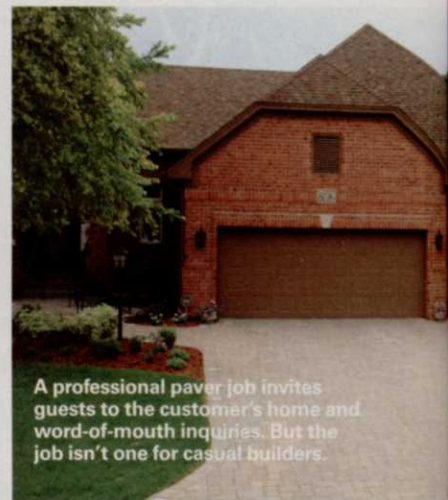




Proper planning and project management are required to make paver installation pay off.



A professional paver job invites guests to the customer's home and word-of-mouth inquiries. But the job isn't one for casual builders.

HARDSCAPES *made easy*

BY CURT HARLER

THE ROAD TO profits can be paved with pavers. But putting a fine edge on sales, installation and product choice spell the difference between a profitable job and just another week's work.

Success starts with proper training.

"I struggle with landscapers doing hardscaping," says Steve Jones, president of *Pave Tech Inc.*, Prior Lake, MN. "Too many landscapers are trying to fill their card for the season and see this as a good line. They need to know this requires a skill set they don't necessarily have."

A good sales pitch will include the basics and up-sells, and how you approach the customer is paramount.

"A contractor needs to understand even a basic walkway or patio is going to cost the customer \$2,000 to \$5,000," says Michael DiRienzo, vice president of *SEK Inc.* (*Snap Edge/Kerr Lighting*). That's a substantial amount of

money, especially when folks are tight with their hard-earned cash.

"Make sure you're as serious and professional as your consumer," he adds. "Dress professionally and educate the consumer about the work."

Many consumers aren't aware of upgrades that'll add to their property's value, or what they might look like when completed.

"Whether it be a seat wall, paver lighting, outdoor kitchen or fireplace, carry a photo album of work you've done, or use magazines to plant the seed," DiRienzo says. "Ask questions to learn their hobbies and interests. You might build an excellent outdoor kitchen, but if they don't entertain much or enjoy cooking outside, then you're not going to sell that upgrade."

Retaining walls differ from pavers in that they often support weight.

Jennifer Cargill Gardner, marketing manager, licensees and distributors for Atlanta-based *Tensar International Corp.*, suggests having a good system and design prepared by someone who's done it before.

Most states require an engineer's stamp on any wall over 3-ft. high. The limit is 2.5 feet in Florida.

There are two broad categories of retaining wall: structural, which uses a geo-grid for reinforcement, and gravity, which depends on the strength of the block to hold it. Gravity walls never should exceed three feet, Gardner says.

"If it's not done properly, you'll have problems with the law," she says. "Repairing a job done incorrectly is an enormous expense."

Gardner advises working with an installer who has at least five years experience with walls.

"A 2-ft.-high wall for a tree border will be different in design and installation than a 10-ft. wall with a driveway on top," she says.

There are various edging products on the market, but DiRienzo warns against using cheap ones.



"You get what you pay for," he says. "Do you consider the work you perform to be cheap or inexpensive? Why settle for less than good quality edging?"

A landscaper only needs to order one type of edging, which comes in a rigid state for straight applications. To make smooth curves, snip the back support. SEK has its own brand of polymeric sand, called Polysweep, that offers good sand gradation, superior strength and produces little to no hazing, mostly due to the fact there's no Portland cement in the mix design.

The New World Stoneworks system lets a mason install the stonework 10 times faster than traditional methods, plus there's no dusty or loud onsite cutting. The system, which qualifies a project for as many as four LEED

credits, is delivered by the Uxbridge, MA, firm to the jobsite palletized and ready to install. No cutting is required. Installation is by number and section, following the laminated instructions that arrive with the system.

Gardner recommends a proven retaining wall system like the Mesa retaining wall system.

"Hire a professional engineer to design the wall and an installer with experience in the type and height of wall proposed for the site," she says.

DiRienzo adds: "You can buy many different varieties of aggregates at several different price points, but you should be selecting and ordering the materials that'll meet industry specifications. That goes for the selection of sand, pavers, joint sands, as well as a premium-grade paver edge restraint."

Aside from little things like color, most wall grids cost about the same, Gardner says, suggesting to charge based on the total number of square feet of face area and include engineering fees, materials and installation.

Be aware if the job involves fill or cut. An engineer should be aware of loading conditions on top of the wall, as well as soil type.

"Examine every job for access, delivery options for receiving materials, size of project," DiRienzo says. "Break down every aspect of the job and calculate how many labor hours each aspect will require. Increased productivity will deliver labor savings, but understand what you can accomplish in a day. Make sure you're prepared with timing of material deliveries and the proper tools to perform those functions."

Jones says many landscapers neglect to count their own time and cost when making estimates. Or worse, they look at someone else's estimate and add or subtract a few bucks — not knowing about the other guy's figures.

Understand how many people you need to perform each function and keep the others busy.

"On too many jobs, I've seen where there are two people performing a function, and there are two other employees watching," DiRienzo says. *LM*

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