

# Wallcovering Repairs

by James Turner

for PWC Magazine & American Painting Contractor Magazine

An unwritten rule for most craftsmen is “It isn’t screwed up if you can fix it.” Wallcovering installation varies in difficulty due to many factors: architectural detail, material composition, ambient temperature, and installer dexterity to name a few. I have often considered the process much like conducting a symphony. All the separate elements are in the correct proportion and timing resulting in a pleasing result. However, due to the above mentioned factors, there can be sour notes. Knowledge, experience and proficiency keep the “oops” to a minimum. But accidents do happen during the installation and after we have left the job site. Knowing how to address these problems, separate average installers from those who excel at their craft. Creative solutions minimize their financial impact.

The Law of Supply and Demand. From Wallcovering 101, we know all wallcoverings are man made and will contain flaws. Its a fact - plan for it. The bare minimum is one additional strip. But, be practical. One strip would hardly do for a 500 linear yard project. Material allowances should be in proportion to the work. In residential situations, an additional double roll of material is cheap insurance - especially with higher priced showroom materials. On commercial materials, the allowance may vary from 10% to 5% or less depending on the size of the project. Project costs are a concern to contractors and their clients. However, compromising on material requirements will cost you time, money and produce substandard results.

Repairs during installation are most easily completed using a new sheet of material. However, this approach is not always practical or possible. Depending on the type of repair, there are many tools at the craftsman’s disposal. For minor printing blemishes, a #2 pencil, black Pilot pen and Pentel markers provide a quick fix. The sharp tip of a razor blade is useful for removing embedded manufacturing debris. It is important to remember time spent on material flaws should be kept to a bare minimum. Serious flaws require ordering new materials.

The Dutchman. Larger surface repairs may be addressed using a “Dutchman”. I have often wondered why the Dutch have been honored in this manner. A fellow paperhanger suggested the story of the boy and the hole in the dike. No doubt, it is their ingenuity. The Dutchman is an oversized piece of wallcovering large enough to cover the problem area. The patch is double cut into the damaged area providing a nearly invisible repair. On patterned wallcoverings, the double cut lines follow the design. On residential materials with little or no design, this fix works best below eye level. Even better behind furnishings. On random patterned commercial material, a diamond rather than a square patch is far less visible to the eye. This also avoids the dreaded horizontal seams.

The Dutchman is a common solution for installers who fail to order sufficient full lengths of wallcovering. Found obscured by a door, four or more roll ends are substituted for the missing full strip. It is also used when sheets are cut short. Needless to say, only the most

extreme circumstances dictate this remedy. Frequent use should be a red flag to pay closer attention.

**Shading.** Most often found on commercial vinyl wallcoverings, shading can be a problem at doorways. Severe shading problems can occur on projects where headers are installed after the main walls from non-consecutive material. The use of a single edge razor blade to gently abrade the vinyl surface can often minimize any color variance. Of course, an aggressive hand will do more harm than it would attempt to cure. In all repairs, a light touch is to be encouraged. Over working the area will draw attention to it.

**Seams.** No other topic of wallcovering repair is more hotly debated than seams. Apart from wallcoverings manufactured for continuous installation, seams cannot be avoided. However, a common complaint by installers is that seams show. By sharing their frustration with clients, a very emotionally charged situation results. Once the client is displeased, it is very difficult to remedy the situation.

In an attempt to correct a perceived defect in manufacturing, installers resort to dusting roll ends with chalk or tempera, coloring with markers or spraying with acrylic paint. Many claim this provides a solution. From a business stand point, this is an unsound and possibly costly practice. By adulterating the material, the installer becomes liable for any damage or unsatisfactory result. Some manufacturers are less than cooperative when problems arise. However, treating wallcoverings with caulk, ink or paint will leave you out in the cold. If you or your client are overly concerned about seams, perhaps paint would be a better decorating solution than wallcovering. In my experience, it is the paperhanger who first objects about a seam problem. A word to the wise.

**Post Installation.** Repairs during installation are far easier than those performed after the adhesive has dried. This can be especially true when less than adequate wall preparation has occurred. Echoing wallcovering and adhesive manufacturers, there is no substitute for an acrylic wallcovering primer applied at the proper spread rate over a sound surface. False economy becomes most obvious when attempting repairs. When wallcoverings have dried, easy removal is critical. Any damage to the wall surface during removal delays the repair and possibly compromises its appearance.

At this point, it is important to talk about strippable adhesives. This adhesive is often specified for large commercial projects. According to adhesive sales figures, it is preferred by installers and considered a universal adhesive. Its ability to dry "clear" and flake off vinyl surfaces are considered major advantages over other adhesives. However, the conditions for strippability must be remembered: 1) the wallcovering must be a fabric backed vinyl and 2) the drywall is unprimed. Using a strippable adhesive on any other type of wallcovering will not promote strippability. This is especially true when there is less than adequate wall preparation.

Replacement of entire strips of wallcovering over properly primed walls is usually straight forward. If the materials were originally installed without distorting them by aggressive smoothing, pattern matches and seam positioning is easily accomplished. Materials should be pasted using the original adhesive when possible to avoid shading.

Wallcoverings that have been previously pasted may also show a difference in shading or texture due to the additional adhesive.

Strings, grasses and fabrics will test the skills any installer. During the removal process, water can wick into the material causing discoloration and staining. The body of the strip can be moistened with a sponge; however, seam areas are best addressed with a nearly dry brush. Determine the direction of the nap of the material, if possible. Without knowing whether the top is from the inside or outside of the roll, you have a 50-50 chance for a reversed strip. Materials should be pasted with original adhesive. The sheet may be table trimmed to allow easier installation if necessary.

Commercial fabrics installed by double cutting may be the ultimate test. After removing the damaged sheet and adhesive, check one seam edge for plumb. If it is not plumb, retrim using a straight edge and remove fabric and adhesive as needed. Dry trim one side of a new sheet. Paste the wall lightly and cut in adhesive with a brush at the seam. Butt and smooth out the new sheet. Double cut the selvage edge, peel back the new sheet to allow removal of old material and adhesive. Any old adhesive that remains may cause a visible ridge when dried. Repaste the area as needed and lay down the seam. Repairs to delicate materials demand the most from installers and timing is often critical.

Of course, in any repair, the age of the project must be considered. Under normal conditions wallcoverings may fade, accumulate surface contaminants or receive uneven wear. A patch from an unused bolt may be less than acceptable. In this situation, it is best to discuss the results with the client prior to the repair. Some clients may opt for replacement corner to corner if materials are available. Others may not find a conspicuous patch objectionable when compared to replacing the entire room. Your most discerning customers will decide its time to redecorate.

Jim Turner, with 25 years of commercial and residential experience, is owner of Regency Wallcraft in Columbus, OH. He is an IBPAT-certified paperhanger, and NGPP member and serves as a NGPP regional director.