

# CABINET REFACING

## The Big Cover-Up



BY JIM CAVANAGH

New oak doors and drawers spruced up these tired old cabinets. Thin oak veneer (inset) was laminated to face frame and end panels.



## For a low-end kitchen facelift and quick turnaround, try cabinet refacing



Figure 1. Minor on-site cabinetwork, such as this microwave surround, can dress up a refacing job. But with too much custom work, refacing is no longer a bargain.

Your client wants a new kitchen, but has a limited budget. You have three choices: You can tell him it can't be done; you can sell him the cheapest cabinets and accessories you can find; or you can suggest refacing the existing cabinets.

When you reface cabinets, you cover all the flat surfaces, including the face frame, with thin veneer, plastic laminate, or veneer plywood. Then you install new doors, hardware, and drawers (or drawer fronts). You may also make some minor modifications to the cabinets.

Refacing cabinets can be a good deal for both the customer and the contractor. When done, the refaced cabinets can brighten up a drab kitchen and often cost less than cabinet replacement.

### Reface or Replace?

First determine exactly what the customer expects to get out of the job. An inexpensive basic job can quickly grow past the point of cost effectiveness if you try to make a "totally new" kitchen.

Consider two questions:

- Does the existing layout work?
- Are the cabinets sound?

If the present layout works, if it's efficient, has decent storage, and the customer likes it, then the job will be a piece of cake. But if you have to move a sink, stove, or refrigerator, or significantly modify the cabinets to accommodate modern size appliances or new drawers or roll outs, this may tip the balance in favor of the new cabinets (see Figure 1).

Major structural changes to cabinets, or cabinets that were poorly made to begin with, are not worth refacing (see "Can This Cabinet Be Saved?").

Refacing isn't always cheaper. In fact, one reason refacing appeals to buyers is that it can provide much nicer doors, drawers, and hardware than they'd find on low-end cabinets. Moderate or high-priced cabinets will make the refacing option look better. This comparison is important to the decision and depends heavily on the responsibility and integrity of the contractor and the tastes and standards of the

buyer. I frequently do \$30,000 kitchen remodels, but this investment is beyond the reach of most refacing customers.

We do cost estimates for both refacing and new cabinets. This satisfies the customer. If refacing looks like the way to go, work with the client to select the laminate or wood species and stain. Also work together to choose the hardware and style of the new doors and drawers.

### Many Possibilities

You can reface a kitchen in a number of ways. The cabinet frames can be covered with a thin veneer, laminates, or 1/4-inch plywood. Laminates give a modern, European look if solid colors are used, but a somewhat tacky, fixed-up look if a wood-grained design is applied. The new doors can also be wood, in any style, or high- or low-pressure laminate.

**Veneers.** Thin veneers (1/16 inch or less) work well if the cabinets are perfectly smooth. They come in different wood species with or without a glue backing. I buy mine from a mail-order hardwood supplier or local hardwood

## CABINET REFACING PRODUCT INFORMATION

### Cabinet Doors and Drawers

Conestoga Wood  
Specialties, Inc.  
P.O. Box 68  
Earl, PA 17519  
215/445-6701

Facelifters Home  
Systems, Inc.  
800 Snediker Ave.  
Brooklyn, NY 11207  
718/257-9700

Porta Door  
65 Cogwheel Ln.  
Seymour, CT 06483  
203/888-6191

Quality Wood Products, Inc.  
7200 E. Truman Rd.  
Kansas City, MO 64126  
816/231-4601

Towncraft Wood Products, Inc.  
9616 E. 55th  
Kansas City, MO 64133  
816/356-8844

### Hardware

Julius Blum, Inc.  
Cabinet and Furniture  
Hardware Mfg.  
Blum Industrial Park  
Hwy 16 Lowesville  
Stanley, NC 28164  
704/827-1345  
800/438-6788

Grass America, Inc.  
Box 1019  
1202 Highway 66 S.  
Kernersville, NC 27284  
800/334-3512  
919/996-4041

Häfele America Co.  
203 Feld Ave.  
P.O. Box 1590  
High Point, NC 27261  
919/889-2322

Häfele America Co.  
(Western Division)  
16926-A South Keegan Ave.  
Carson, CA 90746  
213/604-3713

—Compiled by Jim Cavanagh and  
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dealer, depending on what species of wood the customer wants.

