

## Price Is Just Part of the Package

**Paul Mantoni is a remodeling contractor from Terryville, Conn. A substantial and growing portion of his business is deck building.**

**PDB:** Why are you pushing deck sales?

**Mantoni:** To be honest, because I like building them. There's more chance to be a craftsman than in some of the other work I do, like siding.

**PDB:** What's your market like?

**Mantoni:** Saturated. Most of my work is in Bristol. It's a pretty big blue-collar town, and the homeowners tend to be price conscious. A couple of hundred dollars difference in price can mean getting or not getting the job. It's a funny place to start a business, but it's where I grew up.

**PDB:** How long have you been in business there?

**Mantoni:** Since 1987.

**PDB:** How do you sell decks in that environment?

**Mantoni:** Reputation and honesty pay off in the long run. I've lost jobs because I tell potential customers that I can't start for a couple of months. They'll hire someone who says they can start sooner, but who ends up putting the customer off again and again. Sometimes, I'd have finished the job before the guy I lost it to. Some of those people have said, "Paul, next time, we're calling you." And they do.

I try to find ways to make myself stand out that don't rely so much on price. For example, I send out letters to the neighbors before starting a job to introduce my business, Exteriors

Plus. The letter gives them contact information, and it says that if they have any problem — say, garbage blowing onto their property — to let me know, and it will be taken care of. That letter says a lot about how I do business, and it's an inexpensive way to generate leads.

Good help is another thing. My helper, Kenny, has been with me for seven years. He knows how I do things, and I pay him as well as I can. I don't sweat the little stuff, either. If he spends half an hour talking to the homeowner, he's representing me.

**PDB:** Are there any new products out there that excite you?

**Mantoni:** Composite decking and hidden fasteners. It's an upsell in this market, but people who've had a treated-pine deck want low-maintenance alternatives. I went to high school with the guys who make Tiger Claw fasteners, and I've used them on a lot of decks. I've had other guys tell me that they've struggled with hidden fasteners, but when I hear how they installed the fasteners, it was pretty clear they just didn't follow the manufacturer's instructions.

I love LedgerLok screws for attaching the ledger. They're a lot faster to install than 1/2-inch lags, and the manufacturer says they're stronger. No predrilling, I just put the impact driver on them and go.

**PDB:** How do you get customers in such a tight market to go for upgrades like hidden fasteners and composite decking?

**Mantoni:** I make sure they're aware of the options when I make the sales call. I keep a binder that's not only got

photos of my previous work, but that's got product brochures. The last thing I want to hear when I'm collecting the final payment is, "The deck looks great, but I wish I'd known about such and such a product."

**PDB:** Got any pet peeves about the deck industry?

**Mantoni:** Oh, sure. The biggest one is other contractors who undersell me, don't pull permits, and do work that's not up to code. It's not just the unfair competition, but the fact that someone can get hurt.

**PDB:** Do you ever use subcontractors?

**Mantoni:** Not as employees, if that's what you mean. But if a customer is interested in something like a new roof, I have reliable guys I can call on. And it doesn't pay to nickel and dime subs, either. By finding a good sub, and paying his rate, I know he's there when I need him. I keep a log of what subs charge for jobs, and I can give the customer a price right away based on my previous relationship with the sub. This is a great customer service I can offer that doesn't take up a lot of my time on work I don't want to do.

**PDB:** How do you manage some of the heavy work, like setting a girder for a second-floor deck, with just you and Kenny?

**Mantoni:** That's one advantage of working in the town where I grew up. I learned carpentry working for a long-time builder in town. I left that job on good terms. He's still in business, and we help each other out sometimes. It's good to maintain relationships like that. ♦