

THE FOUR-DAY *Bath Remodel*

Standardized materials
and a tight, goal-oriented
schedule turn small bath
makeovers into profits

by Jerry Newman



Many remodelers spend their time hoping to land that big sexy addition or dream kitchen that will look great in the portfolio and keep a crew busy for months. Unfortunately, these “home run hitters” tend to strike out a lot. I know, because I used to be one. A few years ago, I finally learned the value of being a “singles hitter.” Rather than invest hours of time designing and estimating a project only to see somebody else get the job, I now specialize in modest bathroom renovations. I can estimate and sell these projects in less than an hour, and my crew can easily complete the job in less than a week, earning us all a handsome profit.

That doesn't mean I won't take any big jobs. In fact, after I've proven myself to the clients by doing their bathroom, I'm the guy they call for the addition. Usually, I'm the only guy they call.

Typical Four-Day Bath

The houses in my area, which average 35 years of age, have small bathrooms ranging in size from 5x8 to 9x12. Some of the houses have been remodeled over the years, but often the bathroom is untouched. By the time the homeowner calls me, the bathroom is a worn-out embarrassment, seriously in need of an overhaul. In four days, I can replace all the cabinetry, lighting, and plumbing fixtures (including traps and valves), repair or replace the wall surfaces, set a new tile floor, and completely repaint.

My work is fast but not shoddy. All of my jobs include ceramic tile floors and custom cabinetry as standard features. I'm not claiming to be a magician; I can't change fixture locations, make major structural repairs, move walls, or tile a tub enclosure within this narrow time frame. As the saying goes, the difficult takes four days; the impossible takes a little longer.

One Sales Call

I visit the house just once, carrying a sales case that looks like I'm embarking on an around-the-world journey. Besides my portfolio, product samples, and catalogs, the case contains

Figure 1. A laptop computer and portable printer enable the author to design, estimate, and sell a job on site in a single visit to the customer's home.



Figure 2. The author's job board helps keep four-day bath jobs on schedule. Red dots mean a part needs to be ordered. Yellow dots indicate the date the part should arrive. Green dots give the go-ahead — the part is in and has been inspected.



Figure 3. All the tools and materials needed for the fast bath remodel are organized using a system of crates and bins.

my Compaq Presario laptop computer and a Canon portable printer (see Figure 1). The computer is loaded with QuickBooks Pro 5.0, in which I've itemized all labor categories and materials.

During the meeting, I don't rush. I listen carefully to the customers and offer my suggestions, spending as much time and drinking as much instant coffee as it takes to find out exactly what they want to accomplish. If this is their only bathroom, we talk about what arrangements will need to be made to limit their inconvenience, even if it means resetting the toilet at the end of every work day. If they're having difficulty visualizing the finished product, I'll invite them to visit the showroom I've set up in my shop.

Once I'm satisfied that I know exactly what they want, I make a list and take measurements. Then I sit back down at the kitchen table, boot up my "mobile office," and enter specifications and dimensions into QuickBooks. I present the homeowners with an itemized proposal before leaving the house.

Limited choices. While I'm willing to do anything a customer wants as long as it's legal, I've found that most people get overwhelmed if you throw an unlimited array of choices at them. As a first option, I offer the client a short list of fixtures and materials. These are products with which my crew and I are intimately familiar, so I know I will have no worries about back orders, installation problems, or callbacks. I offer alternatives only if they ask for them. For example, if they request a stall shower to replace the only tub in the house, I make sure they understand that such a change may affect their home's salability.

As for paint, I give them the freedom to pick any color they want as long as it's white. This is not just to make the job easy for me; when working with small bathrooms, I'm a firm believer that lighter means larger. If a client prefers a different color, I'm glad to apply it, but to make sure they get exactly the shade they have in mind, I send them to my supplier to select the paint themselves.

I also recommend white for the fixtures, tile, and trim, then suggest they choose contrasting colors for the countertop and tub surround as well as for the tile grout and accessories. If they want to make a small bathroom feel even larger, I may also recommend a pedestal sink and wall mirrors.