Thin veneers are easy to work with and apply. I cut large pieces of veneer on a table saw, with a piece of cardboard under the veneer to stabilize it while the saw is running. I cut the piece 1/8 inch oversize and trim it with a router and wood scraper when it's in place. For edge material, I use veneer that comes pre-cut in 13/4-inch by 12-foot rolls.

With thin veneer, I use contact cement because it provides a barely visible glue line and perfect mating with



Figure 2. Overlay panel doors with self-closing hinges are easy to mount on refaced cabinets.

the substrate. You can also use a veneer with peel-away backing, but the bond is not as reliable. You can trim the veneer with a utility knife and/or sandpaper. The edges are thin enough so that they are virtually invisible at the corners.

To get a good job, however, you must make sure that all seams and joints are even on the surface. Any unevenness will show through the thin material. You need to sand or fill high and low spots before you spread on the contact cement. Also, make sure you put these veneers on very clean surfaces. You may have to wash, sand, or strip the finish before you can trust the adhesive for long-term holding.

**Paneling.** My favorite technique, because it's quick and covers almost all problems, is to use 1/4-inch hardwood-faced plywood laminated to the frames and end-panels. I use panel adhesive, shoot 1/2-inch brads or staples into the paneling, and fill the holes with color putty. I prefer overlay doors and surface-mounted self-closing hinges to finish the job (see Figure 2).

I order my doors from a local cabinet company or from one of the larger suppliers like Quality, Towncraft, Porta Door, or Conestoga. And I have the company that makes the doors pre-stain the veneer or hardwood plywood to match the door stain. I have the doors made 3/4 to 1 inch larger than the openings both ways. This allows me room to jockey the doors until they are plumb and level and cover the opening. I clamp a level to the bottom rail to set the doors on, and the entire run looks perfect level, regardless of whether the cabinets are level or not.

**Laminate.** If you want to use plastic laminate to reface cabinets, you may have a more difficult job finding a local source for doors and drawers. One company that specializes in supplying contractors with refacing doors, drawers, and material is Facelifters, in Brooklyn, N.Y. ("Product Information"). But the job may still be difficult because the hinges that give the Euro-look cabinets their touch of class aren't designed to

## Can This Cabinet Be Saved?

Even if the kitchen layout is decent and the customer is happy with the existing work triangle, the cabinets themselves may not be suitable for refacing. Often the frames are buckled and twisted, the doors racked, and the floors and walls so out of square that no amount of covering can straighten them. If this is the case, don't take on the project. If a cabinet is racked, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to get the new doors to fit.

I once did a refacing job for a major kitchen company that really shouldn't have been done. There were 50-inch-high doors from 15- to 21-inches wide. Three of the corners touched the face frame, but the fourth corner stuck out an inch. I had to shim the top and middle hinge, install a mechanical catch at the bottom (opposite the hinge side), and purposely warp the door over a three-day period with

weights and a humidifier to get it to work. The customers haven't called me back, so it either worked, or they don't want me near their kitchen. The store couldn't have made much on the job considering the extra materials, trim, and the time involved in rebuilding one cabinet and dickering with the rest of the doors and drawer heads. I turned in an extra 26 hours. The job looked okay at a glance, but a practiced eye could tell that some serious sins had been covered up. I certainly wasn't proud of the job when I left.

Most jobs aren't that extreme. A hammer, some screws, and a belt sander can do wonders to "level and plumb" cabinets that are slightly out of kilter. I like using an overlay door because it covers openings that are slightly out of square. Illusion is what refacing is all about, and no one stops to look at a door opening when they're reaching for the peanut butter.—J.C.

fit on cabinets with face frames or cabinets that have face frames made thicker by the extra layer of laminate. You must be careful to use the correct hinge. Look into Blum, Grass, and Häfele which offer some good hinge choices for face-frame cabinets and have technical information available on how to install the different type of hinges.

