



What does the painting contractor want? More importantly, what does he need? There are multiple answers to that question, but we can sum up the most important elements in just a few words: Time. Efficiency. Convenience. Productivity. Reliability. Quality. And, at the risk of being smaltzy, a little bit of love. Okay, not love exactly, but a feeling that someone cares, that someone has an interest in ensuring their success.

Who offers all of this to the painting contractor? The answer should be: You do. As the locally owned paint store, you are in a better position to provide a sense of customer care than the big box or company-owned store. Your employees are more knowledgeable, your service is superior and you can ensure their satisfaction immediately rather than waiting for mandates from a far-away corporate office.

“The dealer has to do everything possible to keep the contractor happy,” said Ron Boyajian, Vice President of Product Development/Technical Sales for California Paints. “You need to open early, at 6 or 6:30 in the morning, so the painter can get his paint and get to the jobsite. There are other things you can do, too, such as having 5-gallon shakers to mix his paint, providing a good product assortment and offering good pricing.”

Expedited customer service is one of the things that will appeal to the contractor the most, and this can be accomplished in several ways—from having a

separate contractor entrance and/or sales counter to making sure that automated tinting equipment will get them out the door in a hurry. “Contractors do a lot better if they don’t have to stand in the store, side by side, with Mrs. Jones and her six-month-old infant,” Boyajian said. “Also, I can’t emphasize enough the use of computerized dispensers. These machines pay for themselves by allowing you to tint paint a lot quicker with a lot less mistakes.”

Paint stores can provide additional support by keeping track of contractor purchases. “The good contractor stores save records,” Boyajian stated. “They’ll do drawdowns and keep them on file.”

John Lanzillotti, Benjamin Moore’s director of marketing, reported that there are some services—early morn-

ing hours, product delivery, efficient color tinting—that are prerequisites to achieving success with painting contractors. “Those sorts of things are the cost of entry,” he said. “Serving this market requires person-to-person selling with a core group of knowledgeable salespeople on staff as well as proper inventory levels and good service. The core of it all is making sure that painting contractors can get in and get out with what they need. The market is so competitive that you can’t drive up their costs by taking up their time.”

A Good Fit

Lanzillotti sees independent paint stores and painting contractors as a good fit for one another. “They offer the best service out there,” he said. “They’ve

Meeting the Expectations of the Professional Painting Contractor



● **Johnston Paint & Decorating in Columbia, Mo. has a separate contractor entrance.**

proven themselves to be solid, high-quality and high-service businesses.”

Tom Dougherty of PPG Architectural Coatings agreed that paint stores have an advantage. “Most paint dealers are well-positioned to have a distinct advantage over big box stores and other paint retailers, but they have to leverage these advantages at every possible opportunity,” he said. “Most contractors are entrepreneurs and like to work with and support other entrepreneurs, but this support has to be earned.”

Dougherty observed that the most important thing that paint stores can offer is knowledgeable customer service. “This is obvious to most dealers, but not always effectively practiced. Contractors come to a dealer expecting to get the knowledgeable service that they cannot and will not get anywhere else. They will always get this from the owner, but the owners must ask themselves ‘Are my customers getting the kind of service they expect from my employees when I’m not at the counter?’”

One way to ensure this is to partner with manufacturers that help provide training to dealers and their employees, Dougherty stressed. “At PPG, training is a key component of what we offer our dealers because we believe that it is critical to our success and the success of our dealers,” he said. “I would encourage dealers to ask their manufacturer partners how they can help them train their employees.”

Having a product assortment that is suited to the painting contractor, plus constantly updated with new items, is a great way to maintain the loyalty of this important customer segment. “Some stores do a very good job—not only with paint but with a full line of sundries,” Boyajian stated. “They’ll carry everything from the standard to the novelty, such as stubby screwdrivers or even switchplates. You might want to expand your product mix so that they’ll buy more products from you rather than the competitors’ store.”

