

Wallcovering Prep Work  
by Jim Turner

Surface preparation is a much debated subject among wallcovering installers. Everyone agrees that something needs to be done prior to committing wallcovering to the wall. However, very few will agree on the exact steps involved. Similarly, we all agree we start with a straight line. Some use a plumb line, others a level, door frame or inside corner ... you get the picture. It is the same with wall preparation. Based on job site conditions, one chooses the "best" preparation.

In wall preparation, one is either likely to do too little or too much. It is a very fine line. For obvious reasons, it is better to error on the side of caution rather than courting an installation failure. As a starting point, we can consider the generic recommendations from the manufacturers. The wall surface should be sound, clean and dry. Pretty basic, right? As any seasoned professional knows, these are not the usual job site conditions. On new construction, the walls may be 1) coated with a low grade flat latex paint (builder's flat) or any non-wallcovering primer (boxed up bone-yard alkyds, pva, stain blockers, etc.) and 2) extremely dusty due to the work of other trades (drywall and saw dusts). On remodel projects, the walls may be unfinished plaster, smooth or textured, old latex or alkyd paint at various sheen levels and multiple coats... At best, they may be lightly soiled. At worst, they may have years of accumulated grime.

To further complicate the matter, add the variety of prep coatings on the market, additional labor costs involved in prep work approaches and a competitive bid process. It is hard to know the best solution to this sticky situation. Recognizing that there will always be someone who short cuts preparation, we have to establish the level playing field with our clients. We will assume the client wants their installation guaranteed for at least one year. And, the walls will be easily strippable in the future with little or no damage.

Old Wallcovering. As professionals, we are often asked if we can install over old wallcoverings. It begs the question: why inherit the sins of a past installation? For optimal results, old wallcoverings should be removed. Certainly, in some residential settings, it may not be possible to remove wallcovering installed over bare sheet rock. On commercial projects, installing over existing wallcoverings alters any fire, smoke and flame rating. This practice is not encouraged and may be in violation of local fire codes.

New Drywall. Apply a uniform coat of an acrylic wallcovering primer at manufacturer's specified spread rate. A pigmented wallcovering primer will afford the maximum surface protection during removal. They also provide a uniform surface color and can be tinted if necessary. Many choices are available with sheen levels varying from nearly flat to semi-gloss. Their higher acrylic resin content makes them suitable for installations using premixed wallcovering adhesives.

**Old Plaster.** Depending on the housing and commercial building stock in your area, bare plaster may be common. Bare plaster, in sound condition, is an excellent base for wallcoverings. In most instances, old paste should be removed to prevent contamination of biocide system in the new adhesive or paste interactions.

**Builder's Flat Paint.** The bane of the wallcovering industry, inexpensive flat latex paint, is prevalent in new home construction although it may be found on commercial projects as well. Composed of high solids (clay, chalk, etc) and very little binder (p.v.a or acrylic resin), they are very weak surfaces. Apply a Drywall Repair Coating (DRC) available from Scotch Paint (Draw Tight), Zinsser (Guardz), Roman (Liquid Drywall), or Sherwin Williams (Drywall Conditioner). These repair products are cousins of masonry sealers. They penetrate and bind the caulky surface. Note: These sealers have less tooth than most wallcovering primers. Use with caution under materials that shrink excessively, i.e. some pre-pasted papers.

**Glossy Paint & Lacquers.** Clear acrylic prep products are very popular among installers. Their claim to fame is low cost and ease of use. Over glossy areas, they provide an adequate surface for wallcovering. Some brands may present problems during removal as the coating can release from the wall when washed leaving an uneven surface. For the best protection, a high quality pigmented acrylic wallcovering primer is recommended.

**Stains.** Any "bleeding" stain, such as ball point pen, magic marker, nicotine, must be sealed with a stain blocking primer preventing their migration through the new wallcovering. Alcohol based stain killers have long been the preferred solution. Available in aerosol cans, they quickly solve small problem areas. Nicotine requires washing the contaminated area with an ammoniated cleaner prior to priming the entire surface with a stain blocking primer. Many installers report good results with alkyd and acrylic based products. Depending on your product selection, no additional primer may be needed.

**Textured & Sand Finished Walls.** Sand finished plaster is often found in older homes and wall textures are finding their way into newer homes at an alarming rate. The sand finish may be scrapped or power sanded. Remember to observe lead safe practices and follow EPA homeowner notification guidelines. Texture, a cost cutting measure in newer homes, does present challenges to an installer. Textured walls can be skim-coated with drywall joint compound or lined with a bridging material. In many instances, an acceptable result can be achieved with the correct wallcovering selection. If the surface is caulky, apply a DRC. Otherwise, use a pigmented wallcovering primer.

**Paneling & Plywood.** The application of wallcovering to paneling and plywood can present problems. Paneling may have surface contaminants – waxes, oils, silicones, etc. – that present adhesion problems. Both paneling and plywood may exhibit warping after installation. If the back side of the surface is unfinished, moisture will cause the wood surface to expand and contract. This movement often results in the wallcovering releasing from the surface. Only the most adventuresome, tread on this thin ice.

Most wallcovering prep work issues are matters of common sense. Wallcovering adhesives require a clean, toothy surface. Satisfy this requirement and prep work is a simple matter. Select the right product and do not expect one “can” to be the solution for all situations.

As a last word of advice, from Hanging Modern Wallcoverings (1971) by Guy Cooper, founding member of the NGPP, and Selwyn Mills, an early Guild member:

“The requirement of all good surface decoration is, of course, *correct* preparation. The word *correct* in this instance is specifically substituted for the more commonly used word, *good*. Good preparation for hanging one wallpaper may be very bad preparation for another.”

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