



# HomeTech Remodeling Manuals

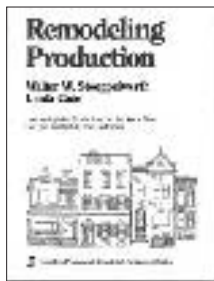
by Carl Hagstrom

In the remodeling business, few people enjoy the name recognition of Linda Case and Walt Stoeppelwerth. Case, who left the remodeling business to found Remodeling Consulting Services in Silver Spring, Md., has written several books aimed at remodelers, and is a regular presenter at trade shows. Stoeppelwerth, also a former remodeler, lectures throughout the country and is a major player in HomeTech, a company that publishes numerous books, tapes, and software programs geared for remodelers.

When I was asked to review several HomeTech books — two of which were written by Case and Stoeppelwerth — I was looking forward to some good, solid reading. I wasn't disappointed.

## Managing Chaos

As a remodeler's business volume increases, so do the number of loose ends. Case and Stoeppelwerth's *Remodeling Production* confirms the importance of establishing a production department to maintain order in an inherently chaotic business.



**Remodeling Production** by Walter W. Stoeppelwerth and Linda Case (HomeTech Information Systems, 1988; 800/638-8292). Softcover, 7 1/2 x 9 3/4, 172 pages. \$37.50.

If you're thinking that this book is only for companies doing \$500,000 or more in volume, think again. While the book targets specialized production managers, I agree with the statement made in the introduction that "its principles apply equally well to smaller companies where the owner handles everything from administration to production."

The authors see the production manager, who takes over the job from the minute it's sold to final completion, as

the most important person in a company. The task list for this position is intimidating, and I wondered if the authors' recommendation to pay "at least \$3,000 to \$5,000 more annually than a lead carpenter" was adequate. Given the number of responsibilities assigned to the production manager, including monthly progress reports and financial summaries, a person who does the job well will be worth his weight in gold.

A small company may not assign all of the duties found in the job description suggested for production manager, but the discussion will give you insight into responsibilities you may be ignoring. At the very least, you'll learn the science of delegation.

Subcontractors play a large part in Case and Stoeppelwerth's view as well. The section on managing subcontractors notes that "subcontractors are the backbone of most remodeling businesses," and recommends making money *with* your subs, not *on* your subs. The authors suggest using predetermined specifications and prices to generate ballpark estimates, instead of dragging your sub out to every site to give you a quote. You can get a price per box from your electrician, for example, so you can count switches and outlets and come up with a rough electrical price. When you finally do choose a sub, the authors recommend looking for good value, not just the lowest price. Consistency is important — a conscientious sub can be an invaluable asset, especially when applying the skill of a specialist to debug the plans.

The authors also realize that good craftsmen don't automatically make good managers, and they include tips to help you develop management skills. Advice like "praise should be frequent, and criticism should be short and quick when it is necessary" will open the eyes of those whose best-developed management tool is a screaming tirade. The authors stress the need to conquer "phoneaphobia" — the fear of returning problem phone calls

promptly — along with overcoming the failure to deal with problems as soon as they arise.

The book also covers varied approaches toward expediting jobs. Requiring that all materials are in local stock before starting a project, for example, can avoid the problems associated with special-order items. And for those who have had problems collecting the final payment (who hasn't?), there is an excellent section describing how to tie the punch list procedure to final payment.

The book is full of sample forms, including checklists, job descriptions, employee evaluations, subcontractor agreements, change orders, punch lists, and many more. Some forms are ready to go; others may need slight modifications to put them in tune with your operation. Like any paperwork system, however, only adopt the forms you can use effectively. Trying to use them all will be overwhelming.

Some remodelers may take issue with the authors' claim that the "one-man crew" is more efficient than the carpenter-with-helper approach to production. In my experience, a good carpenter can keep a helper busy. But I agree that there are times when two guys spend more time talking about last night's game than they do working. Some readers may also see the recommendation to delay the start of a job until all materials are in stock as a good theory that's next to impossible to achieve in the real world. But owners may prefer to hold up the start of construction while waiting for an odd-colored plumbing fixture or a special-order window than to postpone completion.

Despite these quibbles, this book has plenty to offer everyone. If you're having trouble keeping organized as your volume increases, or if you're looking for ways to improve your in-place methods, *Remodeling Production* gives no-nonsense advice at a reasonable price.

## Professional Cost Estimating

Walter W. Stoepelwerth  
for Residential Remodeling, Renovation,  
Rehabilitation and Repair



**Professional Cost Estimating** by Walter W. Stoepelwerth (HomeTech Information Systems, 1990; 800/638-8292). Softcover, 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>x9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, 167 pages. \$37.50.

### Unit Price Advice

If your production techniques are up to snuff, but you're still not making money, consider reading *Professional Cost Estimating*. Stoepelwerth's estimating philosophy is a unit-cost system, which he maintains is both quicker than the stick method and far more accurate than the "guesstimate."

