

Caulks and Sealants • Green Paint

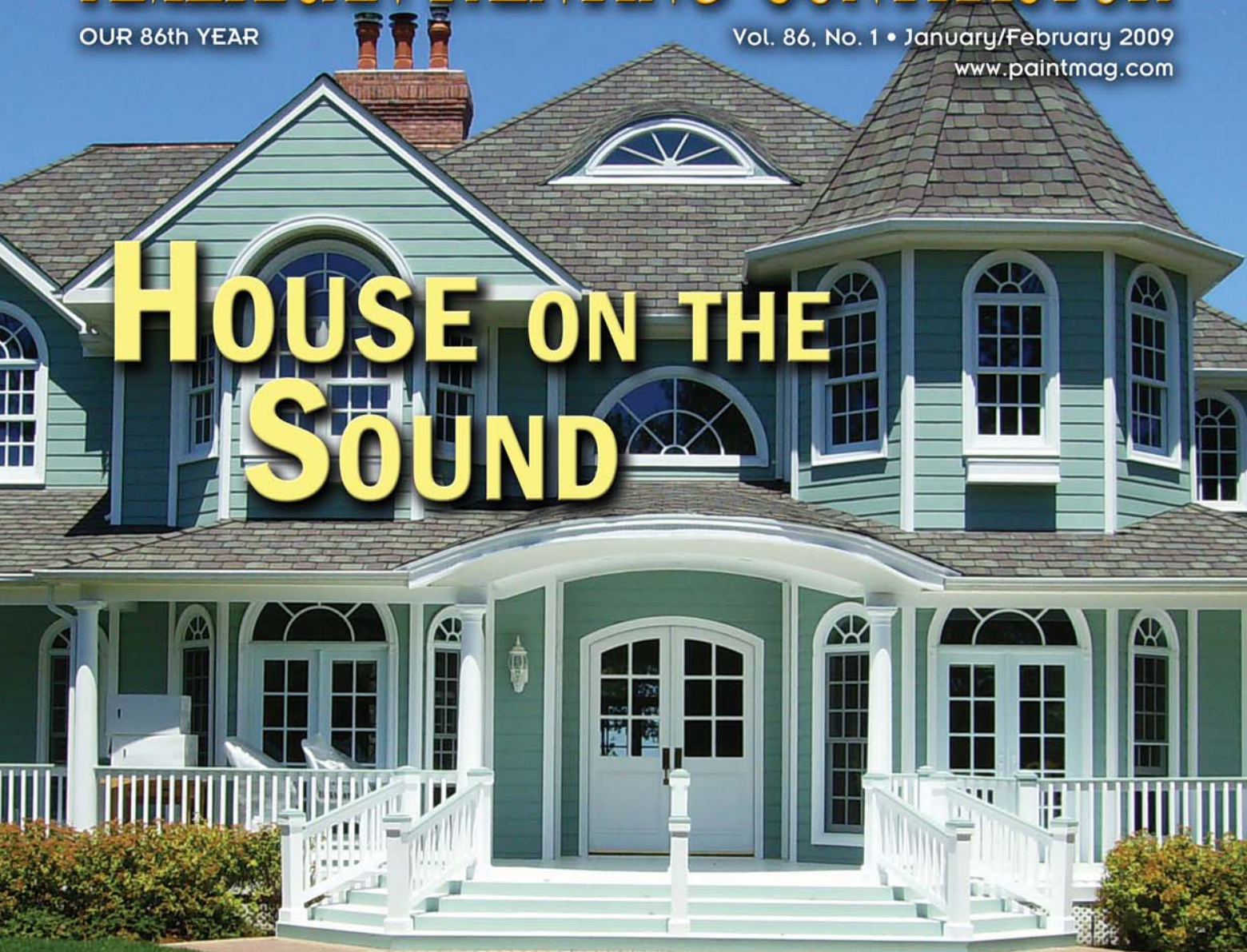
# AMERICAN PAINTING CONTRACTOR

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## HOUSE ON THE SOUND



PLUS



CONCRETE COATINGS

# Reviewing Your Product



By Scott Burt

Welcome to the first installment of From the Field. In each issue of *APC*, this column will reflect on products and processes that are helping paint contractors to be more successful in the field. So far, the forecast for '09' is not great for the trades in general, so painting contractors are presented with more than the usual challenges that January can bring. My company, Topcoat Finishes Inc., is in daily contact with painting contractors around the country, and most recognize that there is reason for concern as builders struggle to secure contracts and homeowners hold on to funds that in the past would have been spent more freely. Even commercial spaces aren't popping up at the alarming rate they did in recent years.

