950s. The streets are safe, beautiful and well-ordered. But despite all these things, Havana also has a distinct feeling of shabbiness. This feeling is unmistakeable and comes from one main thing. Most of the city needs paint. Badly.

Decades of isolationism and US trade embargoes set the stage for hard times in Cuba. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it left Cuba financially destitute and in a situation where paint became a luxury few people could afford. More than a quarter century later and it's only getting worse.

What paint there is in Cuba is the most vile smelling stuff imaginable and it goes mostly to resorts and tourist areas designed to impress visitors. Decades without a widespread painting program in the real Havana shows just how important paint is.

As a painter you deal with the smallest, thinnest, lightest amount of material of all the trades. What does a coat of primer and two coats of paint weigh? How thick is it? To some people this makes professional painting seem like a second-rate trade – something anyone can do. What painter hasn't heard the words, "Wow, that much for a paint job? My brother-in-law can paint the house for half that!" You know it's rubbish, but it's always good to remind yourself why.

Ultimately, painting is about empowering spaces and structures so they make people feel good. A big part of the value of a good paint job is the emotional boost it delivers, and the pursuit of good feelings is one of the most powerful human motivators in the world. Visit Havana sometime and you'll feel exactly why your life as a painter is so very important. pp

Steve

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facebook

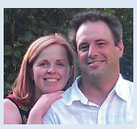
A FACEBOOK CONVERSATION

Pro Painter magazine's Facebook group page has attracted a loyal following in the last two years. The conversation below is a small part of what our Facebook painters are talking about while they help each other learn and grow professionally. To join in, open your Facebook page and search under *Pro Painter Magazine*.

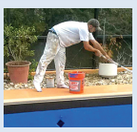
What would you say to a kid of yours who wanted to become a professional painter? Is it still as good a trade as when you got into it?

Aaron Rothenberg: I would tell them to go to college. If they really want to become a painter, I would let them as long as they went with a good company that offered a benefit and annuity plan.

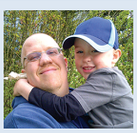
Erik Schlake: I would tell them to learn the trade early, but take the opportunity to go to college and try new things. There is nothing wrong with being a painter. Knowing a craft means you have the ability to always put cash in your pocket. Take advantage of that while you are young, but try as many other things as you can, too.



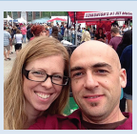
Craig Estey: That would depend on where he wants to live. We have a dying demographic here in Nova Scotia. 70% of the population is over age 63 and we're losing population to the tune of 12,000 per year. There just wouldn't be enough business. Now that my wife has lost her full time benefits we may be leaving as well. Last year our hydro, gasoline and mortgage would take all of my gross from last year.



Justin's Ccpf: If you are a real professional painter, not a hack with a paint brush, then I'm sure you wouldn't want your kids to have to do this. Believe me, they'll know how to paint if they have to. I'm looking for my kids to take care of me after I'm all broken and wore out from painting my whole life. lol.

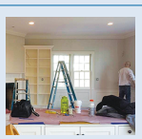


Jared Martin: No! Take over my company. That's it.



Jason Bergen: I want mine to learn that it's good to know how to paint well. But I hope they get an education through school and travel, then choose their own path. It's better if you don't have to paint full time.

Bubba Mason: Here in Alabama its tough, so no to following in my footsteps. Both my daughters are pre-med and my sons play baseball so no painting for them



Daniel Frost: It's pretty much what you make it. Like any craft and profession there are pros and cons. For my new kids, a girl and boy, we have taught them to find their passion and go for it. Whatever you do, do it with all your heart. If it's painting, so be it!

Join the conversation on Facebook: "Pro Painter Magazine"

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DYNAMIC DROP SHEET DISPENSER
You are paid to prep and paint, not to waste time – and money – placing, moving and replacing inferior drop sheets. Dynamic's Drop Sheet Dispenser is an essential tool for professional painters. Made of high-density clear plastic, light and tough, these drop sheets are easy to tape and they resist bleed-through!

DYNAMIC DYNA FLO EXTENDER FOR OIL-BASED PAINTS AND PRIMERS
Slows the drying time by extending the "wet edge," while increasing coverage of paint for better paint value. Helps to eliminate brush and roller marks! Dyna Flo Extender also eliminates dry spray when spraying solvent-based paints. Non-yellowing, adds no residue. Will not affect the color or the sheen.

DYNAMIC DYNA FLO EXTENDER FOR LATEX PAINTS AND PRIMERS
Slows the drying time by extending the "wet edge," while helping to eliminate brush and roller marks. Container is completely recyclable for easy disposal. Safe and biodegradable, non-toxic. Non-yellowing and adds no residue.

WOOSTER ROLLER GAUGE SYSTEM
Spread, gauge, and back roll in one step! Eliminate the squeegee process and directly control coating mil thickness with these patent-pending Wooster endcaps. Use with 5 mm nap rollers to apply floor or roof coatings like epoxies, urethanes, anti-skid floor toppings, vapor barriers. See the Roller Gauges in action in this 1-minute video: http://youtu.be/B7ZnVS95kP0

WOOSTER LOCK JAW TOOL HOLDER
Makes all tools compatible with extension poles for extra reach. The affordable Wooster Lock Jaw™ securely holds paintbrushes, roller frames, scrapers, flashlights, or any item up to 35 mm diameter. Nine locking points provide an adjustment range of 160 degrees. Works with standard threaded and no-twist Wooster Sherlock GT® poles.

