

Is There Room for Craftsmanship in Contracting?



By Scott Burt

Many of our interests in paint contracting were born of another era. My unscientific research suggests that the demographic of paint contractors puts many of us in the 30-to-50-year-old age bracket. If that is close to accurate, many of us learned the trade of painting and began conducting business during economic climates that were very different from the past couple of years. Many of us have changed our ways, while others have clung to the past.

By most accounts, historically, painting was considered to be an art. Craftsmanship was valued and painters apprenticed under masters to learn the trade properly before earning recognized status in the field. Somewhere along the way, in the evolution of our culture and economy in recent decades, that all changed. The pendulum swung our trade from skilled services defined by craftsmanship to a lower-tier trade to be contracted, and many craftsmen became contractors. Throw into the mix a healthy dose of homeowner overexposure to “You can do it, we can help,” and we swim in some muddy waters today.

The interpretation of this shift has led many of the practitioners of our trade to fall into the trap of “contracting” in its strictest sense. Contracts and specs, whether residential, commercial or industrial, constitute an agreement of services to be performed in exchange for compensation by the consumer of those

services. A low cost of entry into the field, thereby creating a highly competitive field, has caused a wave of contracting that, in order to survive, has often aimed for the bare minimum required level of quality and service that would yield payment for the contracted scope of work.

Where does this leave the modern contractor who values more than the mere delivery of the bare minimum acceptable level of finished product and service? Let’s face it; our trade has been de-valued – partly by the times but also by us, the painters. There are some fundamental aspects of the trade that have not changed, and I believe that by pondering exactly what it is we do when we engage in the act of professional painting that maybe we can raise the bar back up a little bit.

Anywhere that hands and minds come together in the execution of a skilled trade, in our case painting, there is the potential for excellence or true craftsmanship to occur. I have told my painters for years that the only thing standing between the surfaces to be painted and a very nice job is them and the tools and materials of our trade. It begins with us – the business owners or painting contractors – and the manner in which we approach the application of our craft.

On one large end of the spectrum there are contractors de-skilling the craft of painting in the interest of being contractors, who by historical definition have at least the very basic goal of satisfying the minimum requirements of the contract agreed to, to the satisfaction of the customer, not the satisfaction of perfection. The

“bare minimum” contractor takes much of the mind out of the equation by distilling the steps to each process down to their basic essence, where laborers can be plugged in, swapped out and substituted from day to day or job to job with no detriment to the general function of the operation. This approach seeks consistency and conformity to a prescribed set of minimum standards and specs, with a rigidly routine process, over the pursuit of excellence. You don’t have to look too far around the trade to find contractors seeking ways to dissect the trade so that its processes can be broken down into simple tasks that can be performed by less skilled and lower-paid laborers, in the interest of profitability. These guys work quickly, efficiently and not to a particularly high standard. Daniel Tambasco, owner of Just Plain Painting in Massachusetts, sums it up best: “Only painters think that as they become faster and more efficient that they deserve a pay cut.” Manufacturers have jumped on board as well, unknowingly contributing to the quagmire by offering tools intended to eliminate steps and products claiming to do away with priming or reduce the number of finish coats. End result: confused consumers and opportunistic contractors. Food for thought.

On the other, narrowing end of the spectrum, are the craftsmen-minded painters who bring a much different aptitude to that union of the hand and mind. People who doubt that using a brush, roller or sprayer every day takes skill have never painted professionally. The tools by themselves do nothing. It is the person laying hands on those tools

who makes the choice as to what will result. When we broaden the definition of the craftsman to include the mastery of the tools and materials of his trade, in addition to manual skill, then it becomes clear that there still is the possibility for craftsmanship to exist today. Knowing exactly which tools and materials to use in which situations and how to modify what is available to complete the task at hand, is a basic example of how the craftsman stands out in the field.

What do we do when we are contractors but also prefer to be as craftsman-like as possible? How can we compete with others who have no interest in the craft of painting? Here are some basic ideas to consider:

1. About 95 percent of your customers don't know or appreciate the difference between an absolutely perfect paint job and a basically satisfactory paint job.
2. The 5 percent who do know are willing to pay for it; the rest are not. Unless you educate them and they decide that they are interested in something better.
3. We can impose our standards of perfection on customers to the point that it is burdensome to their paint budget, which we will generally have to absorb in our labor costs.
4. The pursuit of perfection will also be burdensome to schedule, which irritates customers almost as much as a burden to the budget described in number 3.

Our challenge lies in the reality that to take a paint job to the highest level of perfection usually means that the last 10 percent of the job will probably consume as much as 25 percent of your labor costs for the whole job. Having done this for many years myself, I know this to be absolutely true. Perfection can be a very diminishing return. In

reality, most of the time if we are hitting over 90 percent on the perfection scale, the overwhelming majority of people will be very happy with the results, the cost and the amount of time they were inconvenienced by the work being done. This translates in most cases to a happy customer experience. That should be the goal above all else: a happy customer experience as it relates to the three critical categories of quality, budget and schedule. Every decision or move that you make in the field affects at least one of those categories in some way, and those three categories drive the overall customer experience. I can assure you that if you asked your

- We do it because we are putting our name on the work.
- We do it thinking that our reputation for quality will trump all else and pay us back a hundredfold in referrals.
- We do it for our own ego.

So, our choices appear to be to either educate and sell perfection where possible or impose perfection where it is not valued and finance it out of our own pockets. There is filet mignon painting and there is meat-and-potatoes painting. Most of us don't get to serve up a good filet very often. But we should also remember that there are different qualities of hamburgers. There are tastier and healthier ways to prepare a juicy burger than a fast-food chain would do it. I would love to go into a nice restaurant, order a burger and receive filet mignon at the same price. It hasn't happened yet.

I'm making it a goal in 2010 to explain the whole menu to the customers and listen to what they really want. When I estimate a project, I can see at least three or four different ways that it could be done, which usually translates to three or four

different price points. Usually, one of those ways is just right for the individual customer. The bare minimum contractor described above is generally only offering one option. If we run our businesses correctly, he will have no choice but to continue watering down paint jobs and lowering prices until he puts himself out of business. But don't worry, someone else will take his place. The theme of the year may be: explaining all the options to the customers; letting them choose what fits best; and executing it to the highest level possible within the allotted time, money and quality expectation. **APC**

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customers to prioritize those three categories, quality (a perfect paint job) would rarely come up number one on the list.

That last 5-10 percent on the quality scale appears to not be for general consumption, unless you are willing to throw it in at your own cost in most cases. And we have all done it at one time or another. Why would we do this?

- We do what is best for the house, whether the customer knows, agrees or is willing to pay for it.
- We do it at our own expense, even if the customer is not interested in it.
- We do it because we know best.
- We do it, whether we know that it is bad for the health of our business or not.