



Wallcoverings 101 for painters: Your guiding principle: Wallpaper ain't paint

BY JAMES TURNER

For painting contractors, wallcoverings can offer additional profits to the bottom line as well as bolster a winter schedule. Depending on your location, with the onset of fall exterior work begins to be a riskier option with increased moisture and lower temperatures. The installation of wallcoverings both commercially and residentially can supplement interior painting by providing additional labor hours. However, for many painting contractors wallcoverings tend to be a frustrating -- if not a losing -- proposition. They attempt a few projects, only to give up because wallcovering seems to have too many complications and hassles.

In business as in life, we generally travel down the path of least resistance and stick with routines that have worked in the past. When venturing into wallcovering, a painting contractor must remember one guiding principle above all others: *Wallcovering is not a bucket of paint.*

I know this is stating the obvious. However, when we look closer we can see this is where many painting contractors find much of their frustration with wallcoverings. Successful painting contractors develop procedures for estimating material quantities, ordering and delivery of materials, labor costs, production rates, and job scheduling. However, these paint procedures, when applied to wallcovering, don't translate well.

Estimating materials: Generally, painting contractors use a square foot method to derive their material requirements ([see chart below](#)). Based on a number of factors, they can expect anywhere from 250 to 300 square feet to a gallon of paint at a three-mil wet and 1.5-mil dry thickness if applied according to standard practices. On most days, the ordered amount gets the job done with touch-up paint left over. No one wants to run short on material. Idled labor, or the cost of sending someone out for another gallon, exceeds the actual cost of the additional paint. So why waste time and money estimating short on your material?

But nine times out of 10, this is the first mistake that most painting contractors make in dealing with wallcoverings. With paint, the basic unit of measurement is the gallon. A gallon is a gallon no matter if it's latex, oil, lacquer, epoxy, etc. However, in wallcoverings there are many things that determine the usable square feet of product: packaging length, material width, pattern repeat, and layout wastage. (How cut up is the room?) If you choose to blindly estimate rollage or yardage based on an area's square footage, you're almost certainly guaranteed to run short on materials on a regular basis.

I have seen rush projects where the estimator subtracted for doors, windows, and believe it or not, the four-inch cove base -- allowing a quarter-inch for wastage below the base. In the pursuit of the lowest bid, ordering sufficient material is sacrificed to get the job. However, if there is insufficient material to complete the project, time (read: money) is lost. Besides, no one wants to hear excuses about material shortages, especially when they can be avoided by a little common sense.

First, know your specifications prior to ordering your products. In this business, it is really true that the more you know, the more you make! Use the accompanying table of square footages as a guideline.

Second, allow for wastage and a margin of error. Remember that wallcoverings are a manufactured product. They do have flaws on occasion. Plan for the unexpected and you'll be the winner! On all wallcovering projects, have at least one additional strip over the required amount. On small commercial projects, a 10 percent overage figure allows for one strip and the wastage that occurs during the installation. On larger projects, a 5 percent overage will be sufficient. On residential projects, it is often wise to have a single- or double-roll surplus for insurance against future unforeseen damage. No matter what the cost of the wallcovering, this is cheap insurance over the seven-to-10-year life of the material.

Whatever you do, do not cut your material allowance to the bone. It will cost you money in the end. If the general contractor or client expects you to cut your project this close, let someone else take the job -- and the loss.

Ordering and delivery. Ordering wallcovering is not as simple as ordering paint. On a small job, a painter can stop at the paint store and have his color mixed and be on his way in a matter of minutes. For a larger project, a one- or two-day notice may be required. Often, large orders are delivered onsite. Not so with wallcovering -- unless it's sitting on the showroom floor as an in-stock item. The majority of wallcoverings are specially ordered.

If you're bidding a wallcovering project and supplying the material, your first call should be for pricing and *availability*. Do not underestimate the importance of availability. Just because the wallcovering is in a book doesn't mean it's available. Wallcovering manufacturers in recent years have cut down on inventory to help control costs and increase profits. Your client's choice may be back ordered awaiting production, or even discontinued.

If the wallcovering is available and you have the contract, order the wallcovering *now* -- even if the project is a few weeks or months down the road. If you wait to order, the material may be unavailable at that time. Believe it: It happens. At best, contractors who wait until the last minute to order incur greater shipping costs and delay projects. It doesn't hurt having the goods on your shop floor. Furthermore, wallcovering orders should be prepaid by the client (the owner or general contractor) with a specified penalty for cancellation and return (at least 25 percent). Watch out for non-returnable cut bolts also. Returns can cut deeply into your bottom line if a project is canceled or scaled down. Cover yourself in writing.

