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Reuse and Recycling Tips for Builders

Save money and prevent waste by reusing and recycling common job site materials.

By Matt Alderton

Roll-off bins are a common fixture on any job site. Large, metal and piled high with cardboard, lumber and garbage, these containers are where contractors dump everything from sandwich wrappers to drywall scraps.

"It's like the Wal-Mart for debris: You can find everything in there," says Lorenz Schilling, founder and president of the Laguna Beach, Calif.-based Deconstruction & Building Materials ReUse Network, an environmental public-benefit corporation that promotes the reuse of quality building materials. "In current job site culture, you don't see workers putting their plastic bags and beverage bottles in the plastics and paper recycling can, like we might do at home. No, they generally wind up in the roll-off along with scrap lumber, drywall and everything else."

Because of their contents, roll-off bins often become little more than super-sized garbage cans. The truth, however, is that builders don't like to throw things away. Just ask former builder Ted Reiff, who kept a repository of unused supplies, scraps and reusable building materials in his garage. "Typical of any contractor, I never liked to throw anything away," says Reiff. "It's just, what do you do with it?"

Now president of the Reuse People of America, an Oakland, Calif.-based nonprofit that promotes and facilitates the reuse and recycling of building materials, Reiff knows exