

BY GEORGE WEISSGERBER

Unit Prices for Labor

In my previous column (Oct/13), I began a discussion about how I create a “unit” for a unit price estimate. I used framing 20 linear feet of a typical 8-foot-high exterior wall as an example and described how to do the materials take-off using a sketch.

Labor is more difficult to estimate. The time it takes to do a task is subject to a multitude of issues that have had estimators pulling out their hair for decades. While there is no “silver bullet” formula for estimating labor that will work for everybody, there are some procedures that I am fairly sure will not work for anybody. The most common is the “guesstimate.” This seat-of-the-pants method depends solely on the experience and ability of the estimator. It may work for an individual estimating his own labor on a limited number of projects, but beyond that, this method is the most risky and least accurate.

Other contractors rely on books or websites that publish labor rates for construction tasks. Some specify costs; others provide man-hours to which contractors apply their own labor rates. Similarly, estimating software often comes with cost databases that include labor

rates. These resources can be reasonably accurate, as long as you adjust for geographic variations and understand the assumptions they make about working conditions, crew size and ability, and other factors.

The best way to get labor numbers that truly reflect your operation is to keep good job-cost histories and feed that data back into your estimating system (see “Using a Simple Timecard to Collect Labor History,” Jun/13). If you haven’t yet implemented that system, you can jump start it by choosing a single task, like wall framing, and keeping close track of man hours used over the course of several similar jobs. Then use that data to calculate average labor hours required for the task based on the actual abilities of your crews and the actual conditions on your jobsites.

BOARD-FOOT METHOD

Whether you use published cost data or your own records, here’s a method that applies a unit of time to the material quantities used—the table (top left) shows how it applies to our 20-foot wall example. Published cost data usually provides labor in terms of hours per board-foot (hrs/BF) and hours per square-foot (hrs/SF). To convert your own labor data to these units, add together all of the framing labor on all of the jobs for which you’ve been keeping records—the more data, the better—then divide the total by board feet of lumber and square feet of sheathing used on all of those jobs. This will give you hrs/BF or hrs/SF to plug into the “Hours” column.

The bottom table shows how to find total labor to frame our 20-foot wall by multiplying BF and SF of material times hrs/BF and hrs/SF. Board feet equals thickness x width (in inches) x length (in feet) ÷ 12. (For example, an 8-foot 2x4 contains 5.33 BF — (2x4x8) ÷ 12). “Total Hours” (6.64) would be plugged into the labor section of the “Item or Task Worksheet” (Aug/13) and multiplied by the hourly crew cost to arrive at the cost of framing labor.

Next time, I will show how to compile all we have discussed into a complete estimate using “assemblies.”

Labor Hours per Material Unit

Work Type	Description	Hours	Unit
Wall framing	2 x 4 studs at 16" o.c. & plates	.02	Hrs/BF
Headers	Dbl 2 x 8	.02	Hrs/BF
Wall sheathing	4 x 8 x 7/16	.014	Hrs/SF

To use your own data to find hrs/BF or hrs/SF, divide average hours used for each framing task by total SF or BF of materials used. (BF = thickness x width [in inches] x length [in feet] ÷ 12). This table shows figures for tasks associated with framing and sheathing a typical exterior wall.

Total Hours for 20-Foot Wall

Component	LF or SF	Dimension	Total	Units	Hrs/Unit	Subtotal	
Studs/Plates	288	2	4	192	BF	.02	3.84
Headers	21	2	8	28	BF	.02	.56
Sheathing	20	-	8	160	SF	.014	2.24
Total Hours							6.64

This table shows how total labor hours are calculated for a typical 20-foot-long exterior wall by multiplying hrs/BF or hrs/SF by total material quantities for each of three framing components.

George Weissgerber, a senior vice president at Case Design/Remodeling, in Bethesda, Md., developed the company's estimating system and handyman division.

