

JLC Online

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— The Editors

TOOLS & EQUIPMENT

Air Nailer or Air Stapler?

•Posted by B.K.:

I will be shingling my camp this summer with cedar shingles and would like to know if an air nailer or an air stapler will work better. I'll be using 2nd clear R&R shingles, prestained, with a 6-inch exposure. Please advise. Thanks.

◦Followup posted by Greg:

As a general contractor I've done my share of side wall shingles and roof shingles and shakes. I've learned a lot from doing tear-offs. I have found that I have to fight harder to get the shingles off when staples were used. You have two shanks at each connector, and staple shanks are thinner than nail shanks so they don't cause splits as readily.

◦Followup posted by Scooter:

Staplers, in my opinion, cause the cedar to crack. Make sure you adjust your compressor so that the shingles are not punched through.

I use only galvanized nails. We actually like to hand-nail them. I think it does a better job. The difference is only a few minutes on a square, and maybe a half day on an average-sized roof — a small price to pay for quality.

Idling Generator

•Posted by Mike:

We've just purchased a new generator to run power tools. The unit has a feature on it called "idle control." It idles down when the unit is not under a load. My question: Will this cause tools to burn out, since it takes a few seconds for the unit to come up to speed?

◦Followup posted by Ryan:

All generators have a lag between current demand and supply. If yours has a solid-state regulator (I'm almost certain it would), then your voltage should never fall below what your tools demand. Having insufficient current will not cause a tool to overheat. Heat is generated according to the amount of current traveling through the tool. Too little current actually causes much less heat than you would get under normal operating conditions. The problem with motors burning up during brownouts is that low voltage can make a motor draw too much current (overcompensation). The excessive current is the problem.

So, to make this very long story short: Don't worry about it. (I knew that electrical theory class I took in college would be useful someday.)

Collapsible Sawhorses

•Posted by Philip:

I'm looking for ideas on building lightweight, rugged, collapsible sawhorses.

◦Followup posted by Ryan:

I bought a pair of metal sawhorse "legs" about two years ago, but I haven't seen them in any store since. When you spread the legs, the top jaws bite into any 2-by material. Pressing the legs together opens the jaws. We have used them with 2x4s and 2x6s (with 2x6s, your saw blade always misses the legs; not so with 2x4s), and because they clamp onto any 2-by of any length without damage, I've used lumber I had on site. All I have to carry is four sets of legs that fit in my toolbox.

◦Followup posted by clampman:

The horse legs Ryan mentions are the best I've ever seen. I would not bother with making any myself if I were you. They are called "Great Whites," and have a shark logo. They are manufactured by The Slide-Away Company [P.O. Box 767, Mineola, NY 11501; 516/873-9850].

◦Followup posted by M.Q.:

I also own three pairs of "Great White" sawhorses and I recommend them highly.

BUSINESS STRATEGIES

Best Way to Advertise

•Posted by Ryan:

A partner and I ran a small remodeling business in the urban center of New Jersey. It took a long time to learn what advertising worked and what didn't. Newspaper ads were useless, but a large, expensive phone book display ad brought in a lot of business. I've now moved to the rural town I grew up in and am starting over again. Here in the country, my fancy phone book ad is not pulling any calls, but I am getting several leads a week from inexpensive classified ads in the local paper. I'm looking forward to word-of-mouth to support me, but I'm still too new here. I would appreciate any advice from successful rural contractors on where to spend my advertising dollars.

◦Followup posted by CP:

About five years ago we relocated from the eastern part of our state to the western part, where we had no contacts, friends, or customers. We immediately had business cards and truck signs made. We landed a small sub job for another builder and went from there. We invested in embroidered shirts, jackets, and hats (and gave away a few). The result: We suddenly looked larger and more established than we really were. We took on a lot of small jobs and made a lot of contacts with the local lumber store owners and employees, and other subs.

Today we are probably busier than the average builder in our area. The trick is to look successful, and to act with integrity in all of your business contacts and transactions. You will find that being new in an area will give you the ability to see opportunities that other builders are blind to.

◦Followup posted by Mike:

CP has some good points. I've had success offering seminars, both for free and for a fee. Choose a construction-related topic, such as "Planning Your

Custom Home,” or “Planning a Remodeling Project” (or call it “Avoiding The Money Pit”). Prepare and present useful information without going into too much depth; otherwise, you won’t have enough time to cover everything. Keep the presentation to 1½ or 2 hours. Perhaps you could hook up with your building material supplier. They can help with space and advertising, which looks good for them. Another venue is an adult education program some communities run through their rec departments.