Dealers should also develop a reputation for bringing the latest and the greatest products to their customer base. “It’s important that dealers keep up to date with new procedures—new products, new tools, new painting equipment, new roller systems and different types of brushes,” Boyajian said. “They should become known for always adding new things that are suited to the contractor, for instance, our new professional primer line, Prime Touch. Dealers should make contractors aware when new products are introduced to the marketplace.”

Boyajian also suggested that paint stores become a bit of a “haberdasher” to the contractor, offering an assortment of contractor clothing, including painters’ pants and shorts in multiple sizes as well as shirts, caps—even work boots.

Dougherty concurred about the importance of carrying paint products to

meet the varying needs of contractor customers. “Since the price/value equation is different for different contractors and even on different jobs, dealers must be sure to have a good price point strategy. Typically a good/better/best product lineup from the same manufacturer is helpful. In this scenario, a contractor can choose from a value-priced line (good), a contractor workhorse line (better) and a premium line (best) without making a distinction between manufacturers. This is a clear way for a dealer to provide a range of pricing options without jeopardizing margins. Dealers should seek to work with manufacturer partners that can provide and help to explain this pricing strategy.”

A solid line of contractor sundries is also critical to winning and maintaining professional business, Dougherty added. “To simplify this process, PPG and some other leading paint manufacturers offer sundry programs as part of their overall offering enabling dealers to effectively and efficiently purchase sundries as part of their normal process.”

Being on the leading edge also means staying on top of the latest trends, such as the movement toward environmental “green” products. “It’s important to offer painting contractors products that are relevant today,” Lanzillotti said. “The goal is to sell more paint today than yesterday.”

Lanzillotti also stressed the importance of having a nice store environment. “Painting contractors are like consumers,” he said. “They like to be in a nice, well-organized store environment. It’s an environment that is conducive to doing business.”

Benjamin Moore provides its retailers with assistance in creating a store environment that is conducive to serving painting contractors as well as the rest of the customer base. “We have a fully engaged retail group who work on merchandising, product placement and business consulting services for Benjamin Moore retailers,” Lanzillotti said. “Part of our plan is to help them set up the store properly in order to service their customers at the highest levels.”



● **Contractors get special treatment at Johnston Paint, including their own sales counter.**

In addition, Benjamin Moore makes use of technology that helps retailers solidify their painting contractor relationships. “We use technology to communicate more with painting contractors, such as through monthly email blasts,” Lanzillotti said. “We also help them with the business side of selling to contractors. For instance, we help them better manage their cash flow by offering the Preferred Commercial Account Program. This makes it so that the receivables do not have to be handled by the retailer, and it also rewards painters with miles, trips and other incentives, which helps to build loyalty with the store.”

Dougherty stated that PPG believes that training is critical to having success with this market. “This could include product training, sales training, color training or customer service training,” he said. “We strive to make this available to committed dealers. We also take great pride in having the depth and breadth of product line to help any dealer effectively service his or her intended target customer, and will work with dealers to be sure they are choosing the right product mix to offer. This includes a well-rounded professional sundry line that enables

dealers to take advantage of PPG buying power and distribution efficiencies to offer the right tools to their customers.”

Another key is for dealers to show appreciation to painting contractors for their business. Some paint stores host an annual breakfast or dinner. “That’s a way to say ‘thank you’ to the contractor while also showing them new products. You need to remember that they can buy a gallon of ceiling paint anywhere. The way you keep them is to build the relationship,” Boyajian said.

Providing contractors with referrals is also important, he added. “Most stores have bulletin boards, where they can put the contractors’ business cards up with thumb tacks.”

Lanzillotti agreed that building a relationship with contractors is important. “People buy from people they like,” he said. “The relationship that the paint store owner and his staff has with the painting contractor is critical. Painters want to know that their business is appreciated.”

Benjamin Moore is in a position to help both retailers and painting contractors gain business. One of the company’s newest efforts is the LINK Referral Program, available at *benmoorelink.com*. This is a program that helps connect qualified painting professionals, as well as practicing color consultants, to consumers who need help with their painting projects. There is a pilot program in place in the Washington, D.C., market, and there are plans to expand it to additional markets later this year.