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PRO Painter tip!

Got a long wall to paint? A roll of tar paper is a cheap and easy way to protect the floor or ground. Set it close to the wall, anchor the loose end, and give it a kick. Voila! 100+ feet of excellent floor protection. Tar paper is also easy to cut to shape if necessary.

– Rick Fowler

Craig Lowe

Celebrity Painter Dies

Mississauga, Ontario painter and TV celebrity Craig Lowe died tragically on August 2 while scuba diving in the Dingwall-Aspy Bay area of Cape Breton. Lowe was the owner of Lowe Painting and a regular part of the *Holmes on Homes* show since the beginning. "Craig was a generous & talented man who was always willing to lend a hand", remembers Mike Holmes. "My heart goes out to his wife and his daughters, he will be missed." Lowe was an experienced scuba diver and his death remains a mystery. The Holmes Group has created a trust fund to support the future of Lowe's four daughters. Learn more at http://makeitright.ca/news/death-of-tradesman-craig-lowe

Electric/Hybrid Work Trucks on Horizon

Hate filling up your gas tank at the pumps? Hybrid and electric work vehicles are definitely on the horizon. Electric vehicles use batteries to store power while hybrids use small fuel-powered engines to recharge batteries or boost electric motor power when needed at high speeds or while accelerating. Right now Ford is quietly selling hybrid F-150s to industrial users and utility companies, and public announcements of plug-in work vehicles and hybrids will become common in 18 to 24 months. FedEx is using plug-in, rechargeable electric delivery vans in six cities right now, and Mercedes is testing eight full-size delivery trucks in Portugal, each with 14 foot cargo beds. General Electric even has batteries that now power scoop trams in heavy, underground mining equipment. It remains to be seen if the higher cost of alternative vehicles will justify their fuel savings for professional painters, but it looks like practical alternatives to outrageous fuel costs are coming.

Photo: Thinkstock.com

Canadian Economy Stronger Than Expected

Painting is one of the first things people give up when the economy turns sour, and that's why recent stronger-than-expected economic output is good news for Canadian painters. This past May, weekly earnings in Canada rose 2.6 per cent compared with year-ago figures, along with the fifth consecutive month that gross domestic output was up in this country. More than 158,000 more Canadians were on payroll in May compared with 2013, and the US economy has grown four per cent over the last year. Overall, the Canadian economy isn't exactly hot, but it's definitely warming.

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9-IN-1 PAINTER'S TOOL

Other than a brush and roller, painters everywhere use a handful of other tools. So why not put them all together and keep things compact and handy? That's what the 9-in-1 painter's tool does. It opens cans, cleans cracks, spreads filler, scrapes loose paint on flat and concave surfaces, works wet paint out from rollers before washing, pulls small nails and hammers them back in again. The blade is made from rust-resistant stainless steel that can be resharpened, and the handle has a high-friction rubbery overwrap, with a metal end cap for pounding imperfections below the surface before filling. This tool saves space, reduces clutter and boosts productivity.

PUTTY PENCILS

The best time to fill nail holes in stain-grade woodwork is after staining. Filler never accepts stain like surrounding wood, so it's best to leave filling until everything else is done. That's where these putty pencils come in. Just rub the end over a hole, dent or ding until the depression is a little more than full. Gently scrape or rub away the excess and you're done. Choose a colour that's the same or slightly darker than surrounding stained wood for best results. This putty doesn't shrink, crack, fade or smell. Made in the USA.

MINI MICRO FIBER ROLLER REFILLS

According to tests performed at the Alberta Research Centre in 2008, micro fiber roller refills hold more paint than standard refills and require fewer trips back to the tray. Four inches long, these micro-sized refills are made for primers, exterior paints and all latex and waterbased coatings. Use them wherever a full-size roller isn't ideal – doors, cupboards, window frames and tight spots. Fibers extend around the ends of refills to create smooth edges on painted zones. Top quality performance in a mini format.

RUBBER GRIP PUTTY KNIFE

Every good painter needs to be a little bit of a drywaller when it comes to patching and surface prep. That's where taping knives come in. The Dynamic design starts with a flexible blade made from stainless steel. The tang of the blade extends all the way to the smooth metal end cap that's specially designed for pounding dimples into drywall. The rubberized overwrap on the handle makes it easier to grip than hard-surface knife handles. Keep it clean and this knife will last decades.

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do you really OWN A PAINTING BUSINESS?

OK, you're paid to paint. But can you SELL your business one day? That's the acid test of business ownership.

By Steve Maxwell

As a professional painter, you probably think of yourself as a business owner. But do you really own a business? Does your "business" pass the business existence test? It's easy to find out. Just ask yourself one question: Could your painting venture be sold for more than the value of the equipment and vehicle you own?

If yes, then you've got a business. If not, then you're the owner of a job, not a business. And while some of us consider being our own boss better than working for someone else, owning an actual business offers other financial advantages, too.

Do you fancy the idea of someday selling the goodwill, reputation, contacts and technical experience you've built up over the years? Do you like the idea of creating your own severance package for the day you've had enough of painting?

