

PARODI ON PAPERHANGING

by Jim Parodi



Strip Stakes

How to Remove the Paper and Still Keep the Profit

One day in 1857, an unknown person walking along a muddy footpath decided to leave the path and start a new muddy footpath, which was later paved over into a two-lane blacktop and ultimately became a strip mall road with a new Galleria Mall.

Traditions start in the same manner. Once you bend the twig, you never know where you are going to end up.

Fixed-price fixation

Thus, in the USA, tradition dictates that paperhangers who remove wallpaper should give a fixed price for the removal job. When that tradition began long ago, most people had hard plaster walls and all wallpaper was paper pulp, which turned into an oatmeal-like mush that could be scraped off with ease. Any paperhanger worth his salt at that time could tell you, almost to the minute, when the removal job would be completed.

Then, everything went horribly wrong for those who gave a fixed price when they removed. First, there was paper-faced drywall, which was OK to remove from as long as it got at least two-coat oil priming for starters.

Unhappily, however, someone decided to leave the main path and start a new one that involved cheap contractor paint (*garbage paint*, more aptly put) and new adhesives

that were much more aggressive than the wheat paste of yore.

Yet, the tradition of fixed-price estimates for removal persisted—despite the fact that some removal jobs are so dire that some contractors will



All-Kind-ZA Photography

The worst removal jobs are residential, with either vinyl-coated paper or paperbacked vinyl hung over cheap contractor paint.

consider jumping out a window in mid-job rather than endure the suffering and unanticipated time swamp at hand.

The ABCs of T & M

Some painters and paperhangers will not give a fixed estimate for any type of removal project. They are strictly T & M (time and money). Of course, they are absolutely correct in this approach, but sometimes, being right isn't enough.

Lamentably, the T & M approach

will lose you a good number of jobs right out of the box because of another tradition in the USA: fixed prices for everything.

Few Americans want a business relationship with a contractor who stipulates: "I may be camping out at your house, clocking in lots of hours. The final bill will be based on the difficulty of wallpaper removal, the amount of time I spend on my Internet-enabled cell phone, whether I am busy enough to go to another job, or if I just need to soak you for the entire month of March to make my bottom line."

Then there is what I call "the well digger's approach." The contractor charges to remove wallpaper and stipulates that he cannot guarantee there will be no wall damage. The fixed price given is for the act of removal only—not for any resurfacing or spackling after removal. Those costs will be assessed after removal.

In the same way, the well digger does not guarantee if or where he will find water—at 100 feet or 1,000 feet—and the customer understands this. Unfortunately, as luck would have it, our customers don't understand the difficulties of wallpaper removal as readily as they do drilling for water, so many will pass on this arrangement, too.

Call me a fool, but I still give a true fixed-price estimate for most removal jobs.

Testing, testing

In order to give a fixed-price estimate for removal, the client must

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understand that as much as a 2-by-2-foot section of the existing wallpaper may be damaged in testing. If the client is just tire-kicking price estimates and not actually planning to redo, you had better find this out before you start attacking his house.

Because, well ... Remember how I said I give a fixed-price estimate for most removal jobs? Not being able to test is an in-

stance of when I don't.

I am not a clairvoyant and cannot know if some pothead "paperhanger" who hung the room was experimenting with his own paste brew of vinyl-over-vinyl adhesive and tile mastic to make sure "it sticks real good." So, when I cannot test, I will propose a price on a movable scale.

Pricing for X, Y and Z

Unlike T & M, which is open ended, I set a maximum price limit. I give a low-tier price based on the time involved for removal if the existing material was hung using what I would deem standard practices of priming and adhesive.

For instance, a paper-backed vinyl hung in a bathroom the correct way should take me two to three hours, and I will charge X number of dollars. But if I

discover after a half-hour that it is going to take up to six hours, I will charge Y dollars.

And if, after the first half hour, I discover that the material is going to take way too long to remove and will take even more time to repair wall damage (due to non-standard installation), I will propose a

Burned by a bid? Call it a loss leader.

Z price for an alternative wall preparation that usually involves a bridging liner.

I make sure that the client understands that I am proposing this only because she won't let me test. Sometimes, that alone will loosen up the situation and the client will let me remove material behind a piece of furniture or some drapes as long as I can give him or her the coveted "fixed price."

A peak at primer

The first thing I want to know is if the wall was primed with some sort of water-resistant primer. It doesn't necessarily have to be a universal-type wallcovering primer. I remove a small section, preferably without any water. I then flick some water droplets on the surface and wait to see if the droplets darken those areas of the wall. If there is any indication of darkening,

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that raises a red flag, because *all* good wall priming begins with water resistance.

Sometimes, different materials like fabric backed vinyl (FBV), paperbacked vinyl (PBV), and paperpapers hung with different adhesives or methods over a water-sensitive surface will yield unexpected results—some not so terrible.

But if you do see water darkening, you should plan to remove more than a few square inches and go for the 2-by-2-foot section to get a better idea of what the future removal will be like.

Even if you discover that there is absolutely no priming on a Sheetrock surface, you may be surprised to find that a strippable-type material (FBVs and the newer non-wovens) will pull off without a hitch if it was hung with a strippable-type adhesive.