“The intent is to drive business to painting contractors,” Lanzillotti reported. “However, there also is a benefit to Benjamin Moore retailers, since painting contractors get their paint from their stores, so it comes full circle.”

Lanzillotti added that the LINK Referral Program is especially beneficial in an adverse economy such as this one. The key is to help painting contractors discover the opportunities that exist in the marketplace at any given time. “There’s still a lot of paint being sold,” he said. “Those who go out and seek it are in a better position than those who don’t. You have to be more aggressive. Making a paint sale is about helping people find the right paint and the right color. If we can facilitate that process by offering this type of program, then it’s something that helps everyone.”

Boyajian stressed the importance of taking a proactive approach to building contractor sales. Without a concerted sales effort, not many contractors will come to you on their own. “A lot of contractors don’t shop around,” Boyajian said. “If you don’t find a way to reach out to them, you’re never going to get them. I don’t think I’d spend an awful lot of effort on big guys—they’re buying from company-owned stores, and it’s hard to be price-competitive. My concentration would be on the pot-and-brush guy, typically the one-man operation or the painter with a crew of two or three guys.”

What Dealers Are Doing

How do paint stores show painting contractors they care? By offering amenities that make them feel special. This is something that Johnston Paint & Decorating in Columbia, Mo., does to the max. The amenities at this independently owned store include a separate entrance and sales counter as well as a special contractor area featuring free coffee, donuts, popcorn and an ice dispenser, as well as vending machines for purchasing snacks and soft drinks. The area also includes bar stools and a counter area where contractors can sit down and do paperwork as well as have free WiFi access.

“We do what we can to cater to the contractor,” reported Blair Murphy, the store’s general manager. “We have 70 percent of the contractor market in



● Amenities abound in the Johnston Paint snack room.

town, and we've built this business by offering superior, all-around service."

The management at Johnston Paint realizes that fast, efficient service is the key to maintaining contractors' business. "That's why we have a separate entrance for contractors on the west side of the building," Murphy explained. "The contractors don't really want to mingle with retail customers. They want to be able to come in, get their stuff and get out."

Conversely, if their day isn't too hectic, they will use Johnston's as a place to socialize. Many of the contractors view the store as their "coffee shop," where they can catch up on the day's news as well as converse with Johnston's staff or their peers—i.e., other contractors.

In keeping with its commitment to efficiency, the store has two drive-through doors in the warehouse for quick loading of products—an especially nice feature when the weather turns rainy. Johnston Paint also offers job-site delivery, keeping two full-time delivery vehicles busy.

Additional efficiency is achieved with automatic tinting equipment, which is an upgrade that Johnston Paint added when the store moved to a new location two years ago. "At our old store, we tinted with a manual which is more susceptible to mistakes," Murphy said. "Now, we have four automatics. Also, we touched

every case of paint by hand at the old store. Now, we use forklifts to unload."

Another plus is that Johnston Paint has a qualified, experienced sales staff, which other stores in town cannot match. "We have 170 years of experience among all the staff," Murphy reported. "All of our contractors are very comfortable with our staff. At Home Depot or Lowes, they may have to deal with an employee who was selling garden hoses the previous day."

To help maintain loyalty, Johnston Paint hosts educational events for the benefit of its contractor customers. "We do about three to four a year," Murphy reported. "We keep it to about 10 or 15 guys so they can get more hands-on experience. We've had demos put on by all of our major suppliers, including Benjamin Moore, PPG and Modern Masters."

In addition, Johnston's holds two contractor barbecues each year. Manufacturers' representatives are on hand to answer questions, promote new products, and give out such freebies as T-shirts, hats and product samples.

Educational seminars are great for emphasizing the quality attributes of the products that Johnston Paint carries. For instance, Benjamin Moore has put on seminars highlighting the Aura premium paint line and the Gennex waterborne colorant system. "We've gotten Aura in a lot of contractors' hands and been able to show them that

it saves one or two coats of labor," Murphy said. "People who appreciate quality don't mind paying more for a lot better product."