Creating a marketable painting business means you profit twice from your work – once every time you get paid for a job, then again when you decide to quit painting for good or move to another area. Building a marketable business does take a little more effort than painting alone, but not much. You really just need to work a little differently in key ways.

Why Should They Buy?

A marketable painting business doesn't happen just because you've done lots of jobs over the years and have many happy clients. It doesn't

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even happen if you've got employees. No, a marketable business needs to have something valuable to offer a buyer, and to make this happen you need to start thinking like the person you hope might buy your business someday.

What could you be doing now in the day-to-day running of your business to create an ongoing accumulation of tangible value for another painter who takes over from you? What could you provide that would make them flourish in the future? To begin with, it would have to save the new owner time, effort and uncertainty. A business worth buying would also have to shorten the time it takes to become fully skilled and profitable. All this is why a marketable painting business has three key features.

1 MARKETABLE FEATURE
A Business With Identity

All marketable businesses have a distinct, visible identity. Businesses have logos, they might have a motto, and every successful business has a unique selling proposition.

Building a business happens alongside your work as a painter, but it's different, too. In fact, a marketable business must be different enough from you as a person that it won't take away from some future sale of the operation. Even a business name as plain sounding as ACME Painting Co. is a more marketable brand than, say, Al Brown Painter. How attractive would it be to a prospective buyer of your business if they didn't happen to be named Al Brown? *continued overleaf*

Photo: Thinkstock.com

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> **If you expect someone to pay money for your business, you need to do everything you can to capture client information and stay connected with those clients.**

A logo boosts the marketability of your business big-time, and creating a logo these days is easier than most people realize. You could hire a logo artist and pay hundreds of dollars, or you could Google the word "logo maker" and make use of any one of the dozens of online DIY logo creation tools. I've used these several times and it's amazing how well they work. You start with a template, add your own words, shuffle the details and arrangement a bit, and bingo: a serviceable logo that's the foundation of your marketable painting business.

2 MARKETABLE FEATURE
A Community of Clients

If you expect someone to pay money for your business, you need to do everything you can to capture client information and stay connected with those clients. Repeat business is the name of the game. Not even the best paint jobs last forever, so there's every reason to think of each project with a new client as the beginning of a long-term relationship, not a one-shot business transaction. Passing those relationships on to the new owner of your painting business is a big part of what they'll pay you for, but you need to have those relationships in good order and easy to retrieve.

I'm all for computers, but you really should have some kind of hard cover journal to record names, phone numbers, addresses and job information. Take this journal wherever you go on jobs so you can capture raw client information in the field: names, addresses, paint type and colours chosen and any personal details that might help you stay connected. A client list is gold for any painter looking to profit someday from the sale of their business, and a bound journal is an excellent way to reliably gather information in the field. The best I've found is called Everyman's Journal, published by Lee Valley Tools (800-267-8767; www.leevalley.com) I've used these journals for years and they're tough and top-notch. At the end of each day, week or month, transfer client information onto your computer, then back up this information off-site using one of the many free services. Only an idiot loses their client list (and most of their business equity) because of a hard drive failure.

Better than just a digital archive, keeping in touch with your clients by email newsletter every month or so makes a lot of sense. There are countless painters that clients can choose from for their next job, and the biggest reason they'll choose someone other than you is because they forget who you are. It can be years between painting jobs, so it's up to you to help previous clients remember you.

Mailchimp is my favourite tool for reaching a subscriber list via email, and it's nearly as simple to use as an ordinary email program. Mailchimp is also free for lists up to 2000 subscribers, which is plenty of space for any small painting business. Interact with your clients even a little after doing a good job for them and they're much more likely to become regulars. A list of clients is the most marketable part of your business.

3 MARKETABLE FEATURE
A Skills Transfer Process

Fully skilled professional painters almost certainly aren't the market you'll be selling your business to. Why would they be interested? They're probably already busy, and if they're not, something is wrong. No, your prospective business buyer will more likely be someone who knows something about painting, likes what they've seen, and is willing to pay you money to fast-forward through the business growth and building phase. They want to get right down to earning good money and they're willing to pay for it. That's why you need to include a teaching phase as part of your business sale.

If you've built your painting business right, and established ongoing client relationships, you won't want to turn those clients over to just anyone buying your business. Committing to a business transfer period where you show the new owner everything needed for success in the field over a period of a few months helps both the new owner and the clients you've come to know. The best approach is for you to continue to receive all payments for the jobs completed in the transfer period, with the new owner tagging along and learning for free.

The world is filled with people who have many different ambition and enthusiasm levels, and that's why building a marketable painting business isn't for everyone. But if you're as interested in business and profits as you are in your life as a pro painter, why not set things up so you can cash in someday on what you've built? pp

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GREEN SCENE

by Robert Walton

Public concern for the environment isn't quite the hot topic it used to be. Just don't make the mistake of thinking that all green products for professional painters fall into the same category as the over-priced, over-marketed environmental nonsense that made the public suspicious in the first place. The fact is, truly green painting products do exist and the best of them make financial and practical sense, too. Green can sometimes even help get you more work with certain clients.

Here are five of the best green painting products to help make that happen.

1

Dynamic Enviro-Brush

Why throw out an entire brush when only the bristles are toast? This is the thinking behind the Enviro-Brush, and like all good green ideas, this one saves time and money as well as trash.