Goal-Oriented Labor

When a job calls for complex structural framing, major re-plumbing, wall tile, a hot-mop shower pan, or custom shower doors, I will bring in outside subcontractors. On a typical four-day bath, however, my two-man crew will do it all. Both are experienced craftsmen capable of handling moderate plumbing, electric, flooring, drywall, and paint, all of which are permitted under our general contractor's license. This arrangement enables me to keep a firm handle on production.

Over the years, I've used both employees and indepen-

dent contractors as my crew, but I've always paid them the same way. To encourage efficiency and flexible work schedules, the crew is paid a percentage of the contract for each job. Before each project begins, they receive a job data sheet which includes a brief job description and a comprehensive list of materials as well as the name and address of the client.

They also receive a flow chart, which lists each day's tasks. Instead of watching the clock and working a preset number of hours, they work to complete every item on the list of tasks for each day of the job. Some days they work late, some days they knock off early, but the job always stays on schedule.

Plenty of Lead Time

I never set a starting date that's less than three weeks away. This allows enough time for fixture orders to arrive, and gives me time to return damaged items or correct delivery mistakes.

To keep track of materials, which are ordered for as many as 20 upcoming jobs, I use a color-coded, magnetic grid board (Figure 2). Along the left-hand side of the grid, listed vertically, I place the client names and starting dates for their jobs. Horizontally along the top is a list of parts — valves, traps, vanities, toilets, faucets. Everything I could put into a bathroom is on that list.

Here's how it works. Let's say I just sold a job to Ralph and Alice Cramden that involves redoing the shower area, installing a new vanity, and replacing the toilet. I would place a red magnet in the squares for those items, as well as any valves, faucets, and other items I'll need. Red means I need to order that part. After I've made the orders, I replace the red magnets with yellow ones and write the delivery date in yellow underneath. When the materials arrive and pass my inspection, I switch to green markers. When I look up at the board and see green all the way across, I know that job's a go.

To avoid last-minute surprises, I have all materials and fixtures delivered to my shop two weeks ahead of time. When they arrive, I personally open all of the boxes to inspect for defects or missing parts. Something is always either damaged or missing or just plain wrong, but the two-week buffer gives me plenty of time to make it right. I buy all my plumbing supplies from one supplier who's eager to keep my business, so problems get resolved quickly.

Custom cabinetry. I never have to worry about the cabinets because we build our own in our shop. Besides vanities, we also make the medicine cabinets, linen closets, and light bars. Even though custom cabinets are expensive, I like to keep this operation in house for peace of mind, as well as for the flexibility of being able to fit the odd-size rooms we often encounter. I also hate the thought of placing something made of particleboard and veneer in a moist environment. To save time and money, we buy prefabricated doors and drawers from



Figure 4. The crew keeps demolition to a minimum, removing only as much plaster as absolutely necessary (above). To avoid having to match new fixtures to old plumbing, the author replaces all supplies, valves, and traps (top).

Decorative Specialties (4414 N. Azusa Canyon Road, Irwindale, CA 91706; 800/729-7255).

Supplies. To prevent unnecessary trips to the hardware store, I maintain a fully stocked inventory of all the valves, fittings, fasteners, and adhesives that we use in bathroom remodeling. To save time, my crew keep themselves fully outfitted on site (Figure 3).

Day One

I always start a four-day bath remodel on a Monday. That way if we get delayed, which happens occasionally, we've got the weekend to wrap up. The key to success is to be taping drywall by the end of the first day. This can make for a hard day's night, but most of the time it's just a good eight hours of work. Before any work begins, however, I always meet the crew at the site to go over the written instructions and answer any questions they may have. When I'm satisfied that we're all on the same page, I'll head over to Starbucks and let them get started.

Tear out. After they've unloaded, set up, and downed a couple of espressos, the crew will start the demolition. Very rarely do they need to completely gut a bathroom (Figure 4). They remove the fixtures, plug the supply lines, scrape up the old flooring (most of these baths have concrete floors covered with vinyl), and remove baseboards and door casings. They will also remove the lath and plaster in the shower area. The remaining plaster stays in place unless it's damaged.

