

# APC

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# The 'F' in Festool



By Scott Burt

Inspired by the need to maximize our efficiency during the prep stages for painting, both exterior and interior, my paint contracting company launched a round of field-process upgrades in mid-2011. We started with the question of how prep work was being done, and we quickly identified weaknesses in the categories of abrasives, sanding tools and site/surface cleanliness. Deficiencies in equipment options for surface prep were causing an excessive amount of hand sanding to happen during prep – a great example of how equipment drives process, for better or worse.

Pretty much no matter what type of painting you do, how you get to the desired result produces your efficiency, and therefore profits. “How” is actually mission-critical. We all want to get projects completed faster – you know, budgets and schedules – but without having to figure out how to paint at superhero speed. Efficient projects are best for the contractor and for the customer. Nothing good usually comes from just prepping and painting faster, though. The ideal balance of speed and quality is gained only through efficiency and accuracy, with no backward motion. The quicker and cleaner you can get through the steps that lead to cracking open the paint, the better.

So, the question of how you work becomes essential to improving your business. A big part of the answer lies right square in how you set up and manage your worksite and right at the individual task workspace level. Workstations for painters preparing surfaces to paint must be simple, functional and organized. They usually will include abrasives, sanding tools, a vacuum



and good light as minimum requirements. We want our paint workstations in the field to be like the dojo of a master martial artist, only mobile.

Starting with sandpaper, we discovered a new line of abrasives from Festool called Granat. Light blue in color, it is steared paper that is designed specifically for use by painters (unlike the majority of abrasives purchased by paint contractors, which are intended for use by anyone on anything and not ideal for painted surfaces). The Festool abrasives are designed to be used on Festool sanders, which are built specifically for state-of-the-art dust extraction through Festool vacs. Because Granat abrasives are made to be used on

painted surfaces, the mileage we observed with them is significantly higher than most other options we have used. By that, I mean as much as three times more life in the abrasives, which, of course, translates to less time and money in the long run going into changing out and disposing of worn-out sandpaper.

The sanders and abrasives, when not in use, are housed in a remarkably organized, tough and professional series of cases called systainers, which stack and lock together and can be attached to the top of the vacs. That is a large logistical leap from a dusty old orbital duct-taped to a Shop-Vac hose, hoping for the best on hardware store sanding discs that gum up,

swirl out and blow dust. The ability to house a comprehensive system of sanders and abrasives on the footprint of a vacuum contributes to efficiency by reducing occupied space and keeping related items together.

The fundamental question when pondering a large-scale equipment change is: Would you invest more in your business for better built tools and a higher level of manufacturer support? If the tools work better together than what I have currently and there is reason to believe that they can pay for themselves, last longer without downtime and improve the overall experience for everyone involved with my projects, then yes, it needs a look.

In the past, our power-sanding options have been limited to buzz-bomb palm sanders or orbitals with unreliable dust extraction capabilities. This limitation relegated us to an excess of hand sanding, which is a slow, dirty production drain. Where there is a loss in production, and therefore profit, it only makes sense to invest.

The Festool line offers a variety of 12 sanders for paint contractors, and four of the sanders are capable of performing in multiple modes, including orbital, a more aggressive gear-driven mode, as well as attachments for special detail situations.

This line of sanders can perform any task in the finish spectrum, from piano grade polishing at 6,000-grit down to stripping floors at 24-grit. These sanders run the Granat abrasives, with variable sander and suction speeds and excellent dust extraction.

The extractors are far superior to traditional Shop-Vacs. These vacs are not just HEPA-filtered, they are full-unit HEPA-certified, meaning that the seal between the filter and the unit itself has been tested and certified to meet HEPA requirements for dust containment. While the EPA RRP requirements continue to be cloudy at best, this type of unit is a good investment in covering all relevant bases for paint contractor dust containment.

Festool abrasives, sanders and extractors are designed for daily use together as a system. Having not found that synergy previously, it has been interesting to experience the difference an integrated system makes in the way we prepare and transport equipment to jobs and the way our painters now operate on a daily basis. It does not take long to observe the improvement that efficiency makes in the final job cost analysis of projects. Resources that save time make money. The extent of that ROI is completely up to you, and the pattern seems to be that the more you do with this equipment, the more it can do for you.

There is a learning curve to making a technology change like this. Basically, you have to lose all of the bad habits that you have learned with other sanding systems up until now. For instance, because these sanders are well-balanced, the abrasives perform evenly, and the jetstream extraction minimizes disc heat up and abrasive clumping, you no longer have to bear down on the sander or favor one edge over the other. Inferior tools need to be run that way, but better tools do not. With these you have to “feel” the motion of the sander to back off from your previous methods so that the sander can float smoothly and do the job for you. It takes a minute to navigate this learning curve, but once you get there, sanding becomes a less laborious task. You can now get back to the basics of letting the tool do the work.

The vac-hose connection at the sander is a threaded friction fit, so you no longer have to worry about the connection (duct tape, etc.). Better-engineered connections and proper flow of dust through the sander to the vac yield complete dust extraction, which allows you to focus on the work surface instead of having one eye on what the sander/vac combo is doing or not doing. Surfaces, in turn, are much more finish-ready using this system because you are not grinding super-fine dust particles into the grain of the wood. Penetrating finishes will appear more rich as a result, and adhesion of top coats is better-facilitated. The gain in quality of finished product is nice, but it's secondary to the efficiency and working condition improvements.

The “F” in Festool is about faster completion of prep tasks so that we can use our hands for spreading paint, which is what we do best. There is not enough space in this column to cover in detail all of the particulars of the results my company has discovered during this transition, so we have posted in-depth footage in the digital edition of APC at [paintmag.com](http://paintmag.com) and at [topcoatreview.com](http://topcoatreview.com) as well as on YouTube. Please feel free to contact me with questions if you feel that the prep stage is hurting your profitability.

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*Scott Burt is the president of Topcoat Finishes, Inc., in Jericho, Vt. He enjoys communicating with contractors and manufacturers at [www.topcoatreview.com](http://www.topcoatreview.com).*