But as important as quality is, competitive pricing also gets its due. Many contractors will buy such products as tape or caulk in bulk, and that typically saves them an extra 10 percent. Another plus is that, as a locally owned store, Johnston Paint has the ability to work with its regular accounts in the event of a past-due invoice. "I'll be flexible and let a guy go 60 days if I know he's on a big job and he's been reliable," Murphy stated.

And while Johnston Paint has the lion's share of the contractor business in and around Columbia, the store is not content to rest on its laurels. The store has an outside salesperson making calls on the area's hospitals, nursing homes, apartment complexes, builders, etc. That, and the loyalty of existing painting contractors, has kept Johnston Paint the choice of area contractors. And even with the recent opening of a Menard's in town, Murphy is not worried about losing business. "The big boxes are not going to get our painting contractors business most of the time," he said. "They're not going to go 22 miles round-trip to deliver a quart of paint, which is something that I personally have done. Painters keep coming back to us because we have a great relationship."

One of the painters showing loyalty to Johnston Paint is Jeremy Kuhlmann, owner of Flashover Painting in Columbia. "I have been in painting business for almost 15 years and exclusive with Johnston Paint for about 12 years," Kuhlmann reported. "It's a local store, and we like to do business with people who like to do business with us."

What impresses Kuhlmann most is Johnston Paint level of service, which is demonstrated by the fact that the store personnel will go that extra mile—literally. "They'll deliver a quart 30 miles if I need it," Kuhlmann stated. "And while their pricing is not the cheapest in town, it's still very competitive. I'm willing to sacrifice a dol-

lar or two a gallon if I know I'll be getting exemplary service."

Kuhlmann employs close to 20 painters who typically work about six jobs per week. He appreciates the ability to get in and out of Johnston Paint quickly. "They have a separate entrance, and they open at 7, so we can get to the job site. They also have automatic tinting, which cuts tint time and delivery time in half. That saves us about 19 man-hours per week, which is significant, because if we're sitting idle, then we're losing money."

Chuck Turner, another Johnston Paint customer, concurs about the benefits of doing business with this store. "I like the fact that it's an independently owned store owned and operated by local people in the community," says Turner, owner of Chuck Turner Painting in Columbia. "I've known these guys (owners Gary Turner and Ron Elder in addition to Murphy) for over 20 years."

Turner has the feeling that the management of the store is interested in his success, and they'll do what it takes to help him meet the requirements of a job. "I've worked weekends on projects, and I've called them and had them open up the store for me so I can finish up or keep going. There are times when I called and needed something on the spur of the moment, and they've delivered it to me. They've done their best to accommodate me."

Turner, who has been a painter for more than 30 years and has owned his own business for more than half of that time, specializes in painting custom homes. He typically employs from eight to 15 employees, but it doesn't matter how big or small the job. Johnston Paint still makes him feel as if he is a priority. "They service everybody equally, whether they need a quart of paint or 100 gallons," he said. "They offer good products, good service, and we've had a long-term relationship that's been a big help over the years. In slow times or in good times, they support me, which is why I support them."

In the Boston area, a similarly named store—Johnson's Paint—has

What Painters Want

Here is a brief summary of what painting contractors want and how you can provide it.

- **Quick in-and-out service**

Separate entrance, separate sales counter or a contractor-only store. Automated tinting equipment, quick and accurate color matching, storage and quick retrieval of paint formula history.

- **Complete product assortment**

Professional paints, sundries, painters' clothes, spray equipment, pressure washers and hardware items such as screwdrivers and switchplates, bulk quantities, a wide range of "green" products, the ability to special-order.

- **Product knowledge**

An experienced staff, a hands-on owner, training seminars, product demos, access to supplier reps, material data safety sheets and technical product information.

- **Customer service**

Job site delivery, early morning hours, access to a staff member before and after store hours, preferred customer

established itself as a great resource for painting contractors. In fact, one of the three stores—located in Woburn, Mass.—is a contractor-only location. According to owner Bob Johnson, Johnson's does about 60-65 percent of its business with painting contractors. The Woburn store is dedicated exclusively to getting these busy professionals on their way most expediently.

