

parodi on paperhanging

Parodi on Paint

by Jim Parodi

I'm not a Florida snob—a snob about Florida, that is. Unlike my uppity New York friends who claim that the Sunshine State is a horrifying morass of *National Geographic*-sized insects, seashell stands, and bad pizza, I know that Florida is more than a place where old northerners can go to die. To me, Florida is the embodiment of the American Dream, only a tad more humid than you'd like.

Every winter my wife and I visit Uncle Jack and Aunt Ans in orange grove country in the middle of the state. Uncle Jack is a retired shrimp boat captain, who despite years of chain-smoking Camels remains a "super taster"—i.e., someone who can sniff an iffy shrimp at 30 paces. Last winter I discovered he's still on his game as we hurtled, windows wide open, at 75 mph on one of Florida's outbreak two-lane blacktops in the "Canoe," Uncle Jack's rust-free 1989 Crown Vic. Hidden between my knees, I popped open a can of V-8 from the driver's seat. A millisecond passed before Jack declared above the wind noise from the back: "Someone is cooking tomato sauce in an aluminum pot!"

Uncle Jack was on the phone last week, picking my brain about the best paint to use on the shutters he picked up from a neighbor. (If you knew Jack, you wouldn't get into exactly what "picked up" meant.) I'm sure everyone who reads *PWC* gets calls like this from family and friends. I wonder if they go through the same process I do with Jack, where I spell out the importance of cleaning, sanding, and priming. Then Mr. Impatient,

wanting to cut short my "eat your broccoli" sermon, blurts out, "Forget about all that. Just tell me the best paint to use!"

I'll spare the reader my other sermon about how we've become an E-Z Society where every trade can be reduced to a half-hour video.

Everyone has an opinion about what the "best" paint is. But before I answered, my mind flashed back to the ride from the Tampa airport, where I observed strange paint stores with exotic names. I wondered if some local brand—maybe with an arcane name like Flex Bon, Kurfees, or



Illustration by Jane Sanders

Color Wheel or something—produced an undiscovered "best paint" I hadn't been able to get my hands on. Rather than drive myself crazy worrying about an amateur paint job, I just gave him the name of a national brand I like—a heavily advertised national brand, I might add.

Oh, yeah—for those of you who actually read column titles, I decided it was time to give up the small secret that I also paint, but only for customers who are papering in the deal and don't look like they're going to be too much of a problem. (Nutty dogs are the key.

Nutty people always have nutty dogs.) I change hats from time to time and blend in like a chameleon at the paint store with my paint-dappled white pants. I prefer pretending to be a painter at the store because painters get better treatment. Paperhangers come in, drink the free coffee, dunk the stale donuts, complain, and then leave with \$20 worth of paste. Painters back their trailer into the loading dock and must be served with a forklift. A good visit to the store by a big painting outfit can send the owner and his wife to Atlantic City for the weekend. A paperhanger's visit will barely get them on the subway.

My absolute favorite thing about painting? No, it's not the fumes. It's that I, me, *moi* gets to choose what brand of paint I'll be using. Otherwise I tell them to get a real painter. It's such a switch for me, because paperhangers never get to choose what brand of wallpaper they'll be hanging on the job.

The customer can even drop shopworn, defective rubbish in your lap and say, "Beep me when

you're done." And that, my friends, points out the simple economic fact that allows so many wallpapers to run the gamut from Good to Abysmal in quality, whereas paint brands span the Excellent to Mediocre spectrum. Paint sales are *de facto* more contractor-driven than wallpaper sales. You can only burn painters once or twice with bad material—then they'll drop you faster than a diner where they've seen a roach family walk out the front door.

Of course there are exceptions, but most of the time customers

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choose the color and painters choose the label. As long as it's a recognizable brand, it usually isn't a problem. And tell me, painters, can you think back to a brand you used—possibly as a free sample—that didn't hide, didn't level, sagged like an SOB, etc.? Could a customer get you to use that paint again? See roach comment above. Bad paint costs you time and money. However, ironically there exists a situation where the interests of the painter are served by using a Good-But-Not-Excellent paint, and it's not just governed by material price.

