

## One-Man Decking Crew Sells Hard, Builds Right In West Coast Market

**William Bolton, a deck builder in Santa Barbara, Calif., works alone. Bill's decks were featured in the Day's End department of the January/February issue of *Professional Deck Builder*.**

**PDB:** What's your market like?

**Bolton:** People hear "Santa Barbara," and they think money. It's surprising, because there's a lot of money here, but decks can be a hard sell. Lots of people view decks as simple things built cheaply by handymen and gardeners.

**PDB:** How do you market yourself there?

**Bolton:** Several ways. I get a lot of jobs from the Yellow Pages, with about a 20 percent closing rate. Referrals are good, of course. I've developed a relationship with a spa dealer — a lot of people who want spas want decks. That's great in that the closing rate is about 80 percent. Last year, I set up at a local home show. I made contact with a lot of people, and got some good work; I'll do that again this year in order to develop a presence. Verizon offers an online directory called SuperPages, and I get some hits there. My Web site, [www.deckcreations.com](http://www.deckcreations.com), brings in some customers. I've also registered as a contractor with several composite-decking manufacturers, so my name comes up on their sites.

**PDB:** What decking are you using?

**Bolton:** People call up wanting composites — low maintenance is a big deal. I bring along a half-dozen

favorite samples, and I also include ipe and redwood. After comparing, they usually choose ipe. I don't show them just unweathered ipe, either. I show a sample that's been outside with no maintenance for a year.

**PDB:** What fasteners do you use?

**Bolton:** I don't use any nails. Even my framing is screwed together — with Fastap ([www.fastapscrews.com](http://www.fastapscrews.com)) framing screws, approved for use with ACQ lumber. For ipe decking, I use Senco ([www.senco.com](http://www.senco.com)) trim-head composite-decking screws. For composites, I use TrapEase ([www.fastenmaster.com](http://www.fastenmaster.com)) composite-decking screws.

**PDB:** What problems do you foresee in the industry?

**Bolton:** Materials — I wonder if they will stand up as advertised? I am always concerned about encouraging air flow around decks, and I treat all end cuts with copper naphthenate.

**PDB:** What do you charge for decks?

**Bolton:** Of course, that depends on the job. Generally in the range of \$21 to \$28 per square foot, with railings adding another \$40 to \$70 per lineal foot. It's also tough to bid some jobs. I build decks that I expect to last 20 years, and my competition builds decks that might go six to eight years. A sales tool I've been using lately is *Remodeling* magazine's "Cost vs. Value Report" (see "Adding a Deck Pays Off," page 22). It compares the resale value to the project costs, and customers really connect to it.

**PDB:** What sort of railings do you build?

**Bolton:** I almost always make my own, usually from ipe. Sometimes I do cable rails. One key thing I do is mount the posts inside the rim joist. You lose a few square feet of decking, but you get a much stouter connection.

**PDB:** Do you finish the wood as part of the package?

**Bolton:** No, but I suggest that customers who want to maintain that new Bruce-floor look to their decks do so using Penofin ([www.penofin.com](http://www.penofin.com)).

**PDB:** Do you ever get problem customers?

**Bolton:** Usually not. When I look at a job, I assess the state of house. If it's trashy and unmaintained, I don't bid. If I get a bad gut feeling, I don't bid. One customer I did have pulled out a lawn chair, sat down, and watched me put every screw into that deck. "Bill, that's not quite straight." "Bill, you missed a screw."

**PDB:** What about problem jobs?

**Bolton:** Usually, they're easier to deal with than problem customers. One scenario I'm very careful about is working on an existing cantilevered deck. You can't just sister new joists onto them, and if any joist has started to rot, you have to tear out the inside of the house to fix the problem.

Another problem I encounter is below-deck drainage. People think of Santa Barbara as hilly, and a lot of it is. But some is flat, and some houses I've worked on are so low to the

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ground that I have to excavate where the deck will go to provide room for the joists and for air flow. That excavation becomes the lowest spot in the yard, a catch basin, really. So I also have to excavate further to install drainage.

**PDB:** How do you deal with the challenges of working alone?

**Bolton:** I turn down some jobs that are too big, or require me to carry the material too far. Some of the hillside houses here have literally no access to the backyard. The only way to build a deck on them is to carry everything through the house. I don't bid them.

Otherwise, well, it's surprising what you can lift one end at a time. Often, there's a gardener around, and waving a \$20 bill in the air can get some temporary help.

**PDB:** What's the biggest deck you've built?

**Bolton:** I just finished one that is 1,500 square feet. It took me about a month. Most of the decks I build are more like 300 to 700 square feet. Smaller ones often cost as much as big ones, though, because they seem to incorporate more landscape features, like trees and boulders.

**PDB:** How many decks do you build most years?

**Bolton:** I build between eight and 14 a year. It depends a lot on the size of the projects.

**PDB:** What's the best part of the job?

**Bolton:** I like that point when substructure starts to go together, and the deck comes to life. That gets me jazzed. I like solving the problems,

and working through the design with the customer. I like decks that incorporate the landscape.

Initially, I tell customers to think about what they want — look in magazines, show me pictures. I tell them that this is a big investment, and they should consider everything they might want, then we'll whittle down from there.

**PDB:** What's the worst part?

**Bolton:** Fastening decking and carrying material. That 1,500-square-foot deck took me more than two days to fasten. ❖