Finding Strong Keywords

BY APRIL WILSON

Search engine optimization (SEO) used to focus on computer codes with names like “meta tags,” “meta keywords,” and “meta descriptions” that lived behind the scenes on your website. It was considered best practice to repeat about 20 of the same keywords over and over to “convince” the search engines that your website should be on the first page of search results for those keywords.

In the new search landscape, however, the old “meta” strategy can actually penalize your website. So what do you need to know to make sure your site is ready for the new rules?

CHOOSING THE RIGHT KEYWORDS

Today, SEO is all about subject matter expertise. Your first step should be to audit the keywords you have competed on in the past; if you have a long list, you need to pare it down to no more than three or four subject terms.

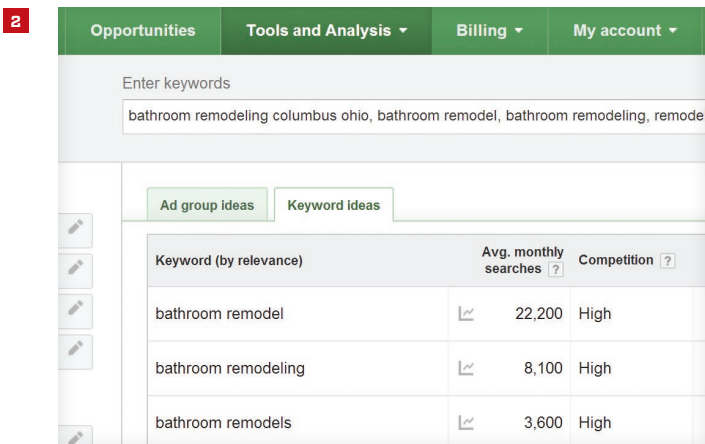
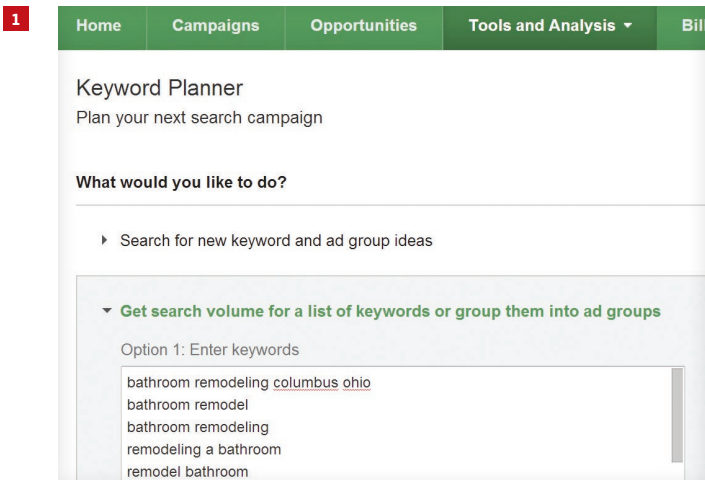
For example, your list might look like this (if you own a remodeling company in Columbus, Ohio):

- bathroom remodeling columbus ohio
- bathroom remodel
- bathroom remodeling
- remodeling a bathroom
- remodel bathroom
- bathroom remodeling cincinnati
- remodeling bathroom
- bathroom remodels
- how to remodel a bathroom
- bathroom remodel columbus ohio
- bathroom remodeling companies
- bathroom remodeling columbus
- bathroom remodel pictures
- cincinnati bathroom remodeling
- bathroom remodelers
- columbus bathroom remodeling

