

## PRODUCT TRENDS: Raising the bar

Suppliers are offering better training, more sales support and quicker installation

By Joshua Lentz



Suppliers have been influenced by the labor shortage in the vinyl and fiber-cement siding industries. They've been listening to remodelers who want new products and support programs to train their crews and allow them to work more efficiently. At the high end, it's no longer good enough to simply offer aesthetic products that stay attached to the home in 180-mph winds. Performance siding products must also install quickly and evenly, saving time and reducing callbacks.

For additional support, more manufacturers are offering installation training and sales programs to give remodelers incentive to expand their product offerings, maximize efficiency and increase the professionalism in the industry.



### Quicker installation

“With the vinyl siding industry growing at an average of 4 to 6 percent per year, there is growing concern of where the labor market will be to support this increase” says Siding-Master inventor Greg Albracht. “There is not enough qualified labor to support the industry as it stands today. The future lies with products that address the problems associated with labor challenges.”

Greg Albracht developed the Siding Master, a vinyl siding attachment system designed to reduce installation time. Steel strips are installed vertically with screws at 16 or 24 in. on-center to the exterior wall surface (over fanfold insulation, house wrap, wood

siding, stucco, etc.) where a clip receives the back hem of the siding. Another clip then folds down over the nailing hem, locking the panel firmly in place without nails.



A starter strip initiates the installation, ensuring that all panels begin straight. Once the snap-on starter strip is in place, the rest of the strips and panels align perfectly. The process eliminates the problems associated with nailing.

“If you don't go into solid wood with nails, they can pull out. If you nail into a nonsolid material such as OSB that has been around for 20 years, they have a tendency to pull out. Siding Master takes most of the guesswork out of installing vinyl siding the right way,” Albracht says.

The Siding Master is designed to work with most panels on the market. It also can be used with Pactiv's 4- by 8-ft. sheets of 1/2-in. insulation with channels cut to receive the strips as well as Progressive Foam Products' contoured insulation with Channel-Cut Technology.

According to Albracht, the siding strips also add a higher wind-load capacity to panels, while still allowing them to expand and contract. Available early next year, the strips will be sold factory-direct to the contractor and through wholesale outlets.



Wolverine's Millenium Siding offers the Smartwall Technology System, which features a nail-tight flexible hem that nails securely to the wall. Each panel is suspended by 2,800 synthetic PermaFlex Suspension Cables, which are fusion-welded into extra-thick siding material.

“One of the challenges with remodeling is you can end up with wavy walls,” says Walt Hoyt, director, marketing communications for CertainTeed's Siding Products Group. “Houses can shift over time, but Millenium's flexible hem absorbs the dip or bow so the siding stays tight and you get a straight, smooth wall.”

Millenium is made to float over minor imperfections and to adjust to temperature changes. Laps remain together tightly because panels can move as the wall moves.

CertainTeed Vinyl Siding's 2002 product line includes the addition of SuperCorners. The one-piece product features a foam backing that adds rigidity, allowing one person to handle installation and eliminating the need for multicomponent corner systems.

"Contractors want to have a choice of styles but they want productivity as well," Hoyt says.

### **Education, training and support**

James Hardie puts a great deal of effort into the promotion of fiber-cement siding products. "Our biggest hurdle is education and awareness," says Michael Schmidt, marketing manager – remodeling. "We're going to great lengths to educate contractors."

Fiber-cement, which is growing in popularity in the remodeling market, still takes a small piece of the pie compared to vinyl. While Hardie's research shows that homeowners are typically very responsive to fiber-cement – for its durability, paintability, strength and aesthetics – it's often the remodeler's lack of awareness or flexibility that keeps it on the shelf.

Because fiber-cement requires different tools, techniques and extra time to install, many contractors have not been using it.

As a result, James Hardie has developed a program to help promote education and training. The Preferred Remodeler Program is a comprehensive system that includes training, in-home sales tips, lead generation and a rewards system.

A 100-page training manual discusses how fiber-cement is manufactured and how to work with it. There is also a 45-minute videotape included in the package. Sales tools include product samples, brochures, customized direct mailers and more.

Hardie's national advertising program generates thousands of website inquiries from interested homeowners. Preferred Remodelers are listed in the Remodeler Locator on the Hardie Web site, which drives potential clients to program participants in their localities.

Finally, the rewards program bounces a certain percentage of purchases back to remodelers in the form of Flexfunds. These credits can be used for co-op advertising, customized sales tools, James Hardie tools and apparel and more. According to Schmidt, Hardie also makes a large investment in face-to-face training. The labor shortage puts a strain on vinyl siding crews, but can be even more difficult for remodelers working with fiber-cement.

"We're doing a lot of training classes, hoping to increase the pool remodelers have to choose from. We've also done a lot of training with roofing crews. Roofing work tends to be cyclical, so when it's down you can teach them other skills," Schmidt says. "Remodelers can contact the company directly, or they can go through suppliers. A lot of our supply partners do on-site training as well."

Hardie also has 100 salespeople that make field calls. If a contractor wants to train a crew, a representative can plan a visit for face-to-face interactive training.

Alcoa Building Products' KnowledgeWorkx Resource Program ([www.alcoatraining.com](http://www.alcoatraining.com)) is a multifaceted program dedicated to helping contractors and distributors with issues such as sales and installation training. The KnowledgeWorkx Resource Center, located in Pittsburgh, serves as the home base. It offers a variety of courses for employees, distributors, contractors and vendors. ProTrain Seminars, a series of one- and two-day programs led by Alcoa trainers, are offered at facilities in Pittsburgh and Sidney, OH.

Other parts include the A+ Education Series, which offers training tapes and workbooks covering sales and installation; the E-Class Internet-based training technology; and HouseWorkx, a full-sized mobile training facility for on-site skills training.

The KnowledgeWorkx program relies heavily on flexibility, according to Larry Banas, director of training, and much of the training takes place at distributor locations around the country. The program will continue to expand, determined to help siding contractors and distributors succeed and heightening professionalism in the industry.

"If we all do our jobs as manufacturers, we can raise the bar for the entire industry," he says.