Few repairs. In a four-day job, there's no time to handle major problems. But if we find some minor damage — a punky wood subfloor from a leaking toilet, for example — we'll cut out and patch the rotten section and reinforce the floor joists, if necessary.

Many of these houses still have their original galvanized supply lines. I don't believe in hooking up new plumbing to old pipes, so we always replace all fixture supplies, valves, and traps. We also replace any pipes that will be buried after our work is done. Eventually, the homeowners will upgrade all of the old plumbing, so making these repairs now will save time and money later. We use copper for supply lines and ABS for drains. To prevent a galvanic reaction between dissimilar metals, we install a dielectric union wherever copper meets galvanized (Figure 5).

While we're at it, we install blocking for cabinetry, towel bars, and accessories. We also run new wiring and rough in any electrical fixtures, including the exhaust fan. Then we set the tub or shower drain pan and install the shower control valve.

Closing up the walls. We use 1/2-inch greenboard (moisture-resistant drywall) for all new wall surfaces, including behind the tub surround. To shim the board flush with the adjoining plaster, we use plywood strips of various thicknesses which we rip from scrap ahead of time.



Figure 5. A dielectric union makes it possible to join new copper to existing galvanized pipes without the risk of galvanic corrosion.

After hanging the drywall, we tape the joints using Durabond 20 (U.S. Gypsum Company, P.O. Box 806278, Chicago, IL 60680; 800/874-4968; www.usg.com), a fast-setting joint compound. We quickly cover that with a second coat of mud, clean up the site, and head home.

Day Two

After the hullabaloo of yesterday, this will be like a day of rest. All the crew needs to accomplish today is to prepare the walls for paint. They start by sanding yesterday's drywall patches; if necessary, they apply a Durabond skim coat and take a short break for lattes and biscotti while the walls dry. Then they'll clean up the mess, mask off the shower area with 2-mil plastic, and spray a textured finish on the walls and ceilings.

Textures like "Mediterranean Knockdown" or "orange peel" are popular finishes in our region, but we particularly like them because they conceal minor blemishes in the old walls. (Even if the plan calls for a smooth finish — for wallpaper, for instance — it doesn't take any longer since you don't have to spray.) The texture application needs to dry overnight so even though the day is barely half over, the crew will pack up and return to the shop to build cabinets for upcoming jobs.

Day Three

This is mainly a painting day. After lightly sanding the spray texture with a fine-grit block sander, the crew will roll on a coat of Kilz (Masterchem Industries, P.O. Box 368, Barnhart, MO 63012; 800/325-3552), a fast-drying latex primer that hides stains, then leave the room for an hour to let the primer dry. They may use this time to assemble light fixtures or shower doors. If they need a break, they'll head next door to Starbucks for coffee and muffins.

When the primer's dry, the crew applies a coat of Dutch Boy UltraWhite semi-gloss oil enamel (2850 Festival Drive, Kankakee, IL 60901; 800/828-5669) to all wall and trim surfaces; one worker cuts in while the

other rolls. The paint needs two hours drying time, so if the crew is crunched for time, they may carefully begin to install the tub surround. Usually, however, they'll knock off for the day because of the fumes and the certainty of smudging the wet paint.

Day Four

Like Monday, the final day is a full one. The first thing to go in is the tub surround. On larger projects this might be done with tile or cultured marble, which are subcontracted.

For a typical four-day bath, we fashion the tub wall out of a single sheet of plastic laminate, which we bend in our shop to fit the tub enclosure (see "Custom One-Piece Laminate Surround").

After the tub surround is in place, one person will install plumbing trim, hang shower doors, and set grab bars. Before getting out of the shower, he'll route a recess in the laminate for any soap dishes, then seal everything with silicone caulk. In the meantime, the other worker will wire up the light fixtures, and hang towel bars, paper holders, and

Custom One-Piece Laminate Surround

I've been making tub surrounds out of standard-grade plastic laminate for almost 20 years. In many ways, laminate is the ideal material for showers: Not only is it attractive and economical, but it's durable, easy to clean, and mildew-resistant. The hundreds of colors and patterns also make it easy to coordinate the vanity top with the shower walls.

