

Deck Maintenance Programs

When the deck is completed, your job should just be getting started



by Scott Burt

I know some pretty good deck builders who go to great lengths to create decks that are well-designed, well-engineered, and well-built. Yet many of them overlook what to me is the most important part of the deal: finishing and maintaining the deck. That's okay with me—it means more jobs for my finishing business—but I think they're missing a tremendous opportunity.

If you're a deck builder, what happens at the end of one of your typical projects? The deck looks great the day you sweep it off and load up your gear. Then, as soon as you pull out of the yard, the barbecue grill is rolled out, and the deck is splattered with grease, suntan lotion, and the family's favorite foods and beverages. Within a month, the elements begin to take a toll, the wood starts forming a protective gray layer, and water stains show up. All of this is probably happening even before your client's final check clears the bank, but you don't realize it because you're deep into your next project. Often, that is when my phone rings.

What Do We Do?

My New England-based contracting company specializes in wood finishing. Between the application of initial finishes and the restoration of older ones, we measure the decking we finish annually in miles rather than lineal



Located in the heart of Vermont's Green Mountains, this slope-side ipe deck hadn't been maintained since its installation 14 years ago. Note the drip line underneath the eaves.

feet. We've seen an increase in calls from clients inquiring about how to care for a new, but unfinished, deck.

Every wood species is different and every deck situation is unique—successfully finishing or refinishing a wood deck requires being an odd blend of forensic detective and math magician. When we arrive on the scene, the first thing we do is clean the deck, taking it back in time to the day you swept it off. Early-stage encounters typically require a low-pressure wash with mild cleaners, though sometimes there is a bit of power sanding too. It actually doesn't matter much if it is a month or a year after installation; the process is the same, with the only variable being the intensity of the cleaning products we use. Then, we cordon off the area to let it dry out for a few days before we return to finish it.

Of course, when we return to apply finish to the deck, we have to shut it down for a few more days of cure time. In a best-case scenario, the mini-restoration costs the customer a week and a half of recreation time on the deck, and even more time if the weather fails to cooperate.

After we've cleaned and oiled the deck, it will look at least 10 times better than when it was raw wood. In spite of the financial strain and inconvenience, the customer will have just witnessed the new deck go from looking its worst to look-

Tips for a Better Deck Finish

1. Use a penetrating finish rather than a film-forming coating.

This rule is especially true for ipe and similar tropical hardwood decking, but in my opinion it applies to all wood decks. Film-forming stains and clear finishes don't do well at all on ipe, and they require too much maintenance to use on other species of wood. Boat owners may point out that film-forming coatings are a traditional and proven finish for teak and similar woods, but what they don't mention is that varnish and similar finishes require regular seasonal maintenance. Homeowners are much less likely to scrape, sand, and refinish their decks every spring than they are their boat's woodwork.

2. Use penetrating oils—but don't use too much.

I have been told that ipe has the structural density of steel. Throw a piece in some water, and watch it sink. This density makes it a finishing anomaly. When you apply penetrating oil to softer woods, you can lay it on heavily and the wood will absorb it; ipe will spit most of the oil back out. The residue that is left behind will stay tacky for weeks, and then become a breeding ground for mildew.

3. Prefinish all six sides of the decking, and allow sufficient rack time for the finish to dry.

Prefinishing will extend the life cycle of the applied finish by blocking moisture absorption, especially on decks that are close to the ground, with minimal underside air circulation. The less moisture that wood absorbs, the less it will expand and contract, which will prolong the life of the finish. Remember, you get only one chance to prefinish the decking. Don't forget to coat the end-grain.

4. Do not apply finish using a sprayer, roller, or squeegee.

It may not be comfortable to apply a penetrating oil with a brush, but that's really the only way to do it properly. So get your kneepads on and do it the old-fashioned way, making sure you have plenty of clean rags to wipe up the excess. And be careful: Spontaneous combustion is a real danger with a pile of oil-soaked rags, so be sure to soak your used rags in a bucket of water and dispose of them properly.