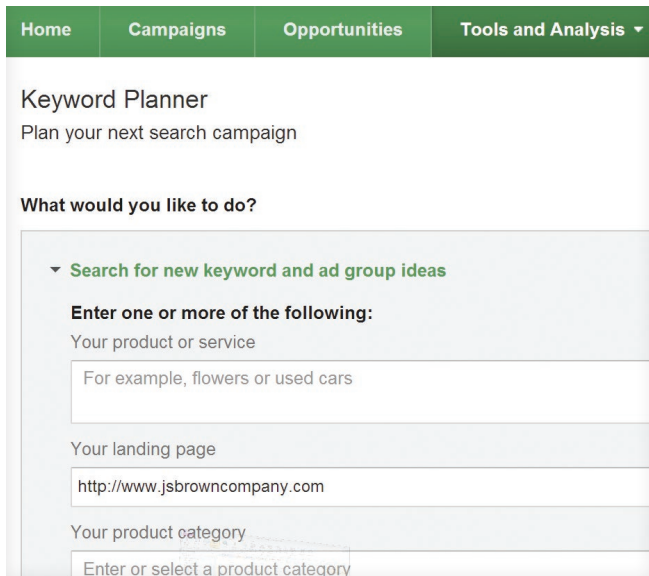
Fortunately, the Google AdWords Keyword Planner provides tools to help you sift through your list and choose the best four terms. Go to the Keyword Planner home screen, choose Tools and Analysis, select “Get search volume for a list of keywords ...” and, under “Option 1: Enter Keywords,” paste in the list **(1)**.

(You will need to be signed in to access Keyword Planner, and if you don’t already have a Google AdWords account, you will need to create one before you can use the tool. The account is free unless you are running an AdWords campaign, so just skip the section of account set-up that asks you to enter financial or billing information. If you already have an AdWords account, you won’t be charged for any of the research unless you choose to buy a keyword.)

When you click the blue Get Search Volume button at the bottom of the screen, you’ll get a list of results. By default, Google puts these into “Ad group ideas”; instead, click on the tab labeled “Keyword ideas” to get the full list **(2)**. The trick is to figure out which keywords are high in search volume and low in competition. Keep in mind: There is no “right” answer, and it



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may take some trial and error. The important thing is to choose three or four terms that focus on your main product, optimize for your local audience by focusing on your location, and get more traffic for your website.

FINDING THE RIGHT KEYWORDS

If you don't have a list of keywords, or if you do but aren't sure which ones best describe your business, you can use this same tool to find relevant keywords. Open Tools and Analysis again from the main menu, but this time select "Search for new keyword and ad group ideas." Instead of cutting and pasting a list of terms, put your website address into the box labeled "Your landing page" (3).

When you click the blue Get Ideas button at the bottom of the screen, Google will display a list of relevant keywords it has detected on your website. Use this list to repeat the process of analyzing search volume and competition to identify the three or four terms that best describe the main focus of your business.

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Current Text

ABC Construction Inc. is a quality, full-service remodeling and design firm offering unsurpassed customer service, integrity, and superior craftsmanship since 1982.

Having worked extensively with leading Rockwall architects and designers, our blend of "old school" craftsmanship and the latest technology has earned us high acclaim with the industry as well as with our clients.

90% of ABC's business is made up of previously satisfied homeowners and referrals.

SEO-Optimized Text

We are remodeling home professionals and general contractors specializing in home renovation.

If you live in Dallas, Mesquite, Garland, Rowlett, or Rockwall and you are looking for a partner in your home remodeling project, we would love to earn your business.

Over 90% of our current clients are repeat customers, having left favorable reviews for our work on their home renovation projects.

USING KEYWORDS ON YOUR WEBSITE

Once you have your short list of key terms, take a critical look at the text on your website. Look for redundancy on each page. For any term used more than twice, delete all additional instances. Make sure every page of your website mentions at least one of the three or four keywords you have chosen (4).

You want your writing to sound natural—you don't want to sound like a robot or machine by repeating the same terms over and over. If it doesn't make sense to you when you read it out loud, you shouldn't have it in your website copy.

Once you've found the right keywords and have eliminated any text currently on your website that doesn't focus on those subjects, the next step is to restructure the content in your navigation to reflect these changes. Having valuable content is a critical component of Google's next update, called Hummingbird. We will cover that in the next article.

April Wilson is CEO and president of Digital Analytics 101, an online marketing company. digitalanalytics101.com