



The Wood Panel:

Advice from Wood Restoration Specialists

by Allison Hester, Editor

Photo courtesy of Carolina ProWash

Not so many years ago, wood restoration was an extremely popular service for power washing contractors. The work was simple, effective, easy to sell and profitable.

It's no longer that simple. Changing markets and regulations have turned a market that once appeared to be the golden ticket for residential power washers into a market that many contractors now won't touch with a 10-foot extension pole.

However, a number of contractors have managed to not only embrace the potential of wood restoration, but to turn it into a niche market that they love. In this article, I've interviewed a handful of such experts, a group I'm referring to as "the wood panel."

Before jumping into – or running away from – wood restoration, read what this panel of wood experts has to offer

Learn the Basics

There is no magic formula for restoring wood. Each job offers a unique array of conditions and challenges, and to do it correctly, contractors must at the minimum

have a healthy understanding of what it takes to restore wood.

But how do contractors learn?

Almost everyone on the panel agreed – the most important step in getting started in wood restoration is to take a basic wood care training class and possibly become certified. A number of wood restoration classes are offered across the country each year by a variety of groups, including at least three options in March alone (see our events page to learn more).

"The wood care courses are very generic, but they will teach you the basic nuggets you need to know before you ever step foot on a deck," said Beth Borrego of See Dirt Run in Germantown, Maryland. "You're not going to get an expert education from any wood class, but it's a good place to start."

That's how most of the wood panel professionals got their start, including Mike Hilborn of Roof to Deck, St. Paul, Minnesota, who has since built a million-dollar business by cleaning wood exclusively. "I started by

taking the PWNA (Power Washers of North America) wood restoration course and becoming certified.”

A basic education is probably enough for most pressure washing contractors who are interested in adding wood restoration to their list of services. “The majority of cleaning/staining companies are just that – a cleaning and staining service that meets the needs of customers looking for a basic job,” added Charles Soden, Apex Deck Savers, Pittsboro, North Carolina. “And, for the most part, there’s nothing wrong with that, assuming the products and processes being used don’t end up making things worse for the customer.”

However, for those wanting to separate themselves as “experts,” Wood 101 courses are only the start. Our panel members suggested researching wood restoration on the Internet, participating in wood forums such as The Grime Scene and The Wood Pros, and potentially finding a mentor to train under.

For Roger and Celeste Gothorp of Carolina Pro Wash in Graham, NC, obtaining proper, in-depth training was key. They traveled to Missouri for a week-long training course with Russell Cissell of Extreme Solutions, Inc., and they have also been mentored by Beth Borrego & Rod Rodriguez to learn about exotic woods. “Beyond that, reading, researching, testing and practicing on wood scraps have proven to be the best teachers for learning compositions, how age affects stains, what types of stains are appropriate for the job at hand.”

When getting started, Borrego suggests practicing on decks and fences that belong to friends and family members, for free. “Or you can ask them to pay for the sealer but you throw in the labor for free.”

And wood restoration is a never-ending learning process, as even the panel of experts

continue to learn and rely on the help of industry members. “As I’ve been in business longer and have developed a track record of excellent results, I still find myself catching great tips from some of those same companies (that helped mentor him early on), in addition to the many, many amazing suppliers, vendors, and manufacturers in our industry,” added Soden.

Use the Right Products

“There’s a lot of garbage out there in pails for sale in the box stores,” said Borrego. “If you want to compete with more established companies, you’ve got to use something that is contractor grade.”

Soden looks for products that have been designed for wood and that have a good history of success. “When it comes to cleaning products, it’s not worth the risk to try and develop your own concoctions,” he explained. “Stick with a packaged product that you know will have a safe blend of chemicals so you know the strength when you mix it.”

John Nearon, Exterior Wood Restoration, Indianapolis, Indiana, said he selects products based on what has worked well for his company and what is recognized as effective. “For example, we focus on sodium hydroxide based strippers for oil-based wood stain removal and methylene chloride based strippers for acrylic based wood stains,” he added.

Rick Petry of Windsor WoodCare in Painsboro, New Jersey, said he has used Ready Seal products from day one. “It’s easy to apply, lasts for a long time, and I’ve never seen a reason to change,” he explained.

According to Celeste Gothorp, “Some of the best information you can get on a product is from the contractors who use them.” She added that when starting out, they were

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Beth Borrego
See Dirt Run! Inc. &
The Grime Scene
Germantown, Maryland
Since 1999
95% Wood

Celeste Gothorp
Carolina ProWash
Graham, North Carolina
Since 2006
90% Wood

Mike Hilborn
Roof to Deck
St Paul, Minnesota
Since 1999
100% Wood

referred to various cleaning products, did price comparisons and ultimately field tested “nearly all of them.” She stressed that effectiveness was their top consideration, followed by cost. Ultimately, their company uses cleaners and stains from Extreme Solutions. “We have been happy with Russell’s products for years and are happy to stick with the adage, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’”

This brings up an important point because there are a number of new products regularly popping up on the market. “I see a lot of people buying into crazy claims for the latest and greatest new product out there, but what’s easy to forget is that you are talking about risking an untested product on a paying customer’s deck,” said Soden.

This is particularly true with wood stains, which vary quite a bit. “My company uses mostly Armstrong Clark stains, but I encourage anyone looking to get into wood to try each stain out,” Soden added. “I also look for a manufacturer or distributor that is willing to stand by what they sell and provide strong product support for me. One reason I use Armstrong Clark is I know I can easily get technical help and that if anything goes wrong, I can rely on their help and expertise to come up with a solution.

