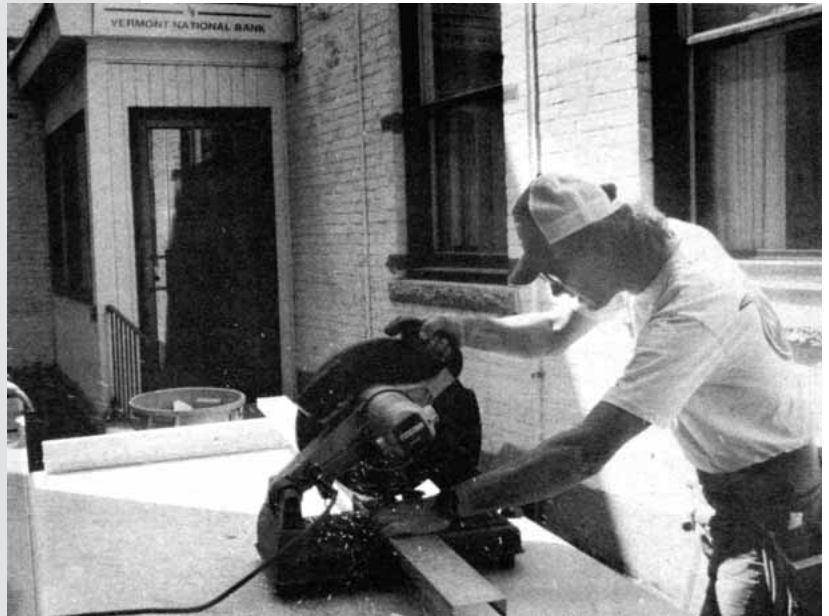


Retail Rehab

by Kent Gjemre

*To make the client
happy, work quickly
and quietly, and
keep the site clean*



Trying to be “invisible” is a basic part of retail fix-up work. This carpenter, building a curtain wall for a bank lobby, made his cuts outside to keep things quiet inside.

As a former retailer — I managed a jewelry store, then opened and managed several bookstores before returning to contracting — I know well what retail remodeling clients worry about: How long will it take? How much will it cost? Will it disrupt my business? These questions are usually more important than aesthetic considerations. The less disruption and down time a remodeling project causes, the happier your client will be.

This means distinct rewards for the contractor who can meet these needs — and trouble for those who can't. A well-done job on a prominent retail site can lead to many similar jobs; a botched job that took too long can mean paying liquidated damages and losing other jobs through bad word-of-mouth.

Scheduling

In most retail remodels — also known as TI jobs, for “tenant improvement,” or “fix-ups” — you work toward a specific deadline, beyond which you must pay penalties according to a “liquidated damages” clause that is present in most commercial contracts. These clauses penalize you anywhere from \$50 to \$500 or more a day.

Obviously, this makes it impor-

tant to use a scheduling method that lets you tightly control and monitor the job's progress. Many large commercial contractors use the Critical Path Method, or CPM (see “Intro to Critical Path Scheduling,” 9/91). But because retail fix-ups tend to be small to medium-size jobs, simpler methods make more sense.

A modified bar chart. The typical bar chart can be useful, but I prefer a modified bar-chart method called MOST (which stands for Management Operation System Technique), taken from a book called *Construction Scheduling Simplified*, by Anthony Iannone and Andrew Civitello, Jr. (published by Prentice-Hall, \$59.95). This system is simpler than its high-tech name suggests (see Figure 1, next page). The charts provide some of the information about task interrelationships that CPM provides, but they are easier to create and read. A glance tells you whether a given element is running behind and what other elements it will affect if it is. This helps you take steps to head off delays or make up time elsewhere.

Include planning time. To minimize foul-ups, it's essential to include planning and drawing tasks as well as actual construction tasks in your schedule. For instance, if you need

shop drawings for a specific item, the schedule should reflect not only the time to generate them, but also the time needed for client and code approval. You should even include time for the drawings to travel to and fro in the mail.

