

TOOL SURVEY RESULTS

*JLC readers tell what tools they own
and which they find most valuable*

by Lewis Lorini

Although it is skill and not tools that matters most, few contractors will deny that having the right tool often means the difference between making a profit or not. But with manufacturers busily introducing new tools, and builders finding new ways to use the old ones, it is not always clear which is the "right tool."

Last August, to find out which tools are being used in the field and in what ways, we went to the best source we know — our readers.

The tool surveys were sent to 750 randomly chosen readers and were returned by 176. The 23% response, considered outstanding for any survey, says in itself that the builders and remodelers who read *JLC* care about the tools they use.

✓ Who Answered the Survey

Most respondents were builder/remodelers who specialize in residential construction, employ small crews, and have sales of up to \$500,000. That profile was culled from the following information:

- Slightly less than half (46%) called themselves "builder/remodeler," while those checking exclusively "builder" or "remodeler" were even at 20% each.
- A majority (61%) specialize in residential construction, while 20% do both residential and commercial work.
- Most of the respondents (57%) claimed sales of \$250,000 or less, which was evenly split between those with a sales volume of \$100,000 to \$250,000 (29%) and those doing less than \$100,000 (28%). The next category, \$250,000 to \$500,000, included 20% of the respondents.
- 19% of the respondents have one employee, which was the highest single category; next was two employees (16%); and three employees were noted by 10%.

✓ Best New Tool Contest

The question that we were perhaps most curious about was, "What is the best new tool you've acquired in the past two years?"

More than 60 different items were named in this category. The selections ranged from a hi-tech Canon copier to a low-tech dead-blow maul; from a large sliding-table table saw to a small Speed Square; and from common nail aprons and hammers to the exotic Lion Miter-Trimmer.

But when the results were tabulated, two tool types stood out from the rest — power miter saws and cordless drills, each drawing 12% of the responses. Some felt obliged to name a specific brand. In the chop saw category, the Hitachi Compound Miter slide saw led the pack with eight mentions. The Makita cordless drill was next, with five specific mentions as the best new tool.

The third-place category in the new tool contest was pneumatic tools. No single brand stood out.

✓ Tool Belt Array

We expected a variety of answers to "What tools do you carry in your tool belt?" But some of the responses went beyond what we could have imagined.

More than one contractor plaintively confessed he carried "too much" or "everything." Others felt obliged to write very small and list every single tool. There were several answers with 20 items — not including nails. Among the tools most popular with the hardware-store-on-your-hip group were: several kinds of metal cutters, pliers, Vise Grips (one respondent claimed to carry three pair), torpedo levels, keyhole saws, hand planes, and a variety of wrenches.

Most of the answers, however, covered the expected tool-belt complement of a hammer, tape, square, chalkline, pencil, and knife. Other expected and commonly noted items included chisels, screwdrivers (the four-in-one kind noted most often), nail sets, and assorted nail pullers.

It was no surprise that the exceedingly useful Speed Square, cited by 28% of the respondents, has apparently gained acceptance across the country. It was, however, a little surprising to note how many carpenters always carry scribes or a compass (12%) and how few carry a calculator (three respondents).

✓ Hammer of Choice

The choice of framing hammer, including type of handle and weight of the head, may be the most personal — and debated — tool decision the average carpenter makes.

Solid steel ranked as the most popular handle nationwide at 38%, narrowly edging out wood at 35%. Then came fiberglass at 24%, and finally tubular steel at 10%.

Regionally, however, there were clearly different preferences. Solid steel was favored in the

East (51% of eastern respondents) and wood was the popular choice in the West (52% of western respondents).

Regardless of handle type, 20-ounce and 22-ounce heads were most popular for framing in all sections of the country.

Most contractors (61%) said they carried a separate hammer for finish work. Of the 16% who said they did not carry a separate finish hammer, most claimed to use a 20-ounce or lighter hammer for framing.

The majority of contractors use a 16-ounce wood-handle hammer for finish work, although 16-ounce steel-handle hammers were also fairly common.

The most-mentioned brand of hammer was Estwing, but Hart, Vaughn, and Plumb brands were also named frequently.

✓ Circular Saws

Sidewinder-type circular saws (46%) barely outdistanced worm-drive saws (36%) on the strength of popularity in the East, where 52% of the respondents have sidewinders compared to 35% with worm drives. In the West, worm drives were more popular, with 39% of contractors specifying them compared to 34% with sidewinders. Many contractors noted owning both types.

It was no surprise that the brand and model of saw mentioned most often was the legendary Skil 77 worm drive.

✓ Cordless Tools

It is no wonder cordless drills scored high in the best new tool category considering that 88% of contractors in this survey own at least one cordless tool.

Dominating the cordless tool category are cordless drills, noted by 74% of those surveyed. Makita was mentioned most often by name (23%). One contractor called the Makita 9.6-volt cordless drill "God's gift to us all."

Cordless saws, far behind drills, were listed next by 17%.