Despite his love of unit costs, however, Stoepelwerth points out up front that "the last 20% of any cost estimate is based on a subjective judgment of factors such as access, site problems, and customer requirements." He backs up this notion with a full chapter on subjective factors that affect an estimate, including a section on customer analysis that will help remodelers identify problem customers before it's too late.

At first glance, 167 pages seems a little thin for a book that covers all of the elements of estimating. But Stoepelwerth makes brevity an asset. He presents topics in a clear, concise format, and saves all the mind-numbing unit costs for the sister volume, *HomeTech Remodeling and Renovation Cost Estimator*.

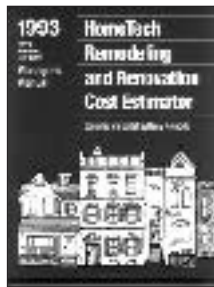
Stoepelwerth's emphasis on the customer profile and the need to establish a budget is on the mark. The same is true of his explanation of how to rearrange costs on estimates for insurance work.

*Professional Cost Estimating* is an easily understood manual that, when used with the companion price book, will help you develop or refine a unit-cost estimating system. If you currently use the stick method to estimate, and you're fed up with the amount of time you spend on rejected bids, give this book a try.

### By the Numbers

The *HomeTech Remodeling and Renovation Cost Estimator* is broken down into the 25 HomeTech categories, which logically follow the sequence of construction for most projects. The categories start with "Plans and Permits," "Tear Out," and "Excavation," and end with "Floor Coverings," "Painting," and "Cleanup." The specifications listed for each category describe many types of building systems, one of which is likely to apply to the remodeling project you're pricing.

The unit costs take into account varying job conditions. The costs for asphalt roofing, for example, differ according to roof pitch and the height of the eaves above the ground. And you can add special treatments, like a bituminous membrane at the eaves of a roof deck, by simply plugging in the linear-foot unit cost for the appropriate item.



**HomeTech Remodeling and Renovation Cost Estimator** compiled and edited by Henry Reynolds (HomeTech Information Systems, 1992; 800/638-8292). Softcover, 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>x11, 278 pages. \$69.50.

One of the handiest tools you'll find in this book is called the "Speedy Reckoner" — a separate list of prices that enables you to create a reasonably accurate ballpark estimate. It can really help you to avoid wasting time on a detailed estimate for a project that your customer can't afford to build. The Reckoner lists a number of typical remodeling projects, such as a Bathroom Alteration, Basement Recreation Room, or Shell Dormer, which are "pre-specified" to reduce the estimating time. If your project differs from the specs found in the Reckoner, you'll have to make adjustments. But if the scope of work is close, the Reckoner will save you time. Both the main estimating sections and the Speedy Reckoner include a local modification index to offset regional price differences.

Some of the specs given for floor and wall systems didn't match with mine — I include vapor barriers, for example, but the *Cost Estimator* doesn't — but they

were close enough that I could easily adjust the price. Other items were missing entirely (painted steel roofing, for example, and foam insulation). But builders I know who use this price book tell me they find over 80% of the items they need.

Of course, the \$64,000 question is: Does the *Cost Estimator* work? I decided to find out. Since I had a number of remodeling bids to get out, I used figures from the book (plus the recommended minimum 50% markup) to work them up. Then I figured the jobs by my seat-of-the-pants approach. Rest assured, the book's prices won't let you get hurt.

*HomeTech Remodeling and Renovation Cost Estimator* is perfect for someone who has no estimating system and doesn't want to reinvent the wheel. Even remodelers who estimate based on historical data will find this book useful for closing gaps in their prices. And for beginners, these unit prices are better than guessing. ■

Carl Hagstrom operates Hagstrom Contracting in Montrose, Pa., and is a contributing editor to the *Journal of Light Construction*.

### Footnotes

**Many builders have spent years** learning how to work with wood, but have never mastered the art of wood finishing. *Complete Woodfinishing* (\$14.95 softcover, Sterling Publishing Co., 1994; 800/848-1186) should change all that. In a little over 160 generously illustrated pages, author Ian Hosker, who learned his craft at his grandfather's knee, covers the full range of materials and techniques required for finishing and refinishing all types of wood. Hosker guides the reader through surface prep, staining and bleaching techniques, traditional wax and oil polish finishes, varnishes, and lacquers. The book also includes sections on sponging, rag rolling, and stenciling, as well as a listing of recipes for finishes.

#### **Need a handy reference for brick work?**

Try the *Pocket Guide to Quality Brick Construction* (\$2, Acme Brick Co., 1988; 817/332-4101). This 98-page, spiral-bound booklet includes a glossary of terms, formulas for various mortar types, illustrations of brick bonding patterns, and advice on cleaning and sealing bricks and pavers. You'll also find details for many types of brick and masonry wall construction, and a table of beam formulas that will help you calculate header loads.