For example, suppose you agree to remodel an existing store to accommodate a new tenant who wants to open in 90 days. The next day you discover that the new fire safety code, passed since your last commercial remodel, requires that you add a sprinkler system to the space. Plotting the entire process of a sprinkler installation on your schedule, you see that the planning and approval time for a sprinkler design, including the architect, city building department, and city fire marshal, typically runs six to eight weeks. Obviously, starting those drawings is one of the first things you need to put on your schedule.

You can and should build a little slack into the schedule to make up for unexpected delays; but it must be minimal if you don't want to lose the bid to another contractor who can do the work faster.

Inspections and Codes

Another often neglected item when working on a tight schedule is allowing enough time for inspections. For commercial work, you usu-

ally have at least three different inspectors visit the site:

- The city building inspector will check not only the same things he checks in residential projects, such as framing, insulation, drywall, and stairs, but also counter and threshold heights, aisle widths, and other elements relating to public and handicapped access.
- The electrical inspector will examine both rough and finish electrical work. What he or she inspects varies greatly with locality — for instance, some require GFCI outlets everywhere, while others don't.
- The fire marshal will come at the end of the job to check such life safety elements as proper placement and installation of sprinklers, smoke detectors, entries and exits, exit signs, and emergency lighting units.

How many times these inspectors visit varies by city and by job. The important thing is to know — before you agree to a finish date — how many inspections you'll need and when you'll need them, so you can weave them into your schedule. I prefer to call the various inspectors out to the job and go over the plans to clarify at exactly what stages they need to inspect and what they'll be inspecting for. This is particularly

The MOST Scheduling System

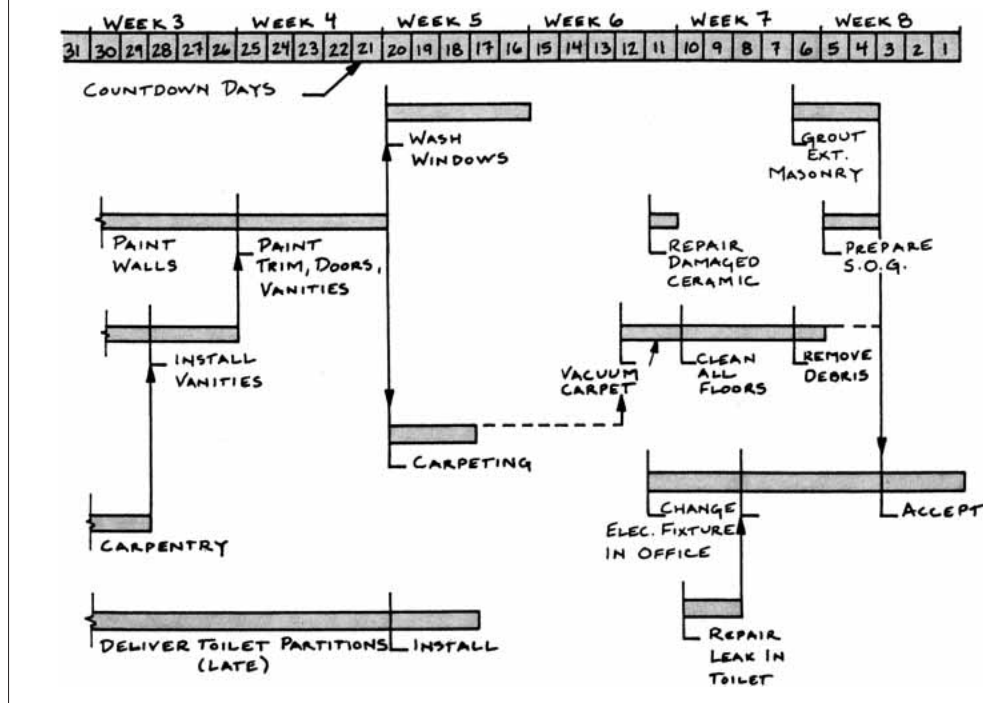


Figure 1. The author favors the MOST (Management Operations System Technique) scheduling system, a hybrid between a bar chart and the Critical Path Method (CPM). Horizontal lines indicate each work stage's duration; vertical lines show each stage's relationship to other stages of work it must precede. This sample, for instance, shows that vanity installation ("Install Vanities," at left) should precede the painting of trim, doors, and vanities, which in turn must precede window washing and carpeting installation. A countdown line at top indicates each task's place within the overall schedule.

important with the building inspector, who typically makes several inspections.