Nearon has actually developed his own product line – Timber Ox Green stains and sealers. “This is a product that we manufacture ourselves and have used exclusively at Exterior Wood Restoration, Inc., for a number of years prior to offering it to the general public,” he explained.

One thing to remember is that if a product’s claim seems too good to be true – for example a stain that lasts for 25 years – it probably is. “You cannot guarantee the life of a product based solely on the product itself,” said Borrego. “There are too many other factors that come into play” such as the environment, the location of the wood (i.e., sun versus shade), the amount of foot traffic, and so on.

For more specific information on choosing cleaners, sealers and brighteners, see “Making an Informed Decision” on page 12.

Charge Adequately

“When you are first starting in the

Photo courtesy of Apex Deck Savers



John Nearon
Exterior Wood Restoration
Indianapolis, IN
Since 2005
99% Wood

Rick Petry
Windsor WoodCare
Plainsboro, NJ
Since 2001
100% Decks

Charles Soden
Apex Deck Savers
Pittsboro, North Carolina
Since 2006
100% Wood



Photo courtesy of Windsor WoodCare

industry, don't be so hungry that you're not making money," warned Borrego. "And make sure you charge enough to do the project properly. The industry doesn't need any more black eyes from contractors who underbid then provide bad service. If you want repeat business, you have to do the job right."

There are numerous things to consider when pricing wood restoration projects, and it's important to price adequately during your estimate. "Doing a full quality deck restoration can take time, and must be charged accordingly," agreed Soden. "Our pricing is high for a reason."

"Also, you have to consider your weather," stressed Gothorp. "If you live in an area with a shorter work season, you are either going to have to price accordingly to carry your company through cold or rainy months or be more diverse than just wood."

Borrego emphasized the need for properly setting up (e.g., tarps and tape) and tearing down. "Don't take shortcuts. It may seem like it takes longer when you have to go through all the steps of doing a job right, but in the end, you don't have issues because you've done it right. You've protected the customer's property – which is huge for the customer – and you've protected your company from liability problems and a poor reputation."

Finally, Hilborn stressed that he has found it to be very difficult to run a successful, large company based off of wood restoration alone (even though he's managed to do it). For those contractors wanting to reach the million-dollar mark, "you might be better off washing fleets."

Market Wisely

Soden says his company's strongest marketing tool – besides word of mouth – has been a well developed and optimized website. "Website leads have far surpassed any of the calls we receive from every other advertising program combined." However, while his website works well for people searching for a wood restoration company, it has not necessarily drawn in those potential "on the fence" customers who are thinking about it but not quite there yet.

To reach that market, Soden has begun implementing some new programs, including a pay-per-click advertising campaign. "For instance, we find that people respond well to our ads on deck building searches where we can hopefully draw them into realizing that maybe their deck just needs to be cleaned and restored rather than replaced."

He also does a lot of "perimeter marketing" during each job, which includes labeled trucks/trailers parked on the street, yard signs that remain up several days after the job is completed, uniformed employees, and occasionally mailing to neighbors informing them that they've done work nearby and would love to give them an estimate as well.

Rick Petry of Windsor WoodCare, Plainsboro, NJ, agreed with the importance of a strong web presence. He also said he has found that a small ad in the classified section of his local newspaper has worked extremely well. Interestingly, more expensive display ads in the same paper were a flop.

Networking is another important marketing tool. "Some of our most effective marketing has been accomplished through relationships we cultivate with local Realtors and their firms, which often have preferred contractor referral programs," said Nearon. Local homeowners associations, chambers of commerce and so on are good groups to get involved with as well.

Part of succeeding in wood restoration requires being willing and able to interact with the customers on a deeper level than with some other cleaning markets. "Today's outdoor living spaces are really popular and they're very personal spaces, often seen as an

extension of the owners themselves,” said Borrego. “Those guys who want to be able to just go wash without having to interact with the customer are probably better off sticking with other things where they’re not touching a living space.”

All participants agree that the best form of marketing in this industry is word of mouth. Gaining a good reputation and getting referrals are priceless. “And if you can get a high-end customer to allow you to show others your deck, it’s golden,” Borrego added.

Protecting Yourself and Your Customer

Borrego said contractors should never take on projects that are beyond their scope. “You can get yourself into real trouble if you take on jobs where it’s something you’ve never tried before. Think about the liability before you jump in. You better be pretty sure you know what you’re taking on before you start.”

Borrego also stressed the need to take tons of photos, not just for future marketing, but also to protect your company. Specifically take photos of any preexisting problems that you see on the property – such as a cracked window or a broken planter pot, etc., because homeowners may not know the problem was already there. Also, take photos of all tarping and other precautionary measures taken, along with the before and after shots of the work.

Finally, Borrego pointed out that training needs to extend not only to you, but to your staff as well. Before hiring technicians to do this kind of work, contractors should be thoroughly versed in wood restoration themselves. Then they must be able to communicate the processes to any hired technicians, who should be painstakingly mentored before being allowed to do the work without close supervision.

In conclusion, wood restoration can be a lucrative add-on service to your existing business, or a specialty service all its own. The key is to learn the right way then implement what you learn, recognizing when a project is beyond your scope.

True wood restoration is both an art and a science, and should be reserved for those companies who truly love and respect the



Photo courtesy of Carolina ProWash

medium. For those unique individuals, the job itself is often the reward.

“Being able to assess the needs of the project and apply a custom solution to give the homeowner the best look possible is very enjoyable for me,” said Soden. “Best of all is seeing the transformation from an old, gray deck to a beautifully stained and sealed surface that you know is all because of your hard work.”



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