

Keeping Up With New Products

by Heidi Jansen

My husband and I started our company, Mike Jansen Custom Cedar Decks, a little over 20 years ago. We still build some decks with cedar, but with the explosion of new decking products, there have been days we wish we'd left "Cedar" out of our name. Like many deck builders these days, we build far more decks with composite or PVC products than with cedar or any other wood.

The sheer volume of new deck products — not to mention peripherals such as railings, balusters, and lighting — can be overwhelming to keep up with, and meeting with customers who request a product about which we have no knowledge is even tougher. When customers mistakenly merge names and come up with funny hybrids like "Timber Trex," "Cross Grains," or "Fiber Ready," we don't always know whether they're confused or a new product has come out that we just haven't heard of yet!

Take Notes

Our solution? To provide the best service for our customers, we've refined the list of decking products we promote to just a few that we feel are outstanding.

To help sort them out, we decided a while back to compile a spreadsheet. Initially, we listed the products we had already built with. We have continued to add to that list regularly and have expanded the type of information we chart. We note everything, including the raw materials used to produce the product, board profiles and colors available, product cost, and most important, the

performance history, warranty, and consumer reviews of each product.

Finding customer reviews you can trust isn't always easy, unless you know people who have used the product. A Google search on the product's name will turn up information on class-action lawsuits and unresolved complaints. A word of caution here, though — people seem to be far more likely to complain about products they don't like than to sing the praises of ones they do.

Even though it's time consuming, our research makes us feel better about our knowledge base than we previously did. Now when a customer throws out the name of a decking board we've not heard about, a rare event these days, we can confidently respond that while we will certainly check into the product they've mentioned, we feel positive we are already providing them with the best choices available.

And we always do research every product our customers ask us about. We find that most are not up to the quality standards we look for; still, that research has sometimes led us to products that looked so good and had such terrific performance reviews that we added them to our offerings.

Competing Against Low-Ball Products

I frequently read in forums and blogs about deck builders who will build with just about any product if it sells the job — the same deck builders who moan and groan about customers blaming them for problems with the product. That should be no surprise — when things go wrong, the customer goes after the closest target, which is usually the deck contractor. While we don't think this is necessarily fair, we do feel that those deck builders bring it on themselves. If they had done a better job during the sales process and shown the customer the downside of that inferior product, they wouldn't be in the position of defending themselves against complaints with the local Better Business Bureau and dealing with customers

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who have filed warranty claims with manufacturers that don't back their products.

We've never experienced these issues because we promote and build with only the highest-quality products. Our best recommendation to all deck builders is to trust your instincts and experience and also do your homework. Build with products made by companies with a solid reputation and a good performance history. Generally, the highest-quality products have the best warranties as well.

Our response to the cost-conscious customer is that it doesn't make sense to spend 25 percent less for a product that has a 50 percent shorter warranty. Choosing a product with a lifetime warranty over one with a five- or 10-year warranty shouldn't even require thought. The best products come with a higher price tag, and we frequently have to explain to our customers that the better-quality products cost what they do because of the

extra expense the manufacturer incurs in research, development, and testing. We have no problem reminding our price shoppers of the old adage "You get what you pay for."

The bottom line here is that a reputable deck builder can successfully steer most customers away from lower-quality products and right back to the top-notch product he initially recommended — if he's done his homework.

We know times are tough and we all need to feed our families. But we also feel it's important to do right by our customers. Sure, we may lose a few jobs by not building with lower-cost, lesser-quality products. We believe that decision will save us far more in the long run: It will avoid future issues with inferior products and thereby protect our most valuable asset — our reputation. ❖

Heidi Jansen and her husband, Mike, run a deck building company in Omaha, Neb.

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