The replaceable bristles are a top quality polyester/nylon blend, with fibers anchored into a rectangular plastic collar with cured resin. The collar fits into the ferrule of a plastic handle, held there by a spring-loaded jaw. Although the handle itself is plastic, the shape and length make it as easy to use as any wooden handle. In fact, I found the handle even better than most wood handles because of the texture. The surface is covered with the same kind of rubbery, high-friction overwrap that's used on high-end power tools.

The best green products save money, and that's the case with Enviro-Brush. Replacing bristles saves 35% to 40% on the cost of the complete brush, which ranges from $7.99 for the 30mm up to $12.99 for the 64mm unit.

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5 eco-friendly painting products that really do make sense

PRO Painter tip!

Tin foil is perfect for keeping paint off sprinkler heads in commercial buildings when spraying. Crumple pieces of foil on the heads beforehand, then pull them off when you're done.

- Aaron Rothenberg

1 Dyna Flo Extender

The world of latex and waterbased coatings was forced onto the painting industry from on high, and while this is a good thing from a health point of view, there is one lingering problem with latex and waterbased coatings. In some cases they simply dry too fast. Without enough time to flow out, there's a distinct chance that brush strokes will show, as anyone who has worked with waterbased urethanes will tell you. Most of these dry way too fast for best results. Even in ideal circumstances, fast-dry coatings require more skill to apply than slower drying oil-based formulations, but it doesn't have to be this way. Dyna Flo Extender slows drying speed so coatings become more forgiving, taming the main downside of all those green latex and waterbased coatings.

2 Enviro-Roller

Of all the different plastics in the world, the kind used to make beverage bottles is the most useful because it's the most easily recycled. This material is abbreviated PET, also labelled as , and it's used to make the lint-free Enviro-Roller. These offer lots of bragging rights when talking to green-oriented clients and they simply make good practical and financial sense, too. Both the core and fibers are made entirely from recycled sources, providing an industrial use for millions of plastic beverage bottles each year. The bottles are processed in the USA and refills are wound and finished in Canada. The only thing not from recycled sources is the backing used to tuft the fibers and the epoxy used to bond the fibers to the core. Lab tests also show the the Enviro-Roller offers excellent paint holding and roll out capacity and they can reduce your costs, too. Price for a 10mm Enviro-Roller refill is 25% less than a similar lint-free, non-recycled refill of the same quality.

3 Enviro-Tray

This is also made entirely of post-consumer PET, but don't be fooled by the transparent green colour. Although it looks like a tray liner at first glance, it's actually stiff enough to function on its own, without a metal or plastic tray underneath. The translucent green colour stands out as different than most roller trays, so the optics show eco-sensitive clients that you do things differently. Cost runs $2.99 each, which is as economical as roller trays get. And since it's made of PET, the old tray is easily recycled when its working life is over.

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“The fact is, truly green painting products do exist and the best of them make financial and practical sense, too. Green can sometimes even help get you more work with certain clients.”

5

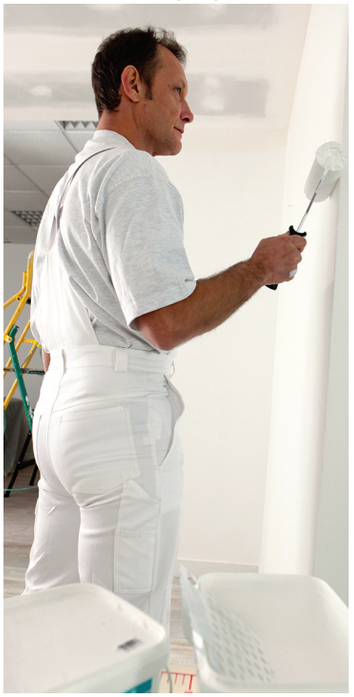
Ecocoat Recycled Latex Paint

Sounds second-rate, but this stuff is actually quite impressive. Leftover paint is collected at municipal drop-off depots across the country, then sorted into primary colours and batched together before filtering and repackaging. Ecocoat is a Canadian company with a colour chart and store locator at www.ecocoat.ca. The current product line includes 26 colours, and the efficiencies of green production translate into cost savings, too. By diverting old paint from landfill or incineration, Ecocoat reduces landfill pressures and energy costs. Producing a gallon of virgin paint, for instance, uses about 100 kilowatt hours of electricity and contaminates 9 gallons of water – all of which is avoided with recycled paint. Ecocoat costs about $20 per gallon. It’s thick-bodied and hides at least as well as the best virgin latex.

Environmental products and lifestyles took off like most fads do, over-shooting the reality and true benefits to an extent. But as the dust settles on all things green, we’re left with real benefits that soon won’t be considered green any more. They’ll just be the way things are done.

GIVE ’EM WHAT THEY WANT

Whether or not environmental concerns matter much to you, some of your potential clients certainly value all things green. That’s why it sometimes pays to use painting products that offer environmental advantages, but only if you talk about them while winning a job. You can usually tell pretty quick if a potential client is the green type. And if they are, tell them about the rollers you use made from recycled water bottles, or the paint trays made from recycled plastics. Pull dried latex right out of reusable trays in sheets so they can see how green trays can be used again and again. Show the right kind of clients that you understand and meet their environmental values and it will turn into more and better work for you.