Be frank. I've found it best to level with the inspectors about any problems you foresee; they will often accommodate you. If the schedule's going to be extremely tight or if you have a marginal construction detail, say so.

Clear door widths, for instance, are usually enforced strictly, but an inspector once let me install a door almost an inch too narrow because I went over the plans with him early on to show him how constrained we were. He agreed there was little choice in the matter and let me build the doorway. Had I built it without checking first, he might have ignored my later pleas that it was "the only way I could fit it in" (a line inspectors hear often) and told me to tear it out and do it right.

Know the code. Try to familiarize yourself with the commercial code, which differs in some material specifications from the residential code. For instance, you generally have to use 5/8-inch drywall instead of 1/2-inch, and insulation requirements are often higher, depending on the town. You must use levers on all doors, rather than knobs (levers are easier for disabled people to turn), and halls and bathrooms must be accessible to those in wheelchairs. You'll even need to know the standard height of urinals.

If you've done mainly residential work before, you'll need to familiarize yourself with two new areas of code regulation: fire and life safety, and handicapped access. The National Fire Prevention Association's *Life Safety Code* covers issues such as sprinklers, alarm systems, and exit signs.

Issues of disabled access, which until recently varied widely by locality, are now made more uniform by the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA is not actually a code and it is not directly enforced by code inspectors; it is a law that prescribes that all "public accommodations" — which include retail space — must be accessible to those in wheelchairs. Businesses that don't comply are subject to civil-rights law suits.

Fortunately, complying is usually a matter of eliminating stairs and high thresholds (those over 1/2-inch) and maintaining certain door and aisle widths. These items may be regulated by state or local code as well. Get a copy of the ADA and any relevant local or state codes. If you're unclear about anything on the plans, check with the building inspector.

Minimizing Impact

Along with scheduling, the other half of the fix-up formula is minimizing the impact of your work on the business you're remodeling. To do this means:

- minimizing physical and visual disruption of the business, so that customers can still come and go
- minimizing dust
- minimizing noise
- occasionally, working off-hours or at night

Minimizing dust. The first step is to seal off the work area. This not only provides a visual barrier to hide construction's messiness, it also contains dust and some of the noise.

We like to block off work areas with portable 4 x 8-foot plywood wall sections framed with 2x4s; we paint the plywood (usually black or green) to improve the appearance. These sections are easily transported, assembled, and dismantled. You can quickly join them with drywall screws or hinge them together where you need to angle them. For in-and-out access, we install a door in one of the panels.

The owners really appreciate these solid-looking barriers, because it saves them from watching (with mounting anxiety) the mess being created in their store. The barriers also provide convenient spots to post your company signs.

Any gaps between panels and wall or ceiling should be sealed with 6 mil plastic and tape. This keeps dust in. If dust promises to be a problem, you should also seal any gaps between panels — even small ones — with tape or plastic. If you

have to tape to a painted surface, use painters tape so you won't pull the paint off.

On smaller jobs, or for a quick piece of work in one part of a store, you'll want to go with just the plastic. Be liberal with the stuff when you're worried about dust — no store owner likes seeing plaster or drywall dust coating the merchandise.

I once had to install a large exhaust fan in the ceiling of a retail clothing store. This involved cutting a 24 x 24-inch hole in the center of a plaster and wood lath ceiling, right over the racks of clothes. To contain the dust, we moved a few racks aside and created a shaft around the area being cut by carefully taping sheet plastic from the ceiling to the floor. After we cut, we vacuumed the floor, plastic, ladder, and even the worker. We then used damp rags to wipe down the ladder and floor. Only then did we collapse the plastic, carefully rolling it from the top down. When we made a final sweep with the vacuum and damp rags and moved the racks back in place, not one speck of dust could be seen.