Production and scheduling. A common pitfall of painting contractors is allowing insufficient time for the installation of wallcoverings. A single painter could easily cover 2,000 square feet of wall in an eight-hour day, including break and cleanup. However, depending on the type of material, a journeyman-level paperhanger may need two to three days for commercial materials (165 LY), or four to six days for narrow-width goods (66 to 84 single rolls). Each type of wallcovering has its own production rate. According to the skill level of the installer, these average rates are modified.

As a basic rule, wallcovering projects need more time than paint. Recently, a painting contractor called for a small project. He stated that his man could do it in 15 days (15-30 yard bolts), but the general contractor needed it completed in two days. His question: "Could I man it and do it in that time frame? The project should break in three to four days." (Note: The wallcovering hadn't even been ordered.) Increasing manpower is an easy solution for painting projects in a time crunch. However, in wallcovering more often than not this tactic ends up costing money. As the professional, don't let the owner or general contractor dictate scheduling. A realistic schedule can be negotiated in most cases. Generals and superintendents who ride roughshod over their subs exact a toll of unneeded stress and additional job costs. If they can't learn or won't negotiate, move on to greener pastures. Life is too short.

Trouble shooting. In painting there is always some touch-up. The painting contractor is usually not the last trade on the job, and his work suffers the abuse of others. Touch-up is most often easily done, and at worst might involve repainting an area from corner to corner. This cost is usually built into the project and materials are readily available.

This is frequently not the case in wallcoverings. The usual one-strip allowance will not cover damages on a project installed too early. The old rule was that wallcoverings are installed last. However, on many commercial projects, it is not convenient or feasible considering cabinets, fixtures, and lighting requirements. Often the best time for the installation is immediately following the wall and door frame finishing. However, common sense should still dictate the installation. Vinyls can withstand some abuse by other trades; but fabrics, strings, and grasses should wait until after carpet goes down. As the cost of the wallcoverings increases, so should your attention to correct scheduling.

There is always some degree of risk on a wallcovering project. Naturally, it's best to keep it to a minimum. Often in painting contracts, the area is very gray about wall damage and responsibility. With wallcoverings, do not make this mistake. If at all possible, avoid using a general contractor's "kitchen sink" contract. You would have to hire a lawyer to understand it, and it's usually heavily weighted toward the general contractor. Use *your* paperwork. Remember, they need you as the professional more than you need them. Clearly spell out who is responsible for all wall damage (not you), and how to address its repair or replacement (as an additional cost on a separate contract). The following is a sample exclusion:

Exclusions:

1. Your Company is not responsible for any and all damage caused by owner, general contractor, or its

subcontractors to installed wallcovering. Its repair is not a part of this scope of work. Repair and/or replacement will only be executed on a new and separate contract.

2. Your Company is not responsible for protection of wallcoverings after installation.

Wall damage may not happen often and its repair may be quite simple. However, why stick your neck out where it doesn't belong? A few years ago, I had a fair-sized wall carpet project using nine-foot continuous material. Two weeks after completing the project, a sprinkler fitting broke and sprayed black oily water on two walls of material. It was a simple removal and replacement, because the contract specified who was responsible.

As a final word of caution for successful wallcovering, *do not give the job away!* Several years ago I had the pleasure of addressing a local group of painting contractors on poor and better methods of wall prep. They were grateful to know that they were already doing things right. But for my own information, I should know that they "give away the wallcovering to get the paint!"

To say the least, I saw that my time could be spent somewhere else more profitably. Wallcovering does not have to be the sacrificial lamb for winning the paint contract. Most painting contractors would never dream of providing their materials and labor at or below cost. On many projects, the dollar value of wallcoverings can exceed the paint bid, and certainly entails a greater risk. If you don't plan on making money at it, why bid it in the first place? Wallcovering has its own rules and requirements for successful and profitable installations. Depending on your approach, it can be a blessing or a curse.

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SQUARE FOOTAGE CHART				
Commercial	Width	Length	SF/YD.	Usable SF
Vinyls (Random)	50" - 60"	30 or 60 yards	12.5 - 15	12
Fabric	50" - 56"	50 to 55 yards	12.5 - 14	12
	36"	50 to 55 yards	9	8.5
Residential			SF/SR	
Metric	20.5"	5.5 yd./single roll	28	24
	24"	4.66 yd./single roll	28	24
	27"	4.5 yd./single roll	28	24
American	24"	6 yd./single roll	36	30
	27"	5.33 yd./single roll	36	30
	36"	4 yd./single roll	36	30