

Dustless Drywall Sander

by Clayton DeKorne



Porter-Cable's new drywall sander is one of the most innovative tools to come along in years. It combines a rotary electric sander with a powerful vacuum to take all the misery out of sanding drywall. I recently used one to sand out a new kitchen ceiling and a two-story hallway. Here's what I found.

Rotary Power

This sander has a small motor in line with a long, 2½-inch-diameter aluminum tube. The tube hooks up to a standard 1¼-inch vacuum hose, while the motor turns a 9-inch sanding disk. The disk — a foam-backed abrasive wheel — revolves inside a plastic shroud at the end of an articulating head. This head is surprisingly maneuverable. While sanding, you can easily move from the top to the bottom of a wall, or from the ceiling to the wall, without the head flopping over. It's well weighted to transfer easily from one plane to the next.

The motor is controlled by a dust-protected rocker switch and a variable-speed dial. Speeds range from 1,000 to 1,650 rpm (marked from 1 to 5). The faster it runs, the more aggressive it sands. For knocking down the highest ridges (after scraping the worst of it off with a taping knife), I ran the sander at 5 (full speed), then I'd back off to about 3.

I used one 100-grit sanding disk for about 120 square feet of taped drywall and about 300 square feet of plaster that had been repaired with fiberglass tape and plaster washers, then skim-coated with drywall mud. While 120- and 150-grit disks are also available, I found the finish from a 100-grit disk to be plenty smooth for paint. The disks retail for about \$6 apiece. Each one comes backed with a layer of foam rubber, so the abrasive conforms to the graduated thickness of a mudded joint and feathers out the mud without leaving sharp gouges at the edge of the wheel.

Because the disk revolves inside a plastic dust shroud, you can't sand right into a corner, or along the very top of the baseboard. The disk stands off about 5/8 inch. While there's rarely many sharp ridges right in the corners, there'll always be a little work left over for a sanding block, especially in inside corners.

The sander weighs in at about 8 pounds, plus a little more for the hose. You'll build your arm muscles holding it up to the ceiling all day. But compared with the rigorous activity of scrubbing a pole sander back and forth, sanding with this machine is a relatively easy workout.

The sander comes with a flexible 13-foot hose and a vacuum cleaner bag that's rated for drywall dust and fits most shop vacs. The hose attaches to the sander with a swivel connection, so it never twists you into a knot. It also has an electric ground to bleed the static charge off the dust as it passes through the hose. This prevents the dust from clinging to the inside of the hose and clogging up. However, this feature and the swivel only work with Porter-Cable's new shop vac.



Porter-Cable's power drywall sander makes quick, clean work out of sanding drywall mud. The articulated rotary sanding pad transfers from wall to ceiling planes without folding over on itself.

Tool-Triggered Vacuum

Porter-Cable's new vacuum is sold separately. On its own, it would serve anyone who needs a powerful 5-gallon wet/dry job vacuum. It has a good flexible hose, smooth-rolling casters, a 25-foot cord, and is built low to the ground (about 22 inches tall and 20 inches long) so it won't tip easily. But this vac was specifically designed to complement the drywall sander.

The sander plugs right into the vacuum, which can then be "tool-triggered." In other words, the vacuum turns on when the sander turns on, and shuts off about 15 seconds after the sander shuts off when all the lines have been cleared of dust.

Drywall dust is superfine, and tends to quickly clog ordinary vacuum filters. To combat this, Porter-Cable has added a filter "comb" that rakes across the filter and instantly cleans the crust of dust that builds up on the filter without opening up the canister. This feature alone makes this one of the best vacuums for dealing with dry wall dust. Without it, a vacuum turbine becomes starved for air, which increases the motor load. If the filter is not periodically cleaned while picking up drywall dust, you run the risk of burning the motor up.

Dust-Free

Sanding with Porter-Cable's new drywall sander is nearly dust-free. While the owner's manual cautions you to wear a dust mask, OSHA would be hard-pressed to find enough dust in the air from one of these sanders to require one. A brush surrounds the perimeter of the plastic shroud around the sanding disk. It does a good job of sweeping the wall and containing the dust in the shroud until it gets sucked down the tube. Occasionally the shroud puffs a small cloud of dust when the abrasive grabs

a high spot and jerks the sanding head. But this is hardly a hazard. To be safe, you'd want to cover electronic equipment, furniture, and finished woodwork nearby. You certainly won't be spending much time cleaning up afterwards.

Price

The list price of the drywall sander is \$360. If you do a lot of your own drywall, the sander's well worth the actual retail price. You could easily make an argument that it could pay for itself in cleanup time alone. Even if you sub out most of your drywall work, you'll probably want to lean on your drywall contractor to get one. Without all the dust, the job will go much better for everyone.

At a list price of \$448, the vacuum is a little pricey compared with a simple shop vac. You're paying for the added features — the tool-triggered operation, filter comb, and anti-static hose. However, if you're sucking up lots of drywall dust on a regular basis, it's worth the price. Any simple shop vac won't last. For more information, contact Porter-Cable, 4825 Hwy. 45 North, Jackson, TN 38302; 800/487-8665. ■



As a complement to the drywall sander, or as a stand-alone wet/dry job vacuum, Porter-Cable's new vacuum handles fine drywall dust better than most shop vacs.