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IN DEPTH: INSULATION AND HOUSEWRAP

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Doug Mans, president, N.A. Mans & Sons

Insulation: Sell It As A System

Go out and buy yourself an \$800 Rambouillet wool sweater and walk outside on a cold, windy day. Do you feel \$800 worth of warmth? Of course not. That's because the insulating power of the pricey wool is defeated by *air infiltration*. Without a *weather barrier* on top of the wool (in the form of a nylon jacket), the wool's insulating value is severely reduced by *wind washing*. The heat you generate is immediately swept away. The same thing would happen if you had two, or even three sweaters on.

I give this example to prove a point: When you sell insulation—we'll focus first on batts and get to foam in a sec.—don't just sell contractors "sweaters" in the form of rolled batts. Sell "jackets" too, in the form of housewrap systems (wrap, tape, and window-and-door flashing systems), as well as other products that control air infiltration and weather, such as wall sheathing systems designed to act as weather resistant barriers. Selling *insulation systems*—as opposed to insulation—is just one way to differentiate yourselves from competing dealers. When the yard across town tells a contractor, "yeah, sure we sell batts," your answer to that contractor should be that you sell *integrated insulation and weather defense systems*.

Differentiating the Undifferentiated

Batts. When you choose what insulation products to offer, note that batt is fairly hard to differentiate. Fiberglass is fiberglass—it's an "undifferentiated commodity"—and despite what the ads imply, a pink batt does not insulate

better than a white or yellow one. The same is true for polystyrene products like EPS (think *coffee cups*) or XPS (think supermarket meat trays), and for polyurethane as well. So, what do insulation manufacturers do to differentiate their products?

Well, sure, you can always brand the color, but other differentiators are more meaningful, and manufacturers may offer one or more of these features: 1) Use *recycled content* for the fiberglass and advertise that fact to people who sustainable products; just 30% recycled content will exceed the EPA Recovered Material Guideline guidance. 2) Use an environmentally friendly binder to hold the glass fibers together, e.g. formaldehyde-free or even bio-based binders. 3) Address the itch factor, with clever formulations. 4) Treat the batts with a mildewcide to keep mold out. 5) Wrap the batt in vapor-barrier envelopes or "smart membranes" that responds to weather conditions. 6) Put fire-retarders in insulation. 7) Seek indoor air quality certifications from third-party rating agencies for VOC compliance, like GREENGUARD, Green Seal, etc. 8) Declare how/why the insulation product can help builders achieve points in the various green rating systems, like IECC 2012, LEED, iGCC, NGBS, or ENERGY STAR.

With these various attributes, or a combination of them, a manufacturer can stand out and not be just another roll of fiberglass. Reading this list, I'm sure you can pick out products from CertainTeed, Owens Corning, Knauf, Johns Manville, and others, as each strives to stand out, to *differentiate*.

Foams. Foam insulation faces the same challenge as batts. You can't tell one piece of XPS or EPS foam from another, and the R-value per inch is essentially dictated by the chemical properties of the foam, no matter who makes it.

So, foam manufacturers will add coatings and foils to their foam, or—more importantly—make the foam part of a insulation system. For instance, Progressive Foam Technologies (PFT) differentiates its "Fullback" foam backing line by preconfiguring it for a wide range of sidings, including vinyl and fiber cement, and by positioning the product very deliberately to help builders comply with Energy Star 3.0 and the IECC 2012 code. (For instance, IECC 2012 will require contractors in most climate zones to install a thermal break between the sheathing and the siding. PFT's Fullback delivers that solution now.)

So, the next time you look at insulation, don't just look at the fiberglass or the type of foam. Look at what the manufacturer has done to package their products with attributes and information that make them stand out from the pack. ■



The award-winning author of twelve books, John D. Wagner is a frequent contributor to the industry's leading trade magazines and a sought-after speaker on green topics at industry events. Reach him at www.JohnDWagner.com.