### A Typical Plywood Job

When you start a reface job, remove all doors, drawers, and trim, including any non-cabinet trim that may interfere with the work. Clients can leave their food in the cabinets (few want to) because most of the dust is created in the garage or porch, the on-site shop. If the counter tops and any tile are to be replaced, remove them. You want bare boxes to work with, and a clean room.

When the room is ready, set up shop. A table saw with a paneling blade, power miter box, compressor and shooter, hand and power planes, and belt sander are the tools you need. You'll also need a good panel adhesive (such as Sonneborn 200 or Dap 4000), thinner, color putty, and spray lacquer. For lacquer, I like to use Delf; it dries quickly and comes in convenient 13-ounce canisters.

Next, take care of any mechanical

changes. These could be additional outlets, under-cabinet lighting, phone lines, intercoms, plumbing, or duct-work changes. Also, if there are any layout changes, like cutting in a dishwasher, compactor, hood valance, or any cabinet changes, get them done now so that the refacing can proceed without interruption. I'll do simple cabinets, bookshelves, nooks, or small drawers on the job. Small jobs like this are nuisance work for local cabinet shops, so it's cheaper and faster to do them yourself.

Job flow. I generally rip pieces for the stiles and rails first, and plane down the widths to fit the face-frame dimensions. Then I rip the larger pieces for the cabinet end panels and cross-cut them to length on a table saw.

I install the stiles first, setting the bottoms flush with the cabinet bottoms. Cut the rail pieces a little long so you can bow them a bit. They will spread out against the stile pieces, creating a perfect fit. Apply a bead of panel adhesive and attach the strips with small staples (or brads). This bonds the material securely to the old cabinets. The prep work, especially with 1/4-inch material, is negligible.

Make the new end stiles flush with the existing corner. Then cut a piece of solid material, usually 1 inch by 1/4- or



Figure 3. This new valance, at left, is locked in place with a narrow hardwood strip used to trim out the cabinet corner. The strip, at right, can also be set flush with the 1/4-inch veneer panel on the side of the cabinet.

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5/16-inch thick, and apply it to the end of the cabinet, flush with the new front. This covers the edge of the paneling and means you don't have to miter the corner. Then rip the end panel to fit between this solid piece and the wall.

When you have a valance above the sink or window, you may want to change this procedure slightly (see Figure 3). In this case, skin the end of the cabinet first, making it flush with the face frame. Then lay the stile over the butt end, and cover the joint with a wood strip.

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**As with all remodeling, dimensional compromise is the rule. Trust your eye, not your tape or level.**

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When all of the skins are applied, put up any additional trim, such as the cornice, gallery, plate rail, or base shoe. Fill the holes with color putty, and touch up seams. Wipe the color-putty residue off with a rag, and then shoot the entire job with a coat of spray lacquer.

It's easier to keep the tops of doors level if you use the trim as a reference. As with most remodeling, dimensional compromise is the rule. Trust your eye, not a tape or level.

When hanging the doors, the important points to remember are to cover the entire opening, keep the doors symmetrical with each other, and fiddle with

them until they open and close properly. You may have to shim or bend a hinge here and there. A helpful trick is to double-up on the felt pads, using two if one doesn't quite touch the frame.

You have to use face-mounted hinges with 1/4-inch panel veneer because you increase the stile and rail thickness to 1 inch. (Most wrap-type hinges are made for 3/4-inch stock.) Also, be sure to use 5/8-inch screws that will go all the way through the paneling and secure the hinge to the solid frame stock.

#### **Final Touch**

The final touch is to sand and finish the paneling edges that are visible in the door openings. Also, sand the bottom edges. Set the counter tops, tile, sink, and appliances. On about half the jobs I do, the counter tops are in good shape. On the others, I replace with new ones. From start to finish, the job takes two to three days on-site. Compared to a full-blown, long-lasting kitchen remodel, these jobs fly by.

Refacing can be good business. The client is less distressed and the work usually progresses without any big unknowns. But it's only a face lift, and it doesn't completely erase all the wrinkles. If this compromise is acceptable to the client and if you've used good planning and installation techniques, the results can be pleasing and profitable and save your client a good deal of money. ■

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