

Primed for Success

Paint stores need to communicate the role that primers play in a successful painting project

Beware the irate customer—the customer who comes into your store complaining because his paint job has fallen short of expectations. It may not look as good as he expected it to look or last as long as he expected it to last. “How could this happen?” he demands to know. He used a top-of-the-line paint and professional-grade applicators. The problem actually might lie beneath the surface—because the paint primer he used was an inferior grade or because he used no primer when a primer was called for. It’s your job as a paint retailer to ensure that such a travesty does not happen by making the appropriate primer recommendation.

“Some skimp on the primer, but use a high-priced topcoat,” reported Tom Dougherty of Pittsburgh Paints. “That’s one of the biggest mistakes they could make.”

Dougherty advised retailers to stress the importance of the primer, since that is the coating that is touching the actual substrate. “That’s what provides the paint job with its adherence,” he explained. “If the primer does not adhere to the substrate, then it neutralizes the

advantages of using a high-quality top coat.”

Jeff Spillane, senior marketing manager for Benjamin Moore & Co., explained that paint dealers should sell primers because they are needed to address specific problems—for instance, eliminating cedar bleed, bridging cracks, providing better adhesion or offering better holdout. “You should not be concerned about selling a primer for the sake of selling a primer but rather because you want to be sure that your customer is getting the right product for the job,” he said.

Spillane concedes that some opt to use two topcoats rather than a primer and a topcoat, and in some instances, that can do the job. “However, there may be specific circumstances that need to be addressed, such as the need for uniform holdout or to solve a problem such as blocking stains,” he said.



● Insl-x has launched Stix® Waterborne Bonding Primer.

However, one thing that Spillane emphasized is that primers are not a replacement for good prep work. “Some believe that the primer eliminates the need for prep work, and that’s not true. If you want to eliminate nicotine stains from a ceiling or grease stains from a wall, you still need to clean the surface before proceeding.”

Getting consumers to understand paint primers is one of the first orders of business for a paint store staff. “Primers are probably the most misunderstood coating in our business,” said Ron Boyajian, product marketing manager for California Paints. “There are DIY people who have never painted before who don’t know even know what a primer is. There are some who think it should be a lot less expensive than the finish coat. Here’s where independent dealers can enhance their business by guiding the customer to the right primer.”



● The SealGrip® line from Pittsburgh Paints.



● XIM's Trim Magic™ transformed the window sill at right.

Boyajian added that selling the right primer is crucial to ensuring future success with painting projects for a given surface. "It's important to get it right the first time, because once you've primed and put on the finish coat, you're at the point of no return. You can't go back to the original surface without a great degree of difficulty. The primer is like the foundation of the house. You want to make sure it's strong and sound."

Dick Hardy, president of XIM Products, noted that a knowledgeable paint staff is vital in selling primers when appropriate. "Most all paint store personnel know that primers are not needed all the time, but when they are, the store personnel should always recommend the added sale of primers, especially specialty primers," he said.

It's important to know when primers are needed and not needed. "Primers work best on new or very porous surfaces because they fill and seal the substrate better than paint," said Dick Seitz, director of communications and training/consumer brands for Valspar. "Paints tend to have more pigmentation and are not intended to penetrate the surface as well as a primer. By creating a good base, the primer will help the topcoat be uniform on the surface and bond to the surface better. In some cases primers are designed for specialty situations like stain-blocking or rust resistance."

Seitz added that primers are not always required before painting. "If a surface is previously coated or finished and is in relatively sound shape, it may only require cleaning before being repainted."

Mike Carey, director of marketing

for Insl-x Products Corp., observed that there is growth in the paint primer market, which he takes as a positive sign that consumers are beginning to understand primers' importance. "Actually, the specialty primer seg-



ment has been outpacing the paint market in growth for a number of years," he said. "An increase in awareness that primers are more than finish coats with a different label is the driving force."

Jason Long, KILZ brand manager for Masterchem, reported that misconceptions about primers still exist in the professional contractor community. "While there may be individual situations in which priming isn't a possibility, the KILZ brand team recommends properly preparing and priming your surface to ensure the highest-quality results. Priming can save you time and money down the road because it will help deliver the right results with the first top coat as well as provide a longer-lasting finish."

Trends in Primers

There are various trends having an impact on the paint primer market. Dougherty explained there is a trend to broaden the scope of the primer market with various types of specialty primers. "A good universal primer-sealer is a safe bet. It's suitable for a variety of applications, but there are specific needs that can be met by specialty primers—for instance, the need to block stains or to stabilize wood."

Pittsburgh Paints offers a complete selection of specialty primers

in its SealGrip line. If the surface is marred by stains, the most appropriate product to use from the line is SealGrip® 17931, a synthetic, stain-killing primer with low odor. For wood-stabilizing needs, Pittsburgh Paints offers SealGrip® Permaizer Plus®, which repairs damage by binding wood together and filling in gaps. It's appropriate for use on outdoor surfaces such as deck railings, fences and sheds.