5. Don't mislead the owner.

Hardwood-deck owners basically have two choices for aging their wood: Do no maintenance and let it turn silvery gray like teak furniture, or maintain it periodically (every year or two) so it will age with remarkable grace. And if they maintain their teak furniture every year or two, it too will look a lot better—and last a lot longer. —S.B.

ing remarkable. The deck now meets the important “look good/feel good/stay that way” test. Unfortunately, you—the deck builder—are not there.

Missed Opportunity

It is not unusual for clients to tell us that their deck builder advised them to let the

deck “weather” for a year prior to finishing. But homeowners who have recently spent \$15,000 on a new outdoor living space are generally less than thrilled to spend even more money on a process that would have cost half as much if it had been done at the time of installation. Besides, this adage probably doesn't

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This eight-year-old ipe deck has just been cleaned and will be ready for a new oil finish once it dries out. The beautiful tone of the water-soaked decking is a good indication of what its finished appearance should look like.

apply anymore even to pressure-treated decks, and it definitely doesn't apply to exotic tropical hardwoods like ipe.

Other clients have reported that their contractors told them, "It's ipe, it's maintenance free. It never needs to be finished. It'll never rot." While technically this is true, weathered tropical hardwoods fail the "look good/feel good/stay that way" test that I think drives customer satisfaction.



The author has maintained this lake-side ipe deck with Penofin Marine oil wood finish (penofin.com) since it was installed six years ago. He allows the oil to sit on the decking for about 20 minutes before wiping the excess off with a rag.

For those of us who connect the supply chain of building products to the end user, everything comes down to time and money. This is where either convenience or inconvenience is defined, and the choice is yours. If you can be a one-stop shopping experience, you can sell at a higher price. Providing the best initial solution is the gateway to a solid long-term relationship.

Service After the Sale

After one of our deck interventions, customers usually ask us how soon the process will have to be repeated, but not because they want to avoid maintaining their deck. Instead, they invariably want their deck to *always* look like it's just been refinished. This, of course, is possible only through annual maintenance. Depending on climate, exposure, and wear patterns, some decks may even require a semiannual maintenance program.

Annual maintenance is not an upsell. It's not like selling the optional two-year warranty on a device at Best Buy. It's not a warranty at all. It is simply service after the sale. And, as with the "stay looking and feeling good" criteria, the desire or need for it is subjective. That's why the best time to offer enhanced service is when the deck is looking its best.

Most home improvement decisions are made based on emotion. While logic may define budget parameters, emotional appeal has the final say. If people want it, they will figure out how to get it.

Therefore, we don't sell a "maintenance contract"; instead, we propose a plan based on a promise that we will continue to take care of the clients' deck going forward. Nine times out of 10, I do not have to initiate a sales discussion about deck maintenance. It just comes up.

The Bottom Line

While the cost to a client might be \$2,500 for the first-year restoration described above, we can do a maintenance coat for half that when we return in six to 12

months. Would you pay \$1,200 per year to maintain something that you now have an investment of \$17,500 in? You bet you would, and experience tells me that your customer would as well, especially when every time you maintain the deck, it looks better than the last time. Exotic hardwoods like ipe age like fine wine.

My recommendation? Include the cost of the finish up front. Wrap the \$1,200 into the initial delivery, and promise your client that you will return every six months for a quick inspection. Happy customers love to stay in touch with the contractor who made them happy. They will let you show their deck to prospective clients. They will send you pictures to put on your website. Their friends will want your number because you are the guy who built the ipe deck that even beverage spills cannot blemish.

You have to be organized and disciplined to wrap this service into your program, because the one time that you don't show up, you'll have blown it. No customers want to feel like you didn't have time for them, or worse, that your business wasn't sustainable enough to continue servicing them at the level you promised. Measured by customer retention, referrals, and additional service requests, maintenance is a profitable promise to keep.

For my finishing company, decks are a specialty service. But within your business, deck finishing should be a natural extension of what you already do. It is directly related—the next level to adding value and building better relationships. It's not about gaining a small percentage of sales volume through maintenance. Your reward is in the earned trust and loyalty that yields a deeper relationship with your clients. That is how exceptional service reputations are built and sustained. ♦

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