

Toolbox

Festool RO 150 FEQ 6-Inch Rotex Sander

by Aaron Telian

Let the tool do the work,” counsels the old power-tool adage. Unfortunately, that approach never really worked with the 5-inch random orbit sander I purchased from a home center a couple of years ago;



Its 6-inch pad and 6-amp motor make the Rotex sander perfect for rapid stock removal. Almost no dust escapes when the tool is connected to a dust-collecting vac, making it ideal for remodeling work in occupied homes.

the tool required considerable elbow grease just to keep jobs moving along. So when a project came up that promised a lot of sanding, I decided to upgrade my setup to a Festool RO 150 FEQ, otherwise known as the Rotex.

At more than 12 inches long, this sander is definitely a two-handed tool, as evidenced by its side handle (which can be installed on either flank). It contains a 6-amp motor and offers 28 square inches of disc surface. Like other Festool products, it comes in a roomy plastic case — called a Systainer — that locks together with other Systainers. The tool's 13-foot cord detaches and fits other Festool power tools, too. The sander also comes with an edge guard that allows users to sand right up to a wall or inside a corner.

Operation

The Rotex boasts dual-mode, variable-speed operation. To switch from rotary to eccentric random orbital sanding (or vice versa) you simply turn a knob on the transmission. (Rotary random orbital, designed for fast stock removal, spins from 320 to 660 rpm; random orbital, for fine sanding, spins between 3,300 to 6,800 orbits per minute.) The sanding pad uses hook-and-loop paper and can be easily replaced without tools.

The first time I put my new tool to the test I was cleaning an old Douglas fir 4x12 header we were going to reuse as an exposed beam. I began the job with a belt sander, running it against the grain to get down to bare wood quickly. Since this technique leaves the surface a mess, I brought out the Rotex, armed with 100-grit sandpaper. The tool's generous surface area and smooth operation cleaned up the wreckage fast and left a nice smooth finish. Since that day, I've used the Rotex for numerous sanding tasks, all of which were accomplished with speed and efficiency.

Performance

The 150 FEQ's motor is quiet and powerful; when you switch it on, you can feel it rock with torque. In fact, if

RO 150 FEQ Specs

Weight: 5 pounds
Length: 12¹/₄ inches
Paper: Proprietary nine-hole hook-and-loop
Motor: Double-insulated 6-amp w/electronic feedback

Festool
888/337-8600
www.festoolusa.com

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Like all Festool power tools, the Rotex comes in a sturdy plastic box with plenty of room for accessories. The company's cases latch together and ride on top of its dust-collecting vacuums.



the tool weren't so superbly balanced, it would be a real challenge to hang onto. For the most part, though, I find it a pleasure to operate.

There's very little comparison between the Rotex and other random orbit sanders I've used. First off, the dust collection is nearly unbelievable. Connected to one of Festool's powerful vacuums, the Rotex leaves almost no dust behind, which makes for cleaner work, cleaner tools, and cleaner lungs.

In addition, the Rotex is much faster than comparable tools and can handle an unusually wide variety of tasks, from heavy stock removal to final polishing.

No tool is perfect, of course. I noticed that the tool's phenomenal torque made it difficult to use the "erasing" technique (holding only a small portion of the sanding disc against the work to remove particularly stubborn blemishes), but this treatment is a bit over-aggressive for most sanding tasks anyway.

Also, because of its size and weight, the Rotex is less agile than a 5-inch model; when I need one-handed convenience I still reach for my smaller sander.

And while the dust collection is superb with the vacuum attached, it is positively frightful without it — because

there's no dust bag available. For those of us who work mainly in the field, space in the truck is often at a premium, and sometimes there's no room for the vacuum. Festool should include a dust bag, or at least offer one as an accessory. I'm considering making my own.

Another inconvenience involves the sander's proprietary nine-hole 6-inch sanding discs: Besides being expensive (I paid \$22.65 for a pack of 50), they're unlikely to be sold at the local lumberyard or hardware store.