"This has been a real 'sleeper' product for us that's been gaining a lot of prominence," Dougherty said. "People are discovering that they can use it instead of replacing the wood. I've used it on a lower panel of a backyard shed that was soaking up water from the grass and sustaining damage to the wood."

To address the primer needs of the masonry market, Pittsburgh Paints offers Perma-Crete.

California Paints plans to relaunch its primer line by the middle of this year. The line will consist of repositioning its existing products as well as the introduction of new products. "The relaunch of this line is addressing the two directions that the market is going—one is to have universal primers and the other is to have substrate-specific primers," Boyajian explained.

The demand for universal primers is what prompted California Products to offer such an option in its soon to be relaunched primer program. However, Boyajian conceded, "By making a product that covers a lot of bases, you have to make compromises to some extent. That is why we are also offering more specific primers that are formulated to address individual circumstances, such as primers for exteriors, primers for interiors, primers for metals, primers for hard-to-adhere to substrates. But there is a market demand for a universal primer, so we are offering that as an option."

All together, there will be 11 SKUs in the



● The Cabot Problem-Solver Acrylic Primer.



● A Victorian house prepped with Mad Dog Primer in 1998 looks as good as new 10 years later. Before photo at right.



newly repositioned line. They will be marketed under California Paints' Prime Choice, Pro's Choice and Grip Coat brands. Among the new products is a bonding primer, which is being formulated to enhance adhesion while offering application-friendly properties. Another new product is a yellow-base primer.

"We introduced a red-based primer previously, and it has been unbelievably successful," Boyajian said. "The rationale behind these two products is to reduce the number of coats required on reds and yellows. We've been so successful with the red-based primer that we are looking to duplicate that success with the new yellow-based product."

Benjamin Moore's primer line, Fresh Start, includes a variety of specialty primers. In addition, the company offers primers in its Aura line of high-quality interior paints. "We offer primers in red and yellow for use with clean, deep colors that on their own don't hide as well," Spillane reported. "We will carry this over to our exterior Aura line, which will be introduced to the market in mid-April."

Primers, like their topcoat counterparts, are being impacted by the more stringent VOC regulations. "There are less alkyds being used," Spillane observed. "At the same time, there has been a step-up in primer quality in the water-based formulations that are filling the void being left by the alkyds."

Dougherty also sees the use of low-VOC and low-odor primers as a major trend. "We have low-odor primers in

the SealGrip line," he said. "If you are painting with a low-odor paint, then you should prime with a low-odor primer."

Tim O'Reilly, Business Manager for Primers and Clear Finishes at Zinsser

Co. Inc., likewise sees a trend toward water-based primer technology in response to VOC regulatory issues. Zinsser has been addressing the issue for many years with product introductions. Most recently, the company launched 100 VOC/gL Cover-Stain Advanced Formula Water-Base (known as Cover-Stain WB), to comply with the regulatory requirements of the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

"This product took years to develop after intensive field research with professional painters," O'Reilly said. "Painters were using our 350 VOC g/L High Hide Cover-Stain formula specifically because they liked the adhesion, the fact it dried fast, dried hard and sanded easily, and it blocked stains. Cover-Stain WB addresses the production needs of the professional painter. For severe stains, our shellac-base BIN is still available in SCAQMD."

A new Zinsser product that will be sold outside the SCAQMD is Bulls Eye Oil Base. O'Reilly characterized this as a "workhorse" primer that addresses most common professional priming needs.

"This product is an easy flow, high-build 350 VOC g/L national formula that mimics the ideal working properties of our popular Bulls Eye Water-Base with the added benefits of oil-base stain blocking."

Much of Insl-x's development work has centered on the low-VOC direction in which the market is moving. "We have been embarking on a number of developments that are mostly focused on low-VOC and low-odor systems that perform the way our customers demand," Carey reported. "One system that is really gaining strength is our Insl-x NO4000 Odorless Alkyd Primer Sealer and Stain Killer."

According to Carey, this product features special resin technology that allows for solvents that are virtually stripped of objectionable odors. However, they excel at sealing and blocking stains on difficult surfaces.

Long reported that Masterchem has been on the forefront of the green movement, offering low-VOC versions of the KILZ® family of products, such as KILZ Original Low VOC. "We're evaluating every product and determining how we can make KILZ brand products more environmentally friendly while still offering the high-quality, top-performing products that professionals have come to expect from the brand," he said.

Seitz did point out that oil primers, both interior and exterior, have certain advantages over water-based primers with regard to adhesion, rust-resistance

and blocking water-extractable stains. "Even so, the enactment of more restrictive VOC laws and customer preference will continue to drive advances in water-base primer formulation," he added.

Long, meanwhile, observed that oil-based and water-based primers have specific benefits that a contractor can



● California Paints offers the Trouble-Shooter primer line.