THE LATEX PAINT EFFECT

The biggest and best environmental progress often goes unnoticed because it becomes part of everyday life. Latex paint is a case in point. I doubt there’s a professional painter anywhere who longs for the bad old days when oil-based paints ruled the trade. Solvents, odours, sticky fingers – who misses that? The whole move towards latex that began in the 1970s was environmentally driven, and though early formulations of latex paints were pitiful at first, that was just the start. Today the lives of professional painters and clients everywhere are so much better because of latex. Even the performance of latex is better than we ever got with oils – and all because the entire paint industry got greener, then green became normal.

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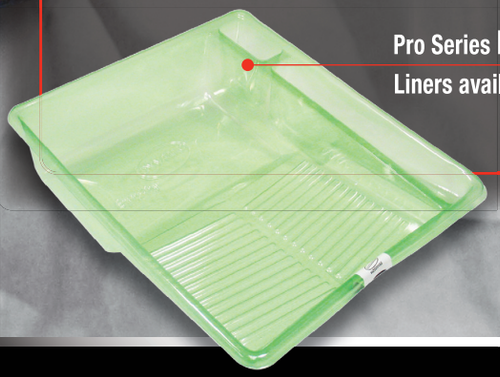

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MAKE 'EM Laugh!

Skill, experience and humor gives Alberta painter a stress-free work life

By Steve Maxwell

When Rick Fowler began painting professionally in August 1973, there was no way he could have known where his career choice would lead. Forty one years later and Rick's been painting full-time ever since. He also loves his work more than most painters you'll meet. One part of this is because laughter and enthusiasm are just part of who this man is. Another is because of the unique painting niche that Rick's skill and experience have led him to.

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All photos: Amber Bracken/KlixPix

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> **“I never get bored with my work. How can I? I’ve been on 6,783 different insurance jobs during my time with the company since 1995, and each job has been different.”**

For the last 19 years Rick has worked for Edmonton-based Spar Construction and is currently their sole painter. He’s part of a 40-man crew that handles insurance work around Alberta, and Rick’s the perfect guy for the painting side of restorations.

Varied Work Life

“I never get bored with my work. How can I? I’ve been on 6,783 different insurance jobs during my time with the company since 1995, and each job has been different. One morning I might be in a million dollar mansion, then painting a skid row house in the afternoon. Earlier this year I did some stain touch-ups in a 26,500 sq. ft., $15 million mansion with just two people living in it. They gave me a map so I could find the room I needed to work on! There was even a swimming pool on the lower floor.”

On a technical level, few painters could successfully handle the variety of work that Rick does and still consider it stress-free. But that’s where his experience comes in.

“Until 1995 I sometimes painted residential jobs that included subdivision work. On several jobs they were building 80 houses at a time. We also did commercial jobs just about as big as they get. Sometimes I ran crews of 5 to 12 painters”, says Rick. “We did malls, airports, warehouses, schools – lots of really big jobs. Looking back on it now, I didn’t get enough extra money

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> “Some of the young guys I see on jobs ask why I spend so much time cleaning my sprayer. ‘There’s only one way to make a busy sprayer last 10 years!’ I say.”

for the hassles of being a supervisor. I got tired of being responsible for everyone else’s work, especially with painters who have limited training. Commercial jobs always involved regular layoffs, which I also got tired of.”

“I remember sitting back one day and joking to the guy I worked for: ‘Don’t hire anyone with less than a bachelor of arts degree.’ It was really hard to find good painters who worked well and consistently did what I needed them to do.”

Rick’s early career wasn’t always complicated. He started off with residential work in Edmonton and Fort McMurray, and traveled back and forth between Canada and Mexico. Back in 1975 he worked in San Francisco painting boats at the St. Francis Yacht Club, right under the Golden Gate Bridge. “I really enjoyed that kind of painting,” remembers Rick. “I’m always at home with tricky brush work and plenty of colour.”

Colour isn’t always what you might think of when it comes to a career as varied as Rick’s. He once spray painted a slaughter house in full operation, one room at a time. “I slopped around in blood for five days”, says Rick “then threw out a couple hundred bucks worth of bloody drop sheets...yuk!”

Technical Skills

The main challenge with insurance work is matching existing surfaces. That’s where unique skills come in. Matching requires a knowledge of