This is often the situation on commercial jobs where 54-inch-wide FBV was used. For these situations, the best technique is to break up the 54-inch-wide piece into one-foot-wide strips. To do so, go to the ceiling and cut four nicks in the sheet one foot apart. Then pull down (not out toward you) the foot-wide strips. Pulling in this way requires much less force than yanking down a four-foot-wide piece, and it's easier on the Sheetrock paper facing.

If you run into a situation where you are causing wall damage, you can use the foot-wide method and add lots of heat with the tool of your choice to separate the vinyl from the scrim backing and then soak the backing for removal.

The pain of 'paintst'

In my experience, however, the worst removal jobs are residential



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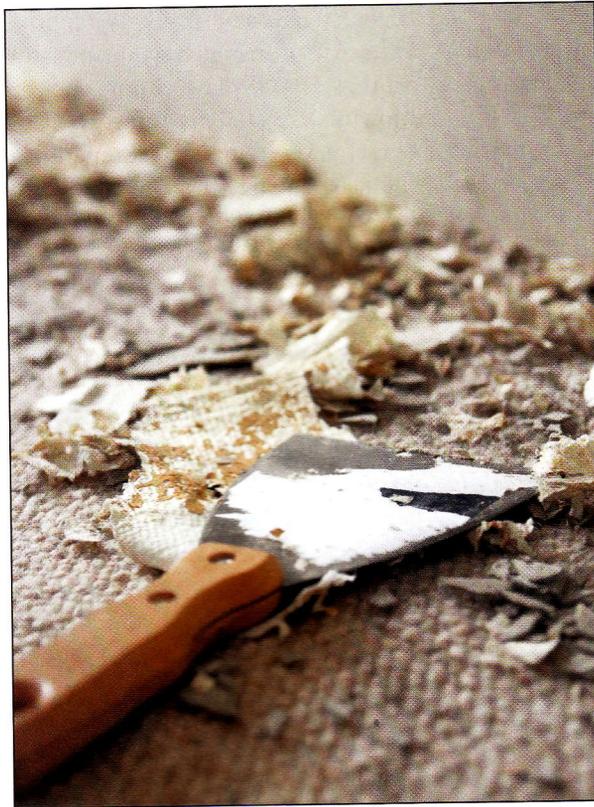


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Test a 2 x 2-foot area before giving a fixed-price estimate.

and the material is either vinyl-coated paper or thin paperbacked vinyl hung over contractor's paint. I have used all sorts of preparations for removal and have found that if the material was hung over an extremely water-sensitive contractor's paint/drywall combo, the problem is not reactivating the paste. That's because in that situation, there really is not a layer of distinct paste but, rather, a paint/paste mixture that was formed on the day the material was hung.

After wallpaper is applied to a water-sensitive paint, strange things happen. The paint starts to rewet, and sometimes the paste and paint join together in a compound I call "paintst."

If you were insane enough, you

could create your own paintst by mixing a gallon of wallpaper adhesive with a gallon of garbage flat, pasting it on the back of a wallpaper and then applying the sheet to an unprimed drywall facing. Good luck removing that.

Wet, wet woes

But there *is* a sensible way to approach such an abysmal installation. What often happens is that people apply way too much removal solution over way too much time. They apply their favorite removal solution—like DIF, white vinegar or dish

detergent—and it does not budge the material from the wall after a half hour. So they soak some more, and then some *more* over the course of an hour or two.

What this does is soften the whole wall right down to the Sheetrock's paper facing, so that when removal is actually attempted, the drywall is mushy.

I have had more success using the famous *hohlenpoker*, (<http://www.parodipalace.com/hohlenpoker/index.htm>), which insures that removal solution travels quickly to the paint/paste layer. I try to time everything so that the paint/paste layer softens but the drywall paper does not. I also work smaller sections of the wall—not spraying the whole room, as I nor-

See *PARODI* on next page

PARODI from last page mally do.

Another technique that sometimes works with these difficult removal situations is to *hohlenpoker* the surface of the paper, spray the surface with removal solution, and quickly put some plastic sheeting over the section. This does not allow for evaporation of the removal solution and can give you a “sweet spot” of time when you can coax the material off.

EZ enzymes

Some corporations have made a good bit of money selling the idea of easy removability if you just buy their wares. Enzymes that eat starch—the meat of all paste—seem like a great idea, until you consider

that enzymes take 24 hours to gobble up the starch and they still don’t gobble up the paint mixed with the starch.

Rotary pin wheel shredders that pull up tufts of drywall paper are also a bad idea, since they necessitate clipping the tufts that remain and skimming the wall to install the very thin residential papers of today. Nowadays, I only use two tools: a razor knife and a *hohlenpoker*. I’ve also never been a fan of steaming the wall, but there have been cases where I’ve used the elements of removal solution, timing and heat gun for greater success.

Unfortunately, there really are no rules for wallpaper removal. Some-

times, what you think is obvious isn’t so. For instance, you can catch a break if wallpaper hung over an unprimed wall was hung with an overabundance of paste. Sometimes, the use of a clay-based adhesive by the previous hanger helps, rather than hinders, removal—the opposite of what you would expect a clay to do.

I don’t think I have ever met a contractor who wasn’t burned by a removal job. I sure have. But I like to think of these rare instances as “loss leaders” that get me more jobs because of the fixed-price policy.

Jim Parodi (jim.parodi@hvc.rr.net) removes (and hangs) wallcoverings at the Parodi Palace.

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