Finally, it would be nice to see Festool offer a variety pack containing an assortment of grits for new users.

The Verdict

Despite these quibbles, I believe that the Rotex sets a whole new standard for quality. It combines the aggression of a belt sander with the control and finesse of a random orbit tool, opening up new possibilities for what can be done with hand-held sanders.

Naturally, this hybrid approach may not make sense for everyone — but for carpenters faced with heavy sanding tasks unsuitable for either run-of-the-mill random orbit sanders or belt sanders, the Rotex may fit the bill.

The 150 FEQ retails for around \$440 — a sizeable investment compared with the \$80 random-orbit sanders I generally see on job sites. As far as I'm concerned, whether you should spend that money depends on if you already have a dust-collecting vacuum. If you do, I'm confident that the tool will live up to its price. But if you don't, the decision's not so simple. To make the purchase worthwhile, you'd have to spend at least \$700 total for the sander and Festool's smallest vac.

Aaron Telian is a carpenter for Telian and Sons in Oakhurst, Calif.

Two Handy Ladder-Levelers

by Brian Doherty

Over the course of 16 years as a house painter, I've rarely had a job that didn't involve setting up a ladder on an uneven surface. Whatever the problem — sloping ground, a pitched roof, a stairway — my standard solution has been to shim the low spot with some combination of bricks, blocks, or boards, then cross my fingers and hope for the best.

However, I'm happy to report that I recently discovered two valuable products that make it fast and easy to erect a safe, level ladder on a base that's anything but.

The Equalizer

Werner Co.'s Equalizer (888/523-3370, www.wernerladder.com) is a standard extension ladder outfitted with factory-installed leg levelers. Although devices of this type have long been available as aftermarket additions, the chintzy contraptions I've seen are difficult to install and more hindrance than help. The Equalizer is different.

Its sliding leveler legs are heavy-duty aluminum box



Teresa Doherty

beams. Rows of holes — much like those in an adjustable shelving system — allow them to be adjusted up to 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches in $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch increments. A stout locking pin secures the setup at the proper height. To avoid guesswork, the ladder's bottom rung features a built-in spirit level. These features have been trademarked by Werner as the EverLevel System.

Last fall, I tried out a 20-foot Equalizer ladder (Type II); my only disappointment was that the company hadn't come out with something like this sooner. Even though the adjustable legs stick out a couple of inches on the bottom, they never got in the way. In fact, the only time I remembered that this ladder was any different from the others in my collection was when I needed to adjust it. Ordinarily I would have had to search around for some type of shim, but with the Equalizer I just pulled the locking pin (it's tethered to the ladder with a cable, or I'm sure I would have lost it by now), extended the short leg until the foot was resting on

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Adjustable legs and a built-in spirit level ensure that the Equalizer ladder can be set up safely on uneven ground (above left). Staggered holes allow users to adjust the height in $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch increments (above right).

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solid ground, and reinserted the pin in the appropriate hole.

A spring-loaded ball bearing located near the end of the locking pin is designed to prevent the pin from being accidentally dislodged. However, I did manage a few times to accidentally kick the pin partially out of the hole, though not far enough to loosen the leg. I resolved to be more careful about where I put my big feet. Still, if the maker decides to upgrade the spring, I won't object.

I've made a substantial investment in my existing stable of ladders, but when it comes time for replacements, an Equalizer will be my first choice.

Werner is currently manufacturing Type I (250-pound duty rating) and Type II (225-pound duty rating) aluminum Equalizer ladders in lengths of 16, 20, 24, and 28 feet. Type IA (300-pound duty rating) fiberglass versions in 20-, 24-, and 28-foot lengths should be available early next year. Prices vary, but you can expect to pay about \$40 more for an aluminum Equalizer than you would for a standard Werner ladder of the same size and rating.