(What do you mean, Leo? How can a producer make more money with a flop than he could with a hit?—Max Bialystok to Leo Bloom in *The Producers*, 1968.)

I socialize with painters a lot. They imbibe more adult beverages than paperhangers and are therefore usually more fun. After I ply them with a few G & T's they open up to me and disclose why they often use a Good-But-Not-Excellent paint. Here's the way it goes:

Step 1. The customer, who knows zip about paint, insists that the painter use a heavily advertised brand which is OK-but-not-great. "Everybody knows it's the best; at least that's what the ads say." Right?

Step 2. The contractor who knows that the heavily advertised paint is OK-but-not-great will oblige them because he knows he'll be back to redo the job in five years instead of 10.

Step 3. When the paint becomes tired looking, or burnished, or faded, or chalky, the customer won't blame the painter because as everybody knows, Wunderbrand Paint is the "best."

Step 4. Cha-ching for the painter.

All the paint really has to do is look good when the check clears and subsequently not peel or craze or anything like that and it's money in the bank for the painter, no?

I was enjoying the free coffee and donuts during a focus group meeting at a smaller, regional paint company last year, as any

self-respecting freeloading paperhanger is wont to do. The sales VP had called us pros there basically to get us to push their paint on every estimate, since the company doesn't have the bucks to burn one of those great TV paint company slogans into the public's brain. Everything was going great until some yokel—wait, I think it was me—pointed out that the banner emblazoned overhead, *You may never have to*



"Yeah Jimbo, that paint is excellent. It has such a nice smell."

paint again, only sounds good to a do-it-yourselfer. The assembled painters began to fidget in their seats, translated the banner in their own minds to *Hey painters, you may never work again*, and put down their donuts. This begs a question which I don't think can really be answered, namely: Is there a glass ceiling for paint quality beyond which we don't really want to go?

And speaking of the DIYers, are you tired yet of them telling you what the "best" brand of paint is? I'm referring to the homeowner who reads the yearly paint roundup in the *Saturday Evening Consumer's Reporting Digest Monthly*. These supposedly comprehensive product reviews should send up a red flag right out of the box, since they only review national brands. Naturally it makes sense to the magazine that paint brands not available to a certain percentage of their DIY readers should not be reported on. But what does that have to do with pros or quality of regional brands?


I usually read the testing criteria of these DIY mags with great amusement. It's always about hide, mildew, and stain resistance, as if those are the only attributes worth considering. I'll tell you one attribute that is really worth considering: How does the paint look,

fellas? Huh? Now, this may be a very superficial prejudice, but face it, we're in a superficial trade. If it's brushy looking or orange-peely or flashing, it doesn't help the check clear. Also, the folks down at *Saturday Evening Consumer's Reporting Digest Monthly* don't seem to care a tinker's cuss about things like recoat time, blocking, sagging, leveling, how well cut-in areas blend with rolled-in areas, enamel holdout, how it touches up, burnishing, or flashing resistance. I know the test crew there is dressed in white and looks like real painters, but that's as far as the comparison goes.

There are also other important paint attributes for the pro...wait a second. Uncle Jack is on the phone again.

"Hello? Yeah...yeah...no, I didn't...so it sounded like me...uh-huh...I don't care if it sounded like me, it wasn't me...no, I don't call people in the middle of the night and hang up...no, she doesn't either...no...nobody died. So how did the shutters come out?" (As I write this column it's still summertime, so Jack doesn't mention the temperature, as he routinely announces to us every other day in January.)

"Yeah Jimbo, that paint is excellent. It has such a nice smell," he says. I hear a faint *thwack* as he swats one of those giant South American fire beetles that are migrating up the peninsula and will reach Atlanta by 2013.

How stupid of me. I forgot to mention the one paint attribute important to DIYers yet barely of consequence to the pros...the smell. I wonder if the celebrity paint lines—Martha Stewart, Ralph Lauren, Alec Baldwin—are considering a line with perfume tie-ins. Do you think there may be a *Ralph Lauren River Rock with Polo Scent* in our future? 

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