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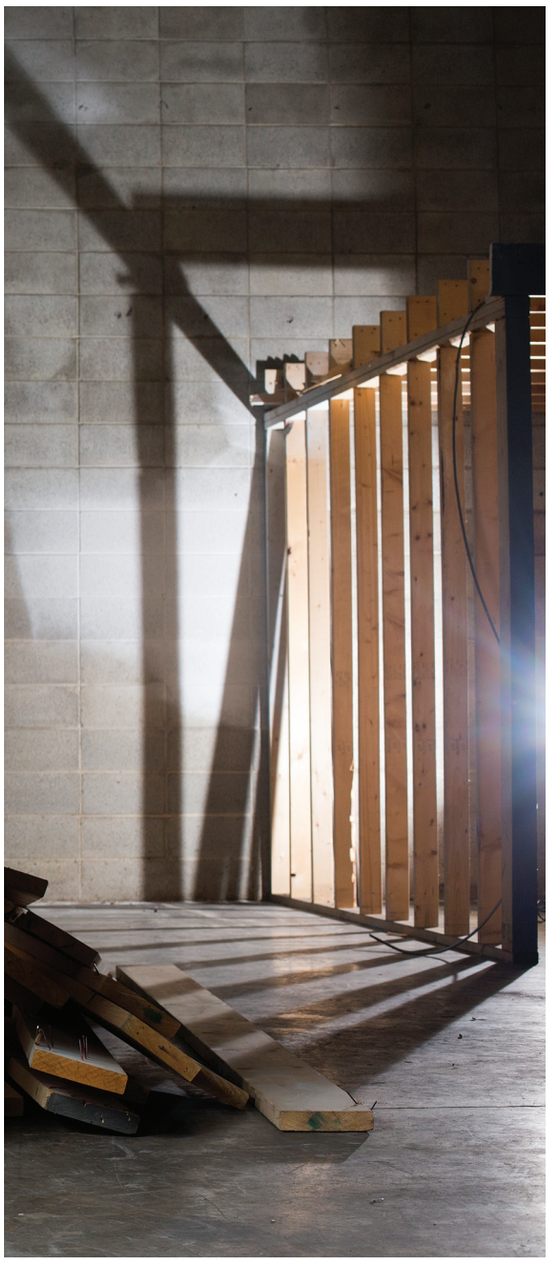

materials that goes way beyond what your average painter needs. "I carry about 18,000 colour cards in my van," explains Rick, "but colour matching is only part of it. You also need to know sheens and textures. Most Canadian homes have an egg shell sheen on walls, but flats are coming on now, too. I keep most every nap length of roller in my van to match wall textures. I also carry a number of primers because of the sheer number of different substrates I can run into in a day. Primers are one of the elements that can make or break a job. Always use appropriate primers whether it's wood, drywall, plastic, metal, glass – whatever. When you've been around as long as I have, you sometimes get to see your own work several times over the years, so you can know what works and what doesn't."

When it comes to colour matching samples, Rick relies on a few Edmonton paint stores staffed with real geniuses behind the colour counter. "When I got started in the business, the old timers used to colour match right in their van, but that's not practical or necessary any more. The number of colour pots you'd need for this today is crazy. These days I slice a piece of drywall paper off the wall, then take it to one of the paint stores that I know can work with colour. Custom colour mixing is a gift. One guy I know is not only better than the computer, he's faster."

Rick's success comes in part from

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> **“Be as dependable a tradesman as you can be. This will expand your business by itself in many ways. People are very receptive to a tradesman who does exactly what he says he’ll do and when he says he’ll do it.”**

the discipline he’s learned to apply to his work, and it can help any painter. “Organize your time from the beginning of the job,” says Rick. “Start the most difficult prep work first, beginning with what will take the most amount of drying time. If you touch something with paint that you shouldn’t have, clean it immediately. Keep several types of cleaners with you and know which ones work well on different surfaces. Always keep a brush extender handy, too – it can save you a ton of grief. And don’t skimp on brush quality, either. Be as dependable a tradesman as you can be. This will expand your business by itself in many ways. People are very receptive to a tradesman who does exactly what he says he’ll do and when he says he’ll do it.”

Part Painter, Part Diplomat

As an insurance painter, Rick’s usually the last tradesperson in people’s homes as restoration work is winding down. A major portion of his job is to make clients happy, but that’s not always easy because every insurance job begins with a disaster.

“A lot of homeowners I see have put up with workers tromping through their house for months. Clients are nervous too because even the best restoration job doesn’t look good until the paint goes on. That’s why I always show up with a cheerful attitude – clean and professional. I’m a diplomat and try to get the clients laughing if I can. Laughter makes a big difference. Bottom line: If the client isn’t happy, they won’t sign off on the job. That’s why I do whatever it takes.”

“I had one repeat customer who was obsessive compulsive. She’d see some tiny spot on a wall or door frame and wouldn’t be able to sleep for weeks. Eventually I got her down to once-a-year painting visits from me – sometimes big jobs sometimes small ones. Every time I stepped into her house there were paper towels on the floor for me to leave my shoes on. If I popped out for a minute to the truck to get something, there were fresh paper towels on the floor again waiting for me.”

Sometimes, it takes a lot to satisfy the customer. Once Rick went to see an elderly lady who said that her freshly painted bathroom was in horrible shape. “I arrived and found it absolutely perfect,” remembers Rick. “Nothing wrong, even to my experienced eye. I painted the whole bathroom and got the predicted call-back the next day. When I went back, she told me it was something that could only be seen in the dark, so I turned the light off, looked at it in the dark and agreed with her. I repainted the bathroom and she was happy.”

Tricks of the Trade

Patching is something Rick does more than most painters because insurance work often involves fixing up damage left behind by other trades. Halogen lamps, topping mud, fibre tape and a heat gun are all part of Rick’s patching kit. “I like metal and fibre patches for door knob sized holes, and if I’m in an occupied house I build poly barricades to keep things clean. People hate dust so I do, too. Whatever you do, check and double-check that all patching is done properly before spot priming. It’s pretty hard to get it all the first time around, and missing damage just costs you time later on.”

Smoke sealing has been a constant part of Rick’s work since he began on insurance jobs, and it’s the kind of thing that demands exceptional patience and attention to detail. In order to eliminate the lingering smell of smoke-damaged homes, everything in the house is stripped back to the bare frame.