The Pivit Ladder Tool

For all of my ladders that don't have adjustable feet, the Pivit Ladder Tool (ProVision Tools, 888/276-1060, provisiontools.com) is a godsend. Essentially a giant plastic wedge covered in strategic places with nonskid materials, it provides a stable platform over an uneven surface. On asphalt shingle roofs, for example, the Pivit can prop up a ladder on pitches as steep as 7/12 without having to be fastened to the sheathing, the maker says. So far, I haven't set it up on anything steeper than 5/12, but it's been rock-stable every time I have used it.

This tool is more than just a glorified shim: Its unique design allows it to serve as a paint-tray holder, stepstool, tool



Courtesy ProVision Tools

A Pivit Ladder Tool can support a ladder on a staircase or hang from the rungs to serve as a ladder jack.

carrier, and ladder jack. In a pinch it can also be used as a standoff, though I much prefer the standard U-shaped devices for that job.

Since I do mostly interior painting these days, my favorite place to use the Pivit is on a stairway. It has a notch in one end that's designed to rest securely on the nose of a stair tread while the other end sits on a lower step. With this "landing strip," I can lean a ladder against the side wall and easily reach the high spots in the stairwell.

ProVision sells the Pivit on its Web site for \$85 plus postage. The tool is also available at paint stores and hardware stores.

Brian Doherty is a painting contractor in Richmond, Va.

Heavy Lifting. One of the most useful remodeling tools I ever owned was a 25-ton railroad jack, which was invaluable for structural repairs and porch rebuilds. I bought it at a garage sale, but Jet — better known for its table saws and other shop equipment — sells screw jacks similar to my tool with capacities from 5 to 25 tons. The 441325 (shown) has a 25-ton capacity and weighs about 45 pounds; I found it on the Web (www.fastenal.com) for \$171.

Jet, 800/274-6848, www.jettools.com.



Do-It-All. More than one GC has purchased a Fein MultiMaster for a single job, only to have it become his all-around go-to tool. With the help of



various accessories, it can cut, sand, scrape, remove grout, and polish.



The most recent models — *FMM 250* and *FMM 250Q* — have 250-watt motors and star-shaped accessory mounts that don't loosen during use. FMM 250Qs also feature a toolless quick release. Prices range from \$200 to \$400.

Fein, 800/441-9878, www.feinus.com.

Nice Fit. Expertly fitting countertops and finish carpentry to existing walls can be a lengthy process, but a neat tool invented by cabinetmaker Bill Friegang can help speed things along. The *QuickScribe* — which mounts on the bottom of a Bosch, Porter-Cable, or DeWalt laminate trimmer's offset base — lets users quickly and easily match the contour of the waviest walls. A video on the company's Web site shows how the \$80 product works.

Custom Design Cabinets, 408/258-5768, www.thescribingtool.com.



Toolbox | Chain Saws

Corded. Electric chain saws offer a lot of advantages over gas-powered versions: no exhaust, no need to mix or store gas, minimal maintenance. With Stihl's 16-inch *MSE 180*, users get power, a comfortable weight, and a coast-down brake — features that helped the tool snag top place in a recent electric-chain-saw test performed by *Tools of the Trade* (JLC's sister publication). It costs about \$370.

Stihl, 800/467-8445, www.stihlusa.com.



Just Right. On the chain-saw scale, the *Rancher 455* lies somewhere between the cheesy home-center models and the monsters used by loggers. Designed for part-time users who want pro-saw performance, it boasts a 55cc 3.5-hp engine, a toolless chain tensioner, and a quick-release air filter. It accepts bars from 13 to 20 inches and costs about \$400.

Husqvarna, 704/597-5000, www.usa.husqvarna.com.



Added Stability. The thought of using a chain saw on lumber may strike many framers as sacrilege — but add a Big Foot *Headcutter 75* and you've got the perfect tool for cutting timbers and SIPs, and for gang cutting rafters. The aluminum shoe attaches to the bar of any chain saw and bevels to 75 degrees. It costs \$240.

Big Foot Tools, 888/798-4499, www.bigfoot-saws.com.