Most laminate tub kits provide a separate sheet for each wall and vinyl molding to seal the corners. I do it differently. Because I install a lot of laminate surrounds, years ago I bought an expensive industrial machine that works almost like a sheet-metal brake to heat-bend plastic laminate into tight 1/2-inch-radius corners. With this equipment, I can use a single 5x12-foot sheet to cover all three sides of a bathtub enclosure, eliminating any seams at the corners. After it's bent, the sheet can still be easily rolled-up for transport to the job site.

We often run the tub enclosure all the way to the ceiling. A 5-foot-wide sheet of laminate won't quite reach the ceiling, so we install two heat-bent pieces. This may sound backwards, but we apply the top piece first, running from the ceiling down 3 1/2 feet. On the bottom we place a full 5-foot-wide sheet, which overlaps the top piece by about a foot. We use the same vinyl U-trim to cover the seam that we use along the edges, and we seal it with a mildew-resistant silicone. We have never had a delamination with this procedure.

It takes two people to install the laminate. One supports the sheet while the other scribes the bottom to the tub and marks the holes for the plumbing. Together, they make the cuts and dry-fit each piece, then slip vinyl trim over the outside edges. They glue it up using UCI 150 rubber mastic (Unicove International, 2335 North Clark Ave., Portland, OR 97227; 800/275-8006) applied to the wall surface with a 1/4-inch notched trowel. Once the unit is positioned, a brisk rubdown with a laminate J-roller ensures a tight bond. The edges of the trim are sealed with mildew-resistant silicone. We insist that the customers wait two full days before they use the shower to allow the adhesive to fully cure.



Using a heat-bending machine set up in his shop, the author shapes a sheet of plastic laminate for a one-piece tub surround.

Using plastic laminate for tub surrounds is a fairly common practice here in Southern California. While there are a number of shops that will bend laminate for small contractors, until recently you were on your own as far as technical support from the manufacturer was concerned. Thankfully, that situation is changing. Within the last two years, Wilsonart (P.O. Box 6110, Temple, TX 76503; 800/433-3222; www.wilsonart.com) has begun to actively market laminate surrounds. The three-piece and one-piece kits include adhesive and vinyl trim, and can be purchased from any Wilsonart dealer. The company also claims to have a nationwide list of fabricators who can custom-bend a tub surround.

If there are no fabricators in your area, Unicove International offers a contractors kit — including custom-bent laminate, adhesive, trim, and cove molding (to reinforce the inside corners) — which they will ship nationwide.

— J.N.



Figure 6. The last day of the four-day bath remodel is a busy one: The shower surround is installed and trimmed (A), light fixtures and cabinets are hung (B & C), the tile is laid, and the toilet and vanity are set (D & E). After final trimming out, the crew leaves the homeowners with a warning to stay off the floor until the grout cures.

other accessories in the bathroom itself (Figure 6). Together they'll hang cabinets and set vanities.

Tile floor. With the accessories and cabinets in place, the crew turns their attention to the tile floor. If the bath has a plywood subfloor, they nail down a layer of 1/4-inch Hardibacker underlayment (James Hardie Products, 26300 La Alameda Ave., Suite 250, Mission Viejo, CA 92691; 800/942-7343). Unless the client chooses a different tile, they finish the floor with the standard 8x8 non-skid tile (Integra UP60 Ice White, made by American Olean Co., Lansdale, Pa. 19446; 888/268-8453). For the adhesive, they use Perma-Bond Fast Set 904 (C-Cure, 13001 Seal Beach Blvd., Seal Beach, CA 90740; 800/895-2874), a fast-curing thinset adhesive. With the quick-drying adhesive, we can care-

fully walk on the floor after just one hour and grout within two hours.

After a leisurely lunch, which gives the tile adhesive time to dry, the crew nails up baseboards and casings. Instead of wood, tile, or vinyl, we use a plastic trim made by Rugby Building Products (2855 South Reservoir Street, Pomona, CA 91766; 909/591-0531), which looks like wood but won't swell or rot when it gets wet.

Finally, they set the toilet, grout the tile, clean up, and load out. Before they leave, they'll make sure the homeowners know how everything operates, but caution them to stay off the tile until the grout has fully cured. 

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