“The average house is completely gutted out”, explains Rick. “There’s just a subfloor, open wall frame, and the attic frame. That’s when I come in. I use my sprayer and I have to coat every surface on everything with an odour-blocking primer. If you miss anything – even one small spot – smoke odours will come through the drywall when the restoration is done and we’ll have to strip it all back and start again. It’s crucial that you get every last spot. It takes a lot of fooling around and it took years for me to get good at this job. Young guys are almost never careful enough for smoke sealing.”

Rick does most of his spray work with a Graco 490, renting a larger machine for those rare times when he needs to work with thicker-than-usual coatings. “A big sprayer is nice to have”, admits Rick, “but big sprayers are also hard to lug around. I’ve owned three Graco 490s over the years, and I’ve gotten lots of work out of them. Some of the young guys I see on jobs ask why I spend so much time cleaning my sprayer. ‘There’s only one way to make a busy sprayer last 10 years!’ I say.”

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Last year a client tipped Rick for a job well done with a brand new $4,500 projection system. Before he got into insurance work he painted a large gazebo in San Francisco with 12 colours. Rick once rode an extension ladder all the way down the side of a 2 story house uninjured and didn't get a drop of paint on the house - only on himself. He once ran a job up north in an isolated region for several months in the 70's where he had a dozen painters – all away from their wives, girlfriends, and civilization. "Every morning I'd do a head count," remembers Rick, then track down the missing painters starting with a call to the RCMP, then the hospital. Last week, Rick painted half a McDonald's restaurant after repairs were made because someone "drove through" the staff lunchroom.

"It's always amazed me how easy it's been for me to find work over the years. I've never run out. Another surprise is how I can still learn something from someone who is 40 years younger than me."

Rick makes it a point to have fun every day. "The company I work for is awesome," smiles Rick "and it's great to know the guys you work with personally. I head into the shop in the morning, have a few laughs, drink some coffee, then get my assignments for the day and head out. If we have a problem, we deal with it. My work life is pretty much stress-free and I certainly like it that way." pp

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STAIN & GAIN

By Ken Evans

Even though painting is one skill and staining wood is another, most painters still get asked to finish stain-grade trim, wainscoting and wood interiors. Who else but painters are clients supposed to ask to tackle this kind of work? And whether you're comfortable with stain or not, there's money to be made and reputations to be built getting good with this kind of wood.

Traditionally speaking, stain-grade finishes colour the wood in the first step, then coat it under urethane or some other kind of sealer for protection in another. But to keep things simple, I'll call any transparent, interior wood finish "stain-grade" – whether or not it includes a step to change wood colour or not. Most of the process is the same, and all transparent wood finishes start with the same, crucial step.

Start With Sanding

Even million dollar homes I visit frequently suffer from inferior stain-grade finishing. It's a shame, and while lack of sanding is the most common reason why, it's easy to see where the trouble comes from. Sanding wood is a pain, especially when that wood is trim around a door or window and it's been milled to an intricate profile.

Pain or not, excellence demands that all new wood be sanded before any transparent finish goes on. This means every inch of trim and every visible piece of flat stock. That's because even seemingly smooth wood has subtle marks left behind by the milling equipment that shaped it. Invisible at first, these mill marks show up quite noticeably after the first coat of stain goes on. It's ugly.

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HOW TO SUCCEED WITH STAIN-GRADE FINISHES ON WOOD

PRO Painter tip!

Got plastic wall anchors to hide? Use a sharp utility knife and cut the anchor flush to the wall. Tap the remaining plastic so it's below the wall surface, then skim coat patching compound over the dent.

- Dagmar Wickes

If you're lucky enough to be finishing flat woodwork, start with a belt sander spinning an 80- or 100-girt abrasive, followed by a half-sheet inline sander with 120- or 150-grit paper, finishing up with a quarter-sheet finishing sander and 180- or 220-grit sand paper. All this said, as a painter you won't often enjoy situations where sanding flat, horizontal surfaces are so convenient. More than likely, most of your stain-grade work will involve profiled trim and moulding. It may even already be mounted on a wall, and this is where a trick comes in.

A Canadian power tool accessory called a sanding mop (877-287-5017; www.stockroomsupply.com) is unique among sanding tools because it makes it so fast and easy to sand curve shapes and molded profiles. The sanding mop is made of cloth-backed sandpaper mounted on a mandrel that spins in a drill press or hand-held drill. All those spinning layers allow curved and intricate surfaces to be power sanded to remove mill marks, all without rounding off any crisp details – even fine ones. You wouldn't think this thing would work, but it does. Sanding mops can be used in a hand-held drill for already-mounted trim, or in a drill press for sanding trim before installation. Check out my video and see for yourself: goo.gl/Qge1y0

Finishing Option 1
Stain-Free and Sealed

This is for clients who want natural wood colour and grain to show through with no added colour, and it's the simplest stain-grade option going. The easiest product to brush on in the field is urethane, but you need to choose up front between waterbased and oil-based.

All else being equal, oil-based urethanes are easier to succeed with than waterbased because they dry more slowly, allowing brush marks to flow out. On the downside, governments everywhere are restricting the sale of oil-based urethanes for air quality reasons. That's why they're getting rare on store shelves. Oil-based formulations also usually impart a yellowish colour to the wood – a great thing for some clients and situations, and a bad thing for others. Always use waterbased urethane when clients want the whitest and lightest results on pine, maple, eastern white cedar or other light coloured woods.

