

From New to Tried & True

Getting pros to try new products can be a challenge, but knowing your customers and their needs will go a long way toward gaining acceptance.

Building material manufacturers and vendors unveiled a slew of new products at February's International Builders' Show (IBS) in Las Vegas. But despite all the fanfare surrounding the latest and greatest products, getting a new type of joint compound, decking material, or exterior molding onto an LBM dealer's shelves can be a difficult proposition.

That's not because dealers themselves are reluctant to try out new products—particularly if they're priced right and address a need or shortcoming in an existing product line—but more so because builders, especially remodelers, prefer sticking with products they know. New products that fail to perform as expected, or as well as a previous product the contractor was using, can mean callbacks and unhappy customers. Unhappy customers adversely affect a contractor's reputation.

"[Builders] are very reluctant," says Jimmy Miller, purchasing agent at Ring's End Lumber, in Darien, Conn. "They know what's tried and proven, and to get them to switch to something else, you have to show them the advantages of it."

"They tend to trust us because we've been around for a while. And to keep that trust, I put it on the manufacturer to show me this is something that is good, that's going to be around, and that has value for my customer base," Miller says.

Whether at IBS, the Do it Best Fall Market, the Independent Dealers Education Association Services (IDEAS) LBM Show, LMC's annual meeting, or any of a dozen regional association meetings around the country, dealers are inundated with new-product pitches. But getting them to change habits and switch to a different product or way of doing things requires a commitment from the dealer, the manufacturer, and the vendor to provide not just an explanation of the new product's features and benefits, but also incentives—sometimes financial, sometimes warranty-related—to lure reluctant pros out of their comfort zone.

Ezra Maust, commodity buyer for Peoples Supply Co., in Hyattsville, Md., saw an impressive demonstration for Ames' Blue Max waterproofing paint at the Do it Best Fall Market in Indianapolis last fall. "They had

Tough Sell: Dave McConachy, right, and Greg Ackerson of Blue Ridge Lumber say that pro customers can be a tough sell for new product offerings.

PHOTO: JORDAN HOLLENDER

By Steve Campbell



New Product Blues: Ezra Maust, commodity buyer for Peoples Supply Co., saw a convincing product demo for Blue Max waterproofing and brought the product to his yard.

dry stacked some blocks and you could shake that wall and rock it and the blocks would not separate,” he says.

This month, Blue Max will show up on Peoples Supply Co. shelves next to USG’s Drylok waterproofing, which Maust says is an excellent product. But the Blue Max distributor is giving him a break on the price, which he’ll pass onto his builder customers to induce them to try it. “I’m always looking for new and innovative products,” Maust says. “But I need to try to sell it to our salespeople in order for it to make a go.”

Selling the Sales Staff

As Maust points out, one of the bigger challenges for dealers in introducing a new product is convincing their own sales staff that it’s worth pushing that product out to

customers. After all, the sales team is on the front lines and will be the first to hear when a product fails.

Maust says that vendors must convince their salespeople that a new product “really will work—or that there’s a good chance it will work—and that it’s profitable. Can we bring it in at a price point we can sell?”

“A lot of it comes down to having a good manufacturer rep,” says Wayne Graves, president of Crane Johnson Lumber, in Fargo, N.D. “Our salespeople will say that a good rep doesn’t just sell the product; he takes care of the issues [when problems arise].”

Maust does due diligence on the company offering the new product. If he hasn’t worked with that particular vendor or manufacturer before, he’ll seek out other dealers who have and get their perspective.

“I try to find people who know about the company,” he says, “because [vendor reps] can talk big. I’ll talk to other dealers to see if it’s working out, or what the problems are with the product or the vendor.”

Vendors and manufacturers that consistently deliver quality product and service ultimately earn Miller’s loyalty. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to bring every new product introduced by a trusted source into his store, particularly if the product doesn’t fit with his territory or customer base. “[Our customers] like what they know,” Miller says. “It’s proven, it works, and I know I’m not going to have a problem out of it.”

According to Greg Ackerson, owner of Blue Ridge Lumber, in Blairstown, N.J., “A lot of times we’re selling a product that’s going to make another product

obsolete, or we’re bringing in a midlevel alternative,” he says. But, he points out, the most attractive product is one that opens a whole new sales category.

Work gloves are a case in point. Not too many years ago, most lumberyards carried just a couple basic kinds of work gloves: jersey or leather. Many customers wouldn’t even consider wearing gloves at all, much less buying an expensive pair. But a company called Ironclad introduced a line of gloves that really caught on with builders and other tradesmen. “Today, you have [job-specific] gloves,” Ackerson says, “... gloves for framers, gloves for the ranch.”

“That’s an example of expanding on a category where you used to hardly sell any product at all,” he says. “With gloves, it’s still the same product as 20 years ago; it’s just been enhanced. We had a four-foot section of gloves and we brought in Ironclad and at least doubled our glove sales.”

Convincing the Contractor

The most difficult new product sell remains the pro contractor or remodeler. Graves says that his pro customers are very price-conscious. The builder isn’t necessarily interested in the higher-quality product because when the project is complete, those pricier products won’t increase the appraised value. “They’re not going to pay a lot for a housewrap or a roofing felt,” he

says, “because the house is going to appraise the same”—regardless of the cost of those items.