Don’t try to sell yourself during the presentation, just stick to the topic. People will nearly beg you to work for them. You develop instant trust and you are perceived as the “expert.”

Another way to market is to make some nice presentation books with good photos of your work and a description of your business, who you are, and how you operate. Get your suppliers to start a “Contractor Reference Area” where builders can display their books. All that needs to be is a bookshelf and poster board. (For that matter, you could make the display shelves and board using the supplier’s materials.) Yours will be the first and probably only book, since most builders won’t see the benefit to having their own book or being on the board. Lumberyards can add reference books to the shelves (not how-to’s, but plan books and the like). I think both of these ideas mesh with CP’s suggestion for creating a professional image.

◦ Followup posted by Eric:

I have had success with visiting architects and designers in my area and getting my name into several of their projects. The one item that they examine more closely than anything is your reference list. If you do not have a good list of past clients, this approach will not work. They will also want to visit a current job to examine the workmanship and the site. The downside to this approach is that it will increase your bidding for the short term. After building a rep in your new area, though, that should decrease.

MATERIALS & TECHNIQUES

MDF Moldings

• Posted by John:

I read in the latest Journal about MDF molding, and today a framer gave me a piece from a house he had framed. He said the entire house had been trimmed with 3½-inch MDF colonial casing and that it looked excellent. Has anyone actually used this material? What are your comments? Do you have information on price and availability? Sources in the New York metro area?

◦ Followup posted by Frank:

I made a large entertainment center for a customer. The material is very heavy and it’s tough on cutting tools. It takes paint well, but has some problems with nail fastening (break-outs around the nail hole). Cost is a great factor in its favor — \$20 for a ¾-inch 4x8 sheet.

◦ Followup posted by Eric:

All of the lumberyards I deal with can get MDF molding in common profiles, and as a bonus most of it comes primed and in 16-foot lengths! I have found it to be a good alternative to finger-jointed molding. Your painter may have something different to say about it, though, because it does deform some where you nail it, so it has to be sanded between coats. Also, if you buy sheet goods and route the edges for shelves, it needs to be filled because it soaks the

paint. As with anything else, the quality of the workmanship makes the job.

◦Followup posted by Scott:

I've been using MDF for years and find it an excellent alternative. My company has used it in an entire high-end subdivision. Our clients were thrilled to get the look of multi-piece casing at a single-piece price. There are many profiles to choose from. For a supplier, try Dykes Lumber. They are located in Tallman, N.Y., Rockland County, and also in N.Y.C. Good luck.

Cutting Lath and Plaster

•Posted by J:

We need to cut a hole for a fan/heat/light fixture in the ceiling of a 30-year-old house. Appears to be lath and plaster (wood strips and 1/2-inch-thick plaster, painted). What is the best technique to use so as not to crack the plaster?

◦Followup posted by Tommy:

There is no easy way, and expect the plaster to crumble a bit. But here is what I do:

1. Carefully score the outline of the cut with a razor knife. I often cover the area with masking tape to help keep the plaster that I'm not cutting together.
 2. Next, I use a Makita 9.6-volt cordless saw to cut through the plaster. (You could also drill some 1/8-inch holes around the score line.) Then gently remove the plaster.
 3. Carefully cut the wood lath with the Makita cordless or a sharp keyhole saw. I like using the small circular saw, as you don't get the vibration that you might get from a recip saw or keyhole saw.
 4. Attach a remodeler's box to the lath with screws and you're done.
- Bear in mind that this assumes there is electricity nearby. If you have to pull wires, I would go joist to joist, and make the cuts in the form of a rectangle. If this is the case, I would definitely use the Makita, cutting down the center of the joist through the plaster and lath. Renail the lath to the joist. Attach your fan bracket to the inside of the joists, and drywall over the bracket and box with drywall equal in thickness to the plaster and lath — probably 5/8 or 3/4 inch. Attach the drywall to the joists, then tape and mud as usual.

Mitering Fiber-Cement Siding

•Posted by djk:

Has anyone had any success mitering fiber-cement siding at outside corners? Also, will this product accept stain?

◦Followup posted by CP:

You can contact James Hardie Co. at their Web site (www.jameshardie.com), which has paint and product info, plus tech support.

◦Followup posted by RVP:

We have used full body stains on Hardi-Plank & Hardi-Panel for years now. I think you get a better color penetration than with paint, but follow CP's advice and call Hardie to get the right stains and paints. (They have this great help line that faxes all the info you want.)

I can't imagine that a miter would work very well with this siding. It is just too thin and the cuts are too ragged. But I think the biggest reason they wouldn't work is that the framing will move too much for the edges to stay together. If you do it and are successful, I would love to hear about it.