"There are a lot of contractors in the area, and it has easy access to two major highways," Johnson said. The other stores—on Newbury Street in downtown Boston and the Waltham, Mass., location—also get contractor trade. However, at Woburn, Johnson noted the service for contractors is even greater. "They can get in and out quickly, they don't have to wait for retail customers. Also, we have loading docks, so we can put things on a palette and load them right into their truck."

Johnson also boasts longevity for his Boston business. "We are a 70-

year-old store that was started by my father," Johnson says. "My father knew guys, my brother and I know guys, and now my son knows guys. In the City of Boston, there are four or five major contractors, and we usually get a chance. We have two outside salespeople who call on these guys, keeping our name in front of them."

Having a consistent staff is a big asset. "It's very important for people to come in and see the same faces every day," said Johnson. "It gives an aura of stability."

Respect for the contractors' time also is important. "We carry four major paint lines, and we always have product in stock, so they don't have to wait," Johnson says. "If the painter is on a union job and they have 10 or 15 guys waiting around, that's a major expense. We have five trucks making deliveries, so service is important."

Maintaining Loyalty

Even though paint stores have a good relationship with painting contractors, it's hard to deny (especially in this economy) that maintaining business with this customer segment does have its challenges. Independent paint stores are not the only option for them. They also have the option to buy from company-owned stores, and big boxes always are looking for ways to grab a bigger piece of the pie. An example is the recent launch of Behr Pro.com, featuring a number services designed for contractors (and presumably give them reason to strengthen their ties with Home Depot). Of course, there are also hardware stores as well as other independent dealers who are vying for the same contractor business.

Peggy Sue Wingard, O-Gee Paint, Miami, reported that it's getting harder to maintain painters' loyalty in a marketplace where there are many locations to purchase paint. However, the staff at O-Gee's four stores has the knowledge that helps build relationships with contractors.

"There are people who come to see us because they like dealing with a spe-

cific salesperson,” Wingard said. “They also come to us specifically for color matches and stain matches.”

Those who are loyal to O-Gee cite the fact that the staff has product knowledge. Wingard gives the example of a painter who drives in from Jupiter, Fla., to work in Miami every week. He could stop at any paint store along the way, but he chooses O-Gee Paint. “He knows that we know what we’re doing,” Wingard stated. “He knows we offer quality products at a fair price.”

To help build relationships with contractors, O-Gee is holding special events. “One thing we have been doing is holding a monthly painter breakfast,” Wingard said. “We also hold regular educational events in the evenings, usually about one a month.”

In one case, O-Gee had a “Guns and Hoses” show, which provided information to contractors and sales staff alike about HVLP and sprayer options. There also have been presentations on

new products, such as the Aura paint line and Gennex colorant system from Benjamin Moore. Also, Wingard recently went to the National Hardware Show and came back with new product information that she used as the basis for product demos for O-Gee’s painting contractors.

O-Gee’s business consists of 60 percent residential, 40 percent painters and commercial accounts. To accommodate the pros, the stores carry products that are suited to their needs, including professional paintbrushes, spray equipment, pressure washers, painters’ pants and more. “We’re an ALLPRO dealer, and we buy in quantity to get a discount,” Wingard stated.

In addition, O-Gee will special-order products for contractors to suit their specific needs.

Johnson concedes that the competition in town can be tough, especially in this economy and the competition from company-owned stores. “More players

are going for the same piece of the pie,” he stated. “Service is important, but in a bad economy, price is more important. In bad times, you can’t stock as much inventory or it will just sit.”

Some of the jobs for which Johnson’s has supplied paint include Boston’s famous Fenway Park and 15,000 gallons for a high-end waterfront property known as Museum Towers. However, this doesn’t mean that price is less important for these big projects. “The larger the contractor, the less they expect to pay,” Johnson said.

Fortunately, Johnson added that there are those for whom price is less important. “The middle-range painters, both union and non-union, come in everyday,” he said. “Pricing isn’t as much as an issue as getting things right. If they need 20 gallons in a custom color, they come to us because we have a good reputation for getting things right.” ■

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