✓ Pneumatic Tools

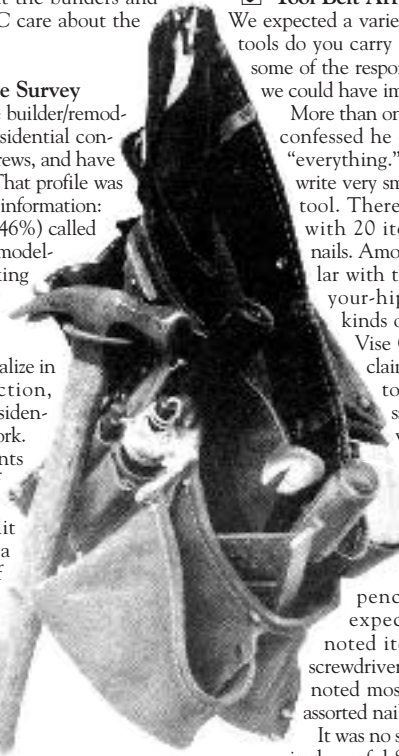
Better than half of the contractors (62%) own at least one pneumatic tool.

The survey showed a relatively even split between framing nailers and finish guns, although many contractors own more than one gun. Sheathing staplers were also popular.

Eastern contractors showed a definite preference for Bostitch nailers, while Senco was the tool of choice in the West. Paslode finished third in both regions.

✓ Rental Equipment

While the survey indicated that contractors rent a wide variety of tools, with a list of more than 30 items, concrete demolition tools are the most common rentals. Jackhammers led the pack, being noted by 16% of the respondents,



with demolition hammers (10%), and concrete saws (5%) also mentioned frequently.

Floor sanding equipment was also a popular rental item, though not as common as concrete tools. Scaffolding and transits were also listed, but not often, which implied that contractors needing those tools tend to buy them.

✓ Scaffolding

Pipe scaffolding ranked highest on the survey at 51%, but it was closely followed by ladder jacks (48%), roof brackets (48%), pump jacks (46%), and wall brackets (32%). Baker stage (11%) was the only scaffold not used often. Most contractors owned more than one type of scaffolding.

Tool Survey

Transit	62%
Jointer	44%
Angle grinder	23%
Plate joiner	15%
Table saw	73%
Radial arm saw	57%
Miter saw	1%
Reciprocating saw	88%
Band saw	38%
Edge bander	3%
Right angle drill	35%
Screwgun	83%
Portable planer	56%
Stationary planer	23%
Water level	31%
Generator	43%
Compressor	75%
Demolition hammer	24%
Heat gun	30%
Wall jacks	26%
House jack	25%
Power hoist	6%
Hinge mortising jigs	30%
Powder-actuated fastener	58%
Impact wrench	35%
Sheet metal brake	27%
Drywall taping machines	5%

Note: This chart lists the percentage of respondents that own at least one of these tools. In some categories, such as table saws and miter saws, many contractors indicated that they own more than one size.

✓ Vehicles

Far and away the most popular rig cited on the survey was a pickup truck equipped with a rack and boxes.

Pickups were marked by 55% of the respondents, more than twice the number that drive vans (21%). Only 5% use flat beds or panel trucks. A few respondents work out of station wagons.

Racks (40%) and truck boxes (30%) were the most popular accessories, with camper covers taking third (14%).



Levels

In this group, contractors are most likely to

own a 2-foot

metal level (49%) and a 4-foot wood level (49%). Most 6-foot levels used by respondents are metal (34%), compared to 14% who use a wood 6-foot level.

The Smart Level, the digital electronic device, is still rare, being noted by only six contractors nationwide, with five of them from the West Coast.

Comments on the Smart Level were mixed. One New Mexico contractor who has owned one for a year said, "It was way oversold." But a contractor from California commented, "It's great for finish cabinet work, setting forms, rafters, and determining grade and slope."

Twist-Lock Extension Cords

Twist-lock extension cords have not exactly taken the construction world by storm. Only 7% of respondents said they used the special locking plugs. Nearly all that use them are from the West Coast.

Comments

Most of the comments jotted at the end of this survey concerned future purchases. Considering the results, it is no surprise that sev-

The Hitachi sliding compound miter saw was the "best new tool" mentioned most by survey respondents.

eral builders are planning to buy pneumatic or cordless tools.

"I find that my most essential tool is my truck," said one reader. "It is American-made, and I am hard-pressed to say anything good or positive about it. If my power tools were as unreliable, I might be more skilled in the use of hand tools."

Another reader pointed out that articles about tools are only good for reference. "It's up to the craftsman to decide what size hammer to use," said that reader. He bases his selection on "feel, capability, cost, and looks, in that order, not because Sam has one or Sears is having a sale."

Others offered thoughts on the role of tools, such as the reader who noted, "Most guys in this business are incurable tool hounds. I am not. I have a very basic collection of both hand tools and power tools. I'm slow, but my jobs look like they have been carefully crafted, as they have been." ■

Lewis Lorini served as senior editor at The Journal of Light Construction.