



The “Wow” Factor

**Go beyond the basics to succeed
in the high-end market**

by Bobby Parks

I’ve built a reputation for creating high-quality, high-end decks and porches. To compete in this market, you have to impress the clientele — and that’s what I set out to do, by incorporating what I call “wow” factors on every deck I build. These are the features that, quite simply, make people stop, look, and say, “Wow.” Once you’ve built a few of them, they start to sell themselves; prospective clients will often specifically ask me about a wow factor they’ve seen on one of my completed projects. And these extra features don’t only sell jobs, they’re profitable as well. In many cases, a rich-looking feature doesn’t cost much more to deliver than a simpler one, but because of its appearance, it brings top dollar.

A wow factor on a deck can be a transitional area, a special treatment of the railing, or an extra such as an arbor. It can include inlaid octagons, routed trim pieces, or aprons. It can also be as simple as a functional space that adds overall interest. On a porch, a wow factor could be a trim detail, an upgraded floor or ceiling, lighting, or a fireplace.

Simple Wow Factors

Not all attention-getting features are difficult or expensive to build. One of my goals for the projects I design and build is that they appear to be extensions



Figure 1. A deck that follows a house’s contours is more memorable than a budget, rectangular deck and doesn’t cost a lot more to build.

The “Wow” Factor

of the house. An easy, low-cost way to dress up a deck and visually tie it to the house is to install an apron made of PVC and paint it to match the house trim or siding. PVC holds up well, and since moisture doesn't penetrate it, the paint doesn't bubble or peel.

Working with yard angles and offsets on the house is another way to add wow to a deck. Incorporating small bump-outs not only avoids long, boring, straight lines but also assures function where bay windows, offsets, or a fireplace would otherwise reduce the deck's area (**Figure 1, page 1**). Even on ordinary decks, bump-outs add a surprising amount of appeal for a relatively minor investment in labor and materials (**Figure 2**).

Finally, you can add interest to an otherwise plain deck just by running the decking diagonally.

Radius Decks

Rounded features look impressive and draw attention. They can be simple projections or they can encompass larger areas (**Figure 3**). The former require fewer framing changes and less labor than the latter and therefore cost less; still, any time radii are involved, pricing allowances must be made. Experience with this type of work is really the only way to know how much time to allow and what to charge the customer.

That said, a radius is not as hard to build as some might think. The understructure for a bump-out radius is formed by simply cantilevering the joists past a beam. Establishing the pivot point, marking and cutting the joists, and blocking will take extra time, but aren't particularly difficult. And in most cases, wrapping a $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch PVC fascia will cap the ends of the joists quickly and simply.

To create a railing on a curved deck, straight sections can be arranged in a polygon, or a true radius rail can be made in the field or ordered. Bending plastic for a curved railing requires some pricey equipment, like Trex's CustomCurve (877/552-8783, trexpartners.com) or Heatcon's Heat Forming Kits (800/556-1990, heatcon.com). If you're not interested in making that kind of investment, you may want to look at a company that will custom-bend decking products to your specifications, like Bugh (888/752-8783, bughinc.com). Or use a local fabricator that can create curved metal rails. Avoiding radii tighter than 4 feet makes the process easier.

Define Areas

A single deck can be host to many activities, such as dining, relaxing, cooking, or soaking in a hot tub.



Figure 2. Even a simple bump-out adds interest to a deck.



Figure 3. The cozy spaces created by round decks are a major wow factor.



Figure 4. Octagons are a little simpler to build than round areas but have a similar impact.

The “Wow” Factor



Figure 5. Extending a walkway through a garden ties the deck to the landscape.



Figure 6. Building transitional steps one board wider makes them more noticeable and provides ample space for seating.



Figure 7. Not only does a pergola provide shade, it also jazzes up any deck.



Figure 8. Cap the top of a railing with a PVC board and you have an eye-catching bar top.

Defining an area for each offers design possibilities that will improve the function of the deck while giving it more visual impact.

Popular with customers, inlaid octagons make great dining or sitting areas (**Figure 4, page 2**). They can be as small as 12 feet across and still be usable, so they are an excellent wow factor on even small to mid-sized decks. In addition to the obvious extra time to install the decking, more framing labor is necessary for octagons because the decking requires additional support. Overall, however, the cost is a small percentage of the value of the result.

Transitions between levels offer lots of opportunities to be creative (**Figure 5**). By building deeper steps, for example, you can add interest and function to level changes. Using three boards per tread instead of the normal two boards keeps the main function of a step and makes the step deep enough to serve as overflow seating (**Figure 6**).

An arbor or a pergola can also set off an area of the deck for relaxing or dining, while providing shade. It's a more expensive upgrade and a significant wow factor (**Figure 7**).

With so many options on the market for railings, they can provide a ready-made wow factor. Centerpiece accents or decorative connectors or balusters are simple ways to amplify the look of a finished project. Material costs, of course, vary widely. Bar tops or eating surfaces can be added to a railing with minimal effort (**Figure 8**). Routed edges and trim create a finished look, again without a lot of extra labor.

The “Wow” Factor



Figure 9. A simple porch adds a wow factor to a deck.



Figure 10. Building up the trim and columns on a porch can tie it to interior finish details.



Figure 11. Stone flooring and a stained wood ceiling give this porch a level of finish that the homeowners will appreciate daily and visitors will remember.



Figure 12. Even in the summer, a fireplace is this porch's focal point.

Porches With Panache

A basic screen porch adds function and interest to a deck and can definitely be a wow factor (**Figure 9**). However, extra details like custom-wrapped columns, beams, and routed horizontal trim — which may require a day or two of work and hundreds or even thousands of dollars in material — will drive the wow factor through the roof (**Figure 10**).

Putting thought into flooring, ceilings, and trim features makes a huge difference in a finished project (**Figure 11**). I offer several flooring types: Hardwoods, capstocks, and slate or tile are common selections. Any of these add a wow factor beyond a typical pressure-treated floor.

Ceilings can include cedar with exposed rafters, painted beadboard with crown and trim, or cypress. Planing rough-sawn cedar rafters smooth changes the look from rustic to refined. Incorporating a few simple details into a beadboard ceiling can change the look dramatically. Dividing the ceiling up into equal panels and trimming the joints with 1½-inch mullion center, then trimming the corners with crown creates an elegant effect.

Fireplaces may be used only seasonally, but they provide a wow factor all year round (**Figure 12**). The cost of adding fireplaces is significant, but coordination and delivery is not difficult (see “Fireplaces in Porches,” July/August 2009).

These added features cost varying amounts to deliver, but they all raise your finished product to a higher plane. They separate you from those builders who focus on production and simple projects, and they allow you to sell more jobs, at higher margins. ❖

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