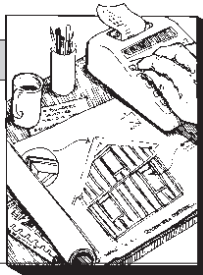


# Don't Make Yourself at Home

by Sal Alfano

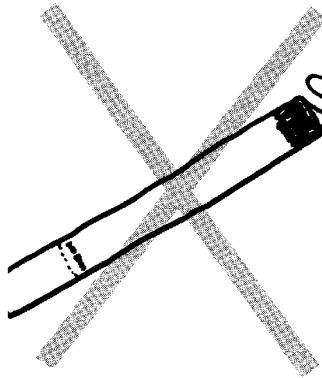


It's important to make a good first impression with the owners when you sell a job. But that impression is a fragile thing and must be nurtured throughout the project. This means that you and your employees must project an image that will inspire confidence and set the owners at ease. The more comfortable they are with your crew, the happier they'll be with the outcome of the job. They may even find it a little easier to overlook small problems or imperfections if they generally approve of the way the work was conducted. If you can't be charming every minute of every day, at least try to follow a few simple do's and don't's.

## Thank You For Not Smoking

Second-hand smoke is a big issue among office workers these days, but it's just as important in construction, especially in renovation, where work is often done in the owner's home. I always look around for signs of die-hard non-smokers: an American Lung Association sticker in the window, a "smoke-busters" decal, no ashtrays. I once had a client who worked for the American Cancer Society; I didn't bother to ask.

If you do ask and receive permission to smoke on the site, don't be a slob, use an ashtray. Even an owner who smokes may be put off coming home every night to cigarette butts lying around in soda cans and half-empty Styrofoam cups. Above all, don't leave butts floating



in the toilet bowl. Among other things, you may get blamed for future sewer line problems. And when the day's over, empty the ashtrays yourself; the owner shouldn't have to clean up after you.

Oddly, many builders think none of this applies on new construction sites, especially in rural settings. But consider that the owners are very excited and possessive about their new house, and that butt you just extinguished on their subfloor may defile the little fantasy they're living out. To them, a floor is a floor, not an ashtray. They may also, and with good reason, be worried about fire. It's easier and safer to confine your smoking to the great outdoors and keep your ashes out of the owners' sight.

## What's Mine is Yours

When it comes to the owners' personal possessions, it's not unreasonable to ask permission to use the phone, the bathroom, and the domestic water, but that's as far as it should go. If they offer the use of a radio or stereo, fine, but don't ask. It puts them on the spot, and even though they may say yes, it could be they're embarrassed to say no, and the situation breeds discomfort.

Even if you get the okay, you're better off leaving their stuff alone. It's amazing what you can get blamed for. If you absolutely have to have some tunes, and the owner has offered his radio, be careful, Don't spill paint or joint compound on it. Don't drop it. And leave it where you found it. This goes for furniture and whatever else you have to touch or move in the course of your work.

Your general policy should be "hands off." Don't read their



newspapers or books, don't watch the soaps on their tube, and stay out of the refrigerator. It's hard enough for some people to have strangers in their house all day and not suspect them of rifling the drawers.

Above all, be discreet. If you have to do some work in their bathroom, and it's not up to your standards of cleanliness, keep your thoughts to yourself. Most people will fall all over themselves apologizing for "the mess" even when the place is spotless. You can make them feel more comfortable by keeping your criticisms under your hat. This also applies to comments about the decor, their taste in colors or modem art, or that funny smell coming from behind the stove.

And don't use their tools unless it's an emergency. Their vacuum cleaner, their mop, their shovels and hoes are all off limits.

## Colorful Language

One of my subcontractors occasionally gets letters from clients thanking them for doing such a wonderful job, and quite often they mention the surprising absence of foul language among the workmen. Construction workers are renowned for their liberal use of four-letter words, but it's obvious that clients

are very aware of and often offended by "colorful" language. Despite the enlightened state of modern movie scripts and literature, most people are not accustomed to hearing an endless stream of oaths. Some words are more offensive than others. Find substitutes. "Gosh" is somewhat overused today in the political arena, but I haven't heard "gee whizz" or "golly bum" in a while.

## Roach Coach

Food on the site can create a sticky situation. I make it a point to adhere to a rigid schedule of coffee and lunch breaks. For one thing, the owner gets nervous if these become extended, wondering when the work will get done. And on a cost-plus job, I always explain that the crew gets paid for coffee break, but not for lunch. It saves arguing over labor charges.

Clean up after yourself. We all do work in winter, but we sometimes forget that snow melts in the spring. I once had a client tell me that he found over 75 Styrofoam cups blown all over his property. One of my subs had dumped their coffee cups into the snow the whole time they were working at the site, and in the spring they came up like mushrooms. Always provide trash containers, and empty them yourself. The owner has enough of his own garbage to contend with.

## Good Times

Punctuality pays dividends. If the crew is supposed to be there at 8 a.m. and they don't roll in until 9, the owner may begin to wonder if there aren't other details they're not attending to. I always ask about the owner's routine as well, and if I can adjust my starting time to fit his or her schedule, I do. Not everyone is accustomed to the sound of a tablesaw at 7:05 in the morning.

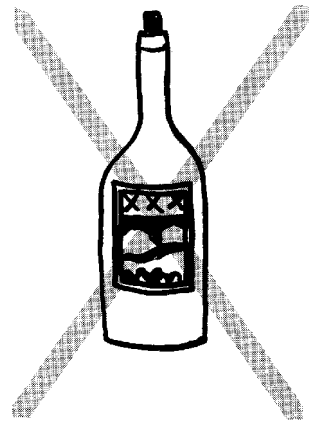
## You Are What You Wear

I've never had a need for a strict dress code, but the potential is there. You don't have to buy printed T-shirts or company uniforms, but avoid the raggedy look. Torn clothing will make you look more like a bum than "Flash Carpenter." Certain kinds of clothing may identify your crew in the minds of the owners with unsavory characters stereotyped in movies and on TV. Sleeveless black T-shirts cut off above the navel, for example, may remind them more of the Hell's Angels than a skilled craftsman. T-shirts with witty sayings are okay, but anything bordering on the obscene ought to be censored.

## Miller Time

Alcohol has no business in the workplace. It's dangerous to everyone on the site to have someone working with staging or power equipment while they're drunk. While it's easy to convince your crews that they can't drink on the site, it's a bit harder to tell them they shouldn't drink before they get there, or even the night before. But a heavy hangover can be just as much of a problem.

A six-pack on Friday afternoon after all the week's work is completed is a popular ritual with some carpenters. If you allow this, make sure the mess is cleaned up afterward.



When the owners come out to the site Saturday morning and find a lot of empties lying around, their imaginations will run wild.

## Common Sense

Some things are obvious: don't flirt with their teenage daughter; don't tolerate theft; don't use the end table for a sawhorse. A little common sense and good manners will go a long way toward building good will.

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