Fickle markets, lowball painters and rising material costs further complicate our field. Talk about a perfect storm for paint contractors. What better time to re-evaluate the product and service we deliver? The knee-jerk reaction to this market condition is to use cheaper materials and lower labor prices to stay competitive and busy. The more methodical approach is to focus on adding value to your business by marketing services that are relevant to consumers now and presenting them in a way that encourages the customer to make informed decisions.

The national trend is that customers are not buying or building new homes, so it's safe to assume that people are preparing to remain in their current homes for the foreseeable future. That's where we come in. Thinking of this target market, people who have homes that they plan to stay in, it is easy to identify the reasons they will need the services

of professional paint contractors; for both interior and exterior projects. For the purpose of this discussion, and given the season, let us consider enhancing our residential interior repaints and the positive results that it can bring.

## Media

The largest entity working to our advantage in the pursuit of residential repaint work right now is the national media (nightly news notwithstanding). Have you noticed how many design and paint makeover shows there are on television? There are even entire networks dedicated to these programs. How about the plethora of national magazines that every month feature simple, cost-effective ways to organize and transform spaces? The major home improvement retailers and product manufacturers sponsor these endeavors in a way that keeps home projects in front of the consumer. In the past, we may not have thought this was particularly beneficial to our trade, but now we should reconsider. There is a definite segment of homeowners who want to enjoy the pleasures that they see on television and in magazines but are not interested in becoming do-it-yourselfers. More specifically, they love the idea of increasing their homes comfort, appeal and value. Bring some of these elements into your own service offerings.

The simplest and most cost-effective way for paint contractors to improve interior living spaces is by painting walls. As the economy declined in 2008, our business saw an unusual spike in the number of residential customers requesting something more unique than the garden-variety wall color change. More than ever- and the trend

is continuing into '09- we are asked to do accent walls, stripes, glazes, textures, Venetian plasters, wallpaper stripping and even sports-themed children's rooms.

These are exactly the types of value-added services to offer in today's market—especially in the nonpeak season. Rob and Chris Haught of RC Painting, Inc., in Utah identified the trend, noting, "We have had more requests for specialty finishes; the DIY shows have encouraged this." These services don't require many additional tools beyond what painters already have in their arsenals, and they create more unique and integrated offerings. The Haughts added that RC Painting contacted a local faux painter in order to learn and do more with specialty finishes.

## The Referral Cycle

This media-driven home improvement mindset is an opportunity for paint contractors to be networking with others in the trades who have similar goals. Now is the time to be in touch with all types of finish professionals: drywall, floor, tile, wallpaper, faux and carpentry. Veltman Painting, LLC, of Michigan has a strong referral base. Owner Dean Veltman points out, "When I provide an estimate on a referral, the closing rate is very high." Also, in the customers, eyes, when you are able to refer another trade that is equal to you in professionalism and service, it reinforces why they have chosen you as their painting contractor. So, whether you are on the giving or receiving end of the referral, there is a definite value to the consumer and the networking partners.

One effective way to start a referral cycle is to identify your best supplier and nurture a loyal and professional

relationship with that supplier. Last year, our primary supplier referred an out-of-state designer to us who was looking for a paint contractor for local design projects. After working on a few projects together, I was able to refer one of our customers to the designer for a consultation. The consultation led to a home office design/paint project, which not only created a project for us and the designer, but also allowed me to refer a finish carpenter for some custom shelving. Our customer was thrilled with the results of the office and asked us to do color consulting and painting in the stairway, the hallway and the other surrounding rooms. Meanwhile, our designer placed some of our collaborations in national publications and on Web sites. This exposure produced more local leads and referrals for our businesses. At the same time, the finish carpenter has referred paint work back to us, and we all send our customers to the supplier who initially brought us all together. And so the cycle repeats itself.

**Educate**

In order to educate customers about the value of our businesses, we need to clearly identify what that value is. Establish your company's value early in the relationship with a customer, and educate the customer about why he or she should settle for nothing less than what you are offering. If someone shows up offering the same value as your company, then the customer's decision can be made based on price and you should be able to compete evenly.

RC Painting educates customers about the benefits of hiring a licensed and fully insured contractor: "We include in our estimate packet a checklist that customers can use to compare companies and estimates," says Chris Haught. By promoting the benefits of hiring your company, you can avoid competing solely on price. Contractors who get on the slippery slope of price reduction to compete with low-priced competition end up devaluing their own services and, by extension, the painting trade as a whole.

Every one of us is responsible for helping to shape the consumers' perception of our business and our trade. Dean Veltman considers his staff to be his most important resource: "I let my customers know that in addition to providing quality paint work, I hire people that they can feel comfortable having around their home." One thing that we can count on with absolute

certainty in 2009 is that customers will expect us to deliver honest and professional services in return for the dollars they spend on home improvement with us.

**APC**

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