Waterbased urethanes are almost always quick drying (too quick in my book), so you can only brush a given area once. Get this wrong and you'll create visible brush strokes and hardened bubbles. Not good. You'll get better results adding a retarder to waterbased urethanes to slow them down and allow some flow-out.

Regardless of how thoroughly you sand before urethane application, your wood will be quite a bit rougher after that first coat dries. That's because all types of urethane – both oil- and waterbased – cause surface fibers to swell, stand upright, then harden in the upright position. The surface won't look much different to the eye, but the

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> **“Even million dollar homes I visit frequently suffer from inferior stain-grade finishing.”**

STAINING FOR HIGH-WEAR SURFACES

Although you can certainly apply a combination of stain and urethane to any kind of wood, a problem emerges when you're dealing with high-wear surfaces like stairs, railings and wooden countertop edges. Traditional staining and sealing looks great at first, but when the urethane layer wears out, followed by the stain layer, you've got ugly light wood exposed and two problems. Besides looking terrible, it's impossible to renew that worn finish seamlessly without stripping back to bare wood and starting from scratch. Lack of repairability is the problem, and this is where coloured oil finishes make all the difference.

Polymerized tung oil is excellent for sealing bare wood without adding colour, but when I need to darken and protect high-wear wood, my favourite option is oil-based, coloured finishing oils. I find that dark walnut shades are especially good at imparting a rich, dark hue, even on hardwoods that aren't particularly absorbent. I finished an ash staircase in 2009, for example, and the treads and handrails are still as dark and even as black walnut today.

wood will feel like it's got a bad case of 5 o'clock shadow. This is normal and it's why sanding lightly with fine sandpaper before the next coat is vital.

I use 220- or 240- grit open coat sandpaper in a quarter-sheet finishing sander for flat areas, and a 3M rubbing pad or Siawool for profiles and rounds. This synthetic steel wool substitute works exceptionally well where regular steel wool would leave residue behind that would rust in the presence of waterbased urethane.

Finishing Option 2 Stain and Sealed

Staining traditionally happens first, as a separate step before sealing, because this approach creates the greatest clarity of grain. Both liquid and gel stains go on in the same way, but liquid stains benefit most from a trick I've learned.

Daubing liquid stain onto the wood with a brush every 4" to 6" then rubbing it out with a rag is better in two ways than rubbing stain on directly with a rag. First, it's easier to put on just the right amount of stain by daubing. And second, a brush lets you apply stain into nooks and crannies of molded profiles much more thoroughly than with a rag.

Always rub the daubs of stain evenly into the wood with a rag, working parallel to the grain only. Most stains these days are still oil-based, and you can safely coat them with either oil-based or waterbased urethane when they're fully dry. Waterbased stains can also be sealed with oil-based urethane after a day or two of drying time. Check out my video to see the waterbased staining process in action: goo.gl/1K2NGK

A versatile painter is a busy painter, and since clients usually turn to painters for help finishing transparent wood, why not take on the work? Even if it doesn't involve paint, it's usually worthwhile just the same. **pp**

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DO YOU PURSUE Craftsmanship?

CRAFTSMANSHIP ISN'T A WORD you hear often these days, and that's too bad. Even though craftsmanship has become largely invisible to many ordinary people, it will always be the single most important factor in how our world looks, functions and endures. A sense of craftsmanship can also be a powerful motivation for people like you who work with their hands. Have you experienced what the pursuit of craftsmanship can do to energize your life as a pro painter?

There was a time when our society was much more aware of craftsmanship than we are now, and something especially sad happens when tradespeople themselves lose the sense that there's more to work than just pay.

These days "designers" are all the rage. And while you've got to hand it to those chatty 20-somethings who've managed to reach media guru status for their abundant talk about how things should go together, the fact is, all the design insights in the world mean nothing without skilled, detail-oriented people to actually roll up their sleeves and make things happen. People just like you.

Everyday, on every project, each job is made up of a hundred little decisions about craftsmanship. Do you patch that little flaw or leave it? Do you grab that rag and wipe off the tiny bit of stray paint? Do you spend the extra to try a roll of that new high-end painter's tape, or make do with what you've got? Decisions like these are small, but how you choose determines whether or not you get energized by the pursuit of craftsmanship.

Celebration of the best is something we take seriously here at *Pro Painter*. That's the reason we're announcing a new feature. It's called Brag Page and it's a place where you can get your best projects featured in print, presented to an audience that knows what good painting is. Go to www.professionalpainter.ca/brag-rights/ and send us photos and a description of your best, most impressive work. Send as many jobs as you like and we'll consider them all for celebration here on the Brag Page. pp

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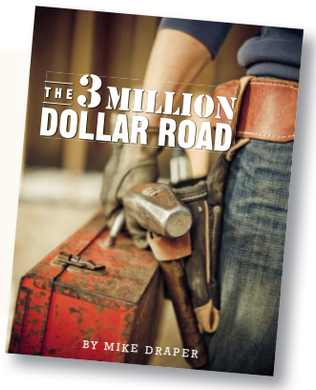

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