The whole process took under an hour. Since we did it before store hours, the client suffered no down time and opened his store normally that morning. The extra half-hour and few yards of plastic used to provide this protection reaped huge benefits in terms of customer goodwill; the business is now a chain and gives us work regularly.

Keeping the noise down. We try to minimize noise whenever we can. Pneumatic guns (careful where you point them!) and screw guns make less noise than hammers, for instance. Using power saws at the back of the store or outside also helps. If noise is a serious concern, you can even staple up some fiberglass or wool batts to reduce noise; but this means considerable time and money, and is rarely worthwhile. If the noisy work is limited, discuss with your client when the best and worst times for noise are. The client may prefer that you do the work during off-hours or put up sound-absorbing insulation with your barriers. Again, it is important to anticipate these things beforehand so you can build in enough time for them.

Working off-hours. Working off-hours can solve some sticky fix-up problems, such as when to tear out the front of a building, bust up a concrete floor, or take out a wall. Sometimes, with a client who doesn't want to close and wants the work done in a hurry, it's what you have to do to get the job. We once remodeled a gourmet chocolate and coffee shop in an upscale shopping mall in San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. The client gave us only four nights to complete the job, even though it included moving nearly every display

case in the store and adding about 15 new ones, relocating some large roll-up doors, building some new walls, moving some plumbing and electrical, repairing some clay tile flooring, and coordinating the work of our own five crew members and eight different subs. (I had originally figured it would take about two weeks.)

To make that schedule, we planned in extreme detail and checked everything twice, from the sequence of work to the spec and material lists and our tool supplies. We knew every measure to the fraction of an inch before we started, and we knew and owned every nail, screw, and piece of material. All this planning, particularly the close accounting of necessary personnel and materials, was essential — you can't call in a new guy at 2 a.m., and you certainly won't find a lumberyard or hardware store open. The client paid extra for all this, of course.

Working at night is similar to other fix-up work, but you have to plan and execute the work almost flawlessly, and make the work almost invisible during the day.

Looking Good

There are a few other miscellaneous areas where doing things a little differently than usual can make a fix-up go more smoothly.

Scaffolding vs. cherry pickers. Scaffolding in front of a store discourages walk-in customers, so I try to avoid using it. A rented manlifter or cherry picker gives quick access to spots overhead without as much disruption, and it can be removed or lowered when you're not actually working. Again, you need to plan for this and include it in your bid; see which approach the client prefers. If I do use scaffolding, I try to make it look as neat as possible, and I try to

place it so it doesn't disrupt the entrance.

With either scaffolding or cherry pickers, you obviously must take care not to drop anything on or near people below. We put toe kicks or plywood along the sides of our platforms to contain the dropped hammer or nail. On high jobs, we often tie off all the tools so we can't possibly drop anything. Again, this takes time, but it can help prevent an injury.

Waste disposal. Tailor your waste disposal method to the job. On some, having a dumpster is the simplest approach: You call the dumpster people; they deal with the permit and deliver and pick up the dumpster. But in some neighborhoods, you'll find the dumpster full the first morning. For these jobs, collect your trash in bins indoors and remove it periodically. We've had some jobs where we had to remove debris daily. If you're trying to be invisible, you may have to remove it as you generate it. You can be sure commercial clients won't like having debris visible to their clients. Whatever approach you take, the main thing is to anticipate what you'll have to do and plan accordingly.

Dress code. If you don't already have one, you might consider some sort of dress code or uniform — even if it's just company T-shirts — for your crews. For our own crews, the rule is no shorts, no jeans with holes, shirts tucked in, and that sort of thing. We request the same of our subs. You can't tell them to wear blue, but you can demand a professional appearance. ■

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