

Radical Change: The Past 25 Years in the Coatings Industry

By David Boyd,
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As an industrial painting contractor, like contractors in other trades, I've seen and responded to numerous radical changes in my industry and in general business conditions during the past 25 years. It's been a roller coaster ride and continues to be, so much so that it's hard to have any perspective. But, at the invitation of JPCL, I've tried to describe the major changes I've seen and some of the impacts they've had.



GPS system: Courtesy of Nextar Inc.

Information Technology

Computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices have radically changed all our lives in the past 25 years. GPS (global positioning system software), for instance, now has the ability to draw a virtual wall around your project, area, or neighborhood, and can alert management when a worker drives outside the approved area.

General contractors have stopped "lending" plans and specifications to subcontractors and instead expect subs to do take-offs and estimates online. Scanners and computers have completely done away with the old triangle, scales, and pencil. More payments are coming wired to your account with an e-mail advising you. BIM (Business Information Modelling) is just materializing.

Software and data programs have changed safety reporting, equipment maintenance, and even RFI (Radio Frequency Identification) tags to alert us when inventory gets low or equipment changes from one location to another. A whole book could be written about getting product information over the Internet

rather than from the local salesperson, which is both a good and bad change.

Changes in Business Conditions

First, there is the fall of capitalism as we know it in the U.S. Who would have thought that in 2009, large banks and financial institutions would be bankrupt and small painting contractors would be looking for small community banks to insure the safety of their deposits? Who would have thought that insurance companies, bonding companies, and pension and benefit companies would be so shaky that

we would be asking them for financial assurance to fulfill our fiduciary responsibility?

Who would have thought that our little firms needed to worry about pollution policies that are backed by AIG and whether AIG will leave us holding the bag? (Most pollution policies for lead jobs are multi-year and require payment in advance.)

All of us over 55 were probably wondering how all those "rich" couples could afford million dollar houses. "Both must be doctors" was the usual answer. Little did we know that people were buying without down payments, and that there were mortgages that required only interest payments. Now who knows how our children and grandchildren will be able to pay the trillions of dollars for loans that the government has borrowed in their names?

A second major change in business conditions is the movement of manufacturing from the U.S. to other countries. How many painting contractors depended upon the auto industry for large yearly painting programs? Hundreds of painters and thousands of gallons of paint were mobilized yearly for GM and Chrysler projects.

When I was calling on customers in the pulp and paper indus-



Early model laptop computer

try, we had a rule of thumb about the size of the business. A typical mill would spend over \$150,000 per paper machine per year. Much of this business has gone offshore.

In fact, except for refineries, all of the large manufacturing jobs are going to non-U.S. firms. Even the Federal government's stimulus package can't enforce its "buy American" clauses.

Several years ago, I put my foot down. "We will buy no more computers that come with a "made in China" stamp." But I found out that no computers were actually assembled in the U.S. anymore, or if they were U.S.-made, their parts came from outside the U.S. Friends remind me this is why I can afford my laptop, notebook, and mini-Acer computer. But still, a little voice keeps whispering in my ear, "you don't paint any plants in China."

Changes to Labor Conditions

Finding qualified workers in the field has become very difficult in the past 25 years. In 1985, we would regularly bid new construction and maintenance work up to 1000 miles from our home office without having to question where we would get the workers for the project. Today, the question arises even 75 miles from home. We can debate the reasons this is so, but the problem has to be addressed on every project.

One reason is the decline of unions. Union membership has declined dramatically since 1985, and this has made a huge difference in the way all painting firms do business.

Additionally, niches have developed that bypass the normal union membership route of acquiring workers. In our area, these niches include paperhanging, sheetrock taping, floor stripping, reglazing of windows, and faux finishing. This work is now priced by the linear foot, square foot, piece, roll, etc., and the people who do this will work nights, weekends, and holidays at a regular rate of pay.

The Hispanic workforce has also created a dramatic change.

Here is a group of people who came to America to work. They work hard and send money home to their families. They do not complain about working conditions, and they work safely and steadily. Their values are similar to the values you find in local churches in the South. One problem is communication—how to train them and how to understand their culture. Another problem is that our government needs to make clear, commonsense laws that businesses can follow in dealing with immigrant labor.

Proving Your Qualifications

Twenty-five years ago you could sell your painting services to an engineer and never worry that he might find out you had not done similar jobs before. Today, customers demand to see your SSPC QP or ISO 9000 series certifications. They want to know if your technicians have received certification from SSPC on the use of plural component pumps.

Certification goes on and on—OSHA 10, OSHA 30, scaffolding competent person, respirator fit testing, drug testing, criminal background reports, abrasive blasting certification, MSHA (Mine Safety & Health Administration) certifications, and our own internal training requirements. Our training catalog has over 100 normal training classes that individuals must try to complete.

New Cleaning and Coating Technologies

There have been innumerable changes to coatings formulations and types and to the equipment that contractors use. Here are a few that stand out.

Soft media (sponge) Blasting: Years ago I called a vendor and gave him a unique problem. How can I wash surfaces of steel 60 feet in the air, and do so without using a rag and detergent? The vendor told me he had learned about sponge blasting at a recent conference, invented by a guy named Bill Lynn. While this invention has still not reached its full potential, its ability to clean steel, concrete, glass, wood, and other substrates without an expen-



Plural-component spray application: Courtesy of Graco Inc.

sive containment structure will make it a "green" surface preparation method of choice in the future.

Plural-Component Pumps: Today, volatile organic compound (VOC) and hazardous air pollutants (HAPS) regulations have taken the solvents out of the coatings. Thank goodness! In my opinion, the smartest developments in our business involve heat curing and getting the viscosity correct on super high-performance coatings so that these catalyzed materials can be applied with plural-component pumps. Twenty-five years ago, we could buy an airless pump for \$3500; today, plural-component rigs start at \$10,000 and can go as high as \$200,000 with trailers, special heated lines, spare parts, and other accessories.

Fluoropolymer Urethanes: And it will hold its color and gloss for how many years? 10...20...30? Twenty-five years ago, no painter would have believed this.

Epilogue

This past year, a local grammar school in my area asked a painting contractor to come out and blast clean a small entrance canopy. The firm loaded a six-bag pot, went and did the clean-

ing, and billed the school for \$3500. It was then discovered that the steel canopy had been coated with lead-based paint, and the blast debris containing the lead got into the library and cafeteria as well as all over the school's grounds. After \$90,000 worth of remediation and the closing of the school for 3 months, the project was finally completed. Has any industry changed as much as ours?



David R. Boyd is the president of Vulcan Painters, Inc., an ISO 9001-certified painting contracting business founded in 1952 that serves customers in the Southeast. The business specializes in industrial and commercial painting projects, blasting and coating structural steel and sewer pipe. Mr. Boyd is Co-Chair of the DC 77 Training Fund, serves on the board of directors of Paintsquare and Axiom Manufacturing Co., and is a past chairman of the Industrial Painting Committee and past president of the PDCA Southeastern Council. In 2007 he was recognized by SSPC for his exceptional contributions to the coatings industry in education. **JPCL**

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