The same holds true for higher-ticket items such as windows. Crane Johnson, an Anderson window dealer, faces competition for its pro customers from companies offering less expensive alternatives. It’s a tough sell to contractors who say that their customers—the new homeowner—can’t tell the difference. “To the consumer, the house has windows, but to the builder it still appraises the same,” Graves says.

“They like what they know. It’s tried. It’s proven. It works.”
—Jimmy Miller, purchasing agent, Ring’s End Lumber

“You have to show that the [homeowner] customer needs this particular product,” Miller says. That need might be a better, longer-lasting product, or—for the contractor—one that installs more easily, or saves time. Also, the new product might be designed to meet changing building code requirements.

For example, home energy audit regulations in Connecticut now require that contractors in the state perform a blower door test to check for air leaks. Miller cites such regs as being the impetus for manufacturers rolling out a range of new products designed to reduce home energy use. And

in such a rapidly changing product category as insulation—where there’s little time to fully investigate all the new product offerings—he says that he prefers to stick with the manufacturers he knows and to promote their insulation products before delving into new or previously unknown manufacturers’ offerings.

Some products in the insulation category come at a higher price, which is another hard sell. But, Miller feels that if the price is justified—as it is with a product such as rock wool insulation from Roxul, which is more

expensive than traditional fiberglass insulation but adds a lot of features beyond R-value, such as fire resistance and sound-dampening properties—it’s much easier to convince pro customers.

“[We found that pro customers] don’t mind paying a little up-charge over standard fiberglass [insulation], so we began stocking [Roxul] about a year ago,” Miller says.

Ackerson in New Jersey points to exterior trim as a category where a product such as Boral’s TruExterior Trim, or Azek’s PVC molding have pushed traditional finger-joined pine to the



PHOTOS: COURTESY ROXUL AND HUBER



Making the Grade: Roxul insulation and AdvanTech subflooring are two relatively new products that some dealers say have won acceptance among pro customers because they perform better than their traditional rivals.

New vs. Tried & True



new products.

Maust says that when Peoples Supply Co. began offering Lafarge's lightweight joint compound, "Lafarge gave me a free skid [of product] to give out to remodeler customers. One guy came back and didn't like it, but most of the others preferred it. I'm selling just about as much [Lafarge] now as USG, and this is a very USG-oriented market."

There's also ease of installation, warranties, or—in the case of tools—the fact that the product is one that is durable and is going to last. "We have some guys who cut a lot of Hardy siding," McConachy says. "They'll buy good blades, but they're not going to buy the best saws for that because eventually they'll dust up and burn out."

When the construction season slows in winter, Blue Ridge will host product knowledge workshops for pro customers. It will also take a handful of builders to trade shows. "We just went to a regional show and took about 15 builders," McConachy says.

"It was one of the best shows I've been to in a long time," he adds. "It was focused on all of our local distributors, selling the products that these guys use, and it introduced them to a new product." Blue Ridge owner Ackerson says that face-to-face time between a vendor and the pro customer goes a long way toward opening doors.

sidelines because they don't rot and are therefore longer lasting. "Now you can sell primed pine, Boral, or PVC," Ackerson says. "It's clean and it's easy to stock. It's taken a category and just really increased sales, not only because of more volume but because it's more expensive."

Dave McConachy, a buyer for Blue Ridge Lumber, says that money can be a significant motivator: "You've got to break [builders'] habits and give them a reason to try a new product—and money will do that."

Graves, of Crane Johnson in Fargo, N.D., notes that AdvanTech subflooring by Huber really took off with his otherwise change-averse builders because of its waterproof properties. Multifamily builders jumped on the AdvanTech bandwagon first.

"Nobody was buying AdvanTech," Graves says, "and then we went through a couple rainy springs." Multifamily builders would quickly get a bunch of units built, but had to wait out the rain to finish. The wet and then warm weather wreaked havoc with regular OSB. "They started finding out that they didn't have

those kinds of issues with AdvanTech."

That experience made believers out of his customers, who switched to the newcomer product even though the price was higher.

And price is another area where manufacturer and vendor reps can sweeten the pot for dealers. By offering discounts or other price breaks that dealers can in turn pass onto builders for trying out a new product, vendors can convert reluctant pros into potential buyers of

Selling the New

Suggestions for introducing new products to pro customers:

Know your customer: Custom home builders and remodelers are less likely to try new products than are production builders.

Point out advantages: It's all about faster, better, cheaper. Highlight how a new product will save time, improve on an existing process, or cost less.

Watch warranties: Check out the manufacturer warranty to provide assurance that the vendor or maker will solve any problems created by an untested new product.

Teach: Organize manufacturer- or vendor-sponsored workshops to show how the product works and highlight its benefits.

Offer discounts: Discounts and rebates can help overcome reluctance to try a new product. See if you can get the manufacturer to provide a pallet of product you can distribute free of charge to your customers to encourage them to try it.