

Tips From a Deck Remodeler

Good customers and straightforward work make for easy scheduling and great cash flow

by Benjamin Timko

Seven years ago, when I created a deck-remodeling company in Clearfield, Pa., many of my friends and colleagues thought I had lost my mind. They saw a small town of 15,000 that was located two hours from a major city — and a place where the average home was over 70 years old and the last new-housing development had been completed in the early



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1980s. They questioned whether I'd have enough customers.

But I knew I would. Before I started my business, 765-Deck LLC, I sold replacement windows in the same town. The company I worked for followed up on 4,000 leads and had over \$8 million in sales the last year I worked there. And almost every homeowner we sold windows to also needed either the front porch or the back deck remodeled.

Selling Remodels vs. Selling New Decks

The best part of being a deck remodeler is the clients. A full 80 percent of my mine are retired. They've made their money and have no mortgage, so neither the economy nor the price of gas affects their purchasing decisions. Most are happy with their current deck size and style, but they are tired of maintenance and would rather enjoy life than stain a deck or paint railings.

Selling to these clients is different from selling to people who want to reconfigure a backyard with a new deck. Fancy software designs or pictures of lake-front decks with putting greens won't sell a reface on a plain 10x20 deck. My clients' primary concerns are the products (particularly maintenance issues), the warranty, and the start and finish dates.

That doesn't mean, however, that you can't be creative — you should be — or that craftsmanship doesn't matter — it does. It also doesn't mean that upsells are off the table. I've successfully sold lights, specialty railings and balusters, curved rails, under-deck waterproofing (**Figure 1**), and hot tubs. (The good relationship I have with a spa and hot tub dealer helps — we feed each other leads.)



Figure 1. While the project scope of a deck remodel is generally smaller than that of a new deck, upsells such as waterproofing, hot tubs, and pergolas can add to your business.

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Permits Rarely Needed

Another plus of deck remodeling, at least in my area, is that permits or inspections aren't usually required, which speeds up the process. But my company still brings an existing deck or porch up to code, by adding joist hangers, flashing, ledger connections, and upgraded railings. It's not just safety I have in mind — bringing a deck up to code is also a great selling point.

The simplicity of deck remodeling makes for few communication mistakes. I can hand a crew two simple pieces of paper detailing the job and know beforehand how long it will take and how it will look when completed. I never hear "those post holes were solid rock," "the inspector didn't show up until one o'clock," or "I didn't understand this part of your drawing." It's a remodel; the deck is already there. Tear off the old, install new decking and railings — no questions, minimal problems, and quick installation.

There are some things to watch out

for, however. Wood on porches can be over 100 years old, and nine out of ten decks my company has worked on weren't flashed to the house (Figure 2). Both of those factors can mean rot. I never know what I'll find, so I include a clause in my contract stipulating that rotten wood will

be replaced on a time and materials basis. If I can stick a pencil in a piece of wood, I get rid of it.

Most older porches need to be completely reframed because of rot. And more times than not, old porch footings are unreliable and need to be replaced. When this last is true, I obtain a permit.



Figure 2. Most older decks aren't properly flashed to the house, but that's difficult to determine before demolition. The author includes a clause in his contract to fix such hidden conditions on a time and materials basis.



Figure 3. Enclosing or finishing the underside of the deck is a good upsell, and it makes the whole job look better by hiding the sound, but weathered, existing framing.

Out With the Old

Most of the rot we find could have been avoided with proper flashing. My crews carry sheet metal brakes and can flash most situations they encounter. I use bendable vinyl coil for flashing, which avoids any issues with wood preservatives corroding aluminum.

Old decks are commonly well out of square, which makes it hard to install new decking and railing. My crews handle this by adding edging, which they shim to make the deck square. When there are aesthetic (rather than structural) issues on the underside of the deck, I sometimes close off the area with a vinyl soffit or lattice to hide the ugliness (Figure 3).

Tearing off the old decking is

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Figure 4. A variety of interchangeable heads makes the Artillery Pry Bar the author's front-line tool for demolition.



Figure 5. Screwed-down decking is harder to remove than nailed boards. Usually, 70 percent of the screws can be backed out. The rest are cut flush with the joists after the decking is pried off.

straightforward. My crews mainly use an Artillery Pry Bar (Artillery Tools; 866/968-2108, artillerytools.com) to separate the decking from the joists (**Figure 4**). This versatile tool has interchangeable prying heads, which makes it useful in many different situations.

Screwed-in-place decking is harder to remove than nailed-down boards are (**Figure 5**). Most of the time, the boards pull up and leave the screws behind in the joists. About 70 percent of those screws can be removed with a screw gun. The worst, though, are stainless screws, whose heads tend to strip out. When I can't remove the screws, I cut them flush with the joists using a metal-cutting blade in a reciprocating saw.

Any questionable joists — those with rot or major structural defects — I replace. A lot of old decks lack joist hangers and post connectors (**Figure 6**), and my crews add those



Figure 6. Post attachment is taken more seriously today than in years past. The author replaces questionable posts with a proprietary mount sold by his railing supplier.

as needed. I also check joist spacing. In years past, a lot of decks were built with joists 2 feet on center, which is too great a span for most composite or plastic decking.

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In With the New

To ensure longevity and minimize callbacks, I install only 100-percent vinyl products (**Figure 7**). My company uses Brock Vinyl Decking (Royal Outdoor Products; 800/488-5245, royalcrownltd.com), which was first produced in 1981 for the dock industry. Royal has been great to us, and its staff is a dream to work with.

The biggest challenge when installing new deck boards over old joists is making sure that the joists crown the same way. To avoid visible bumps in the decking, I usually pull a string line across the tops of the joists before installing the decking, to see how things look. Sometimes, a severely crowned joist can be straightened out by sistering a new one to it so their crowns oppose each other.

This is particularly important when the framing will be covered with Royal's Deck Lok tongue-and-groove decking. Because of the tongue and groove, it tends to hold water on the

surface. Ponding water leaves dirty spots on the decking and can be a callback headache.

Another great product to use when refacing an old deck or porch is a

solid surface post mount. The one I use is from Royal, but other companies make similar products. The mount allows you to cut off the old wood posts and lay out the new posts according to the railing that you will be using, rather than the existing framing.

Stairs can be tricky (**Figure 8**). If you're planning to save the existing stringers, you need to make sure that the current tread depth will work with the width of the new decking. When stairs don't work well or don't meet code, I include building new ones in the contract.

Deck and porch remodeling has been a steady business. It's not as reliant on a booming construction economy as is subbing to builders or selling new decks, and opportunities abound. Just look around. There are probably thousands of decks and porches in your area awaiting your expertise. ♦

Benjamin Timko runs a deck remodeling business, 765-Deck LLC, in Clearfield, Pa.



Figure 7. Low maintenance is a big selling point; the author installs only vinyl decking. Because tongue-and-groove products like the decking shown above may drain surface water slowly, it's important to ensure the framing is flat to avoid ponding.



Figure 8. Old stairs are often in rough shape, don't meet current codes, or aren't configured to accept modern synthetic decking. Replacing them is a common part of a deck remodel.