

Fax Facts

by Ted Kruse



Fax machines are almost as familiar as telephones in many big construction offices, and with good reason. The low operating cost of a fax machine often makes sending and receiving faxes the cheapest way to communicate for both routine and rush jobs. But fax machines are also a good fit for small builders. Their speed and convenience can help save a small contractor's most valuable asset — time.

Fax (short for *facsimile*) transmission is a lot like photocopying by telephone. The sending fax machine digitally scans the document and transmits it electronically over the telephone lines. The receiving fax machine reverses the process and prints a copy of the original document.

You Want It When?

A fax machine's ability to deliver paper copies immediately is its most attractive feature. If you need to get an estimate into the hands of a business customer, for example, faxing it saves you the travel expense. Business people are accustomed to getting quotes by fax, plus you can fax the estimate in the evening and on weekends when your customer's business is closed. The same is true for residential customers who have a fax machine at home or at their workplace.

If faxing an estimate seems too impersonal, you can still follow up with a personal visit. But by sending a fax ahead of time, you give your customers a chance to look things over before you arrive. This helps everyone make better use of meeting time.

The speed with which a fax delivers an estimate can sometimes make the difference between winning and losing a job. Fire damage repairs, for example, often require speedy quotes, as does repair work associated with real estate closings and other types of emergency work.

Speed is also important when ordering materials you're unfamiliar with. Receiving a fax of a catalog page is much faster than waiting for it to arrive in the mail, and it avoids the problem of trying to make a decision based on a description given over the phone. Faxes help in the same way when you're dealing with custom work, such as special-order windows, doors, and cabinets. A supplier can fax you shop drawings for approval, and you can fax

them right back. You can also use a fax to solicit bids and price quotes from subcontractors and suppliers. With the help of a fax, tasks that used to take a week can be done in an hour or even a few minutes.



Though it won't fit in your belt, a fax machine can become an indispensable tool for a builder.

What's the Rush?

Even when you're not in a hurry, sending a fax is still usually cheaper than the mail. In most local calling areas, it's treated like any other phone call, so you don't pay anything more than your monthly service charges. A fax is a low-cost way to deliver bills, thank-you notes for referrals, and other routine correspondence.

Long-distance faxing is relatively inexpensive, too. A two-page fax takes about one minute of telephone time. At business phone rates, that's about 20¢ a call. The mail, which isn't delivered immediately, costs at least 29¢, and conveying the same information by voice in a long distance phone call is more expensive still.

Shopping for a Fax

Fax machines retail for \$500 to over \$2,000, but office supply discounters, mail order companies, and office supply stores usually sell at 30% to 50% below list. Assuming you've decided to buy a fax machine, what should you look for?

Plain paper. The biggest difference between types of fax machines is whether they use thermal paper or plain paper. Thermal paper machines cost less to purchase, but the paper itself costs more than 10¢ per page. A plain paper fax machine, on the other hand, costs about \$500 more to purchase, but the paper only costs about 3¢ per page. Depending on how often you use it, a plain paper fax will probably be cheaper in the long run.

Plain paper has other advantages. Unlike thermal paper, which comes in rolls and tends to curl up, plain paper lies flat. And because plain paper has no special coatings, the fax imprint won't fade or smear the way it can with thermal paper. These are also good reasons to buy a plain paper fax machine if you're going to use it as a copy machine.

Answering machine. If your fax machine will share the same line as your telephone, it's worth spending an extra \$20 or \$30 to get a model with a built-in answering machine. Even though you can connect a separate answering machine to a fax, it adds another level of complexity and could give you problems. A built-in answering machine has a "smart switch" to distinguish between a voice call and a fax; without it, you have to manually answer the phone each time someone wants to send a fax.

Auto feed. An automatic sheet feeder means you won't have to hand-feed multi-page faxes. A five-page or ten-page capacity feeder is probably enough for most documents you will be sending.

Time delay. If you need to send a lot of faxes over long distance phone lines, a time delay feature can save you some money. Time delay stores the fax and sends it when long distance rates are cheapest. But if you do most of your business locally, don't pay a premium for this feature.

Memory. Faxes that can store telephone numbers allow one-button dialing. This can be a real convenience in a busy construction office. But fax machines are priced higher the more numbers they can store. A capacity for storing six to ten frequently called numbers should be enough for most small builders.

Resolution. If you need to send or receive detailed photographs or drawings, or documents with very fine print, look for a fax machine with a high resolution mode. The transmission will take longer, but the image will be much sharper.

Fax/Modems

A cheap alternative to a dedicated fax machine is a computer fax board, called a "fax/modem," but it's of limited use. Fax/modems can only send and receive documents that are digitally stored on a computer. Unless you buy a scanner, you can't use a fax/modem to copy documents or to send shop drawings or to return a form you received in the mail. If you need a modem, a fax/modem is a good choice. But if your primary need is for a fax, a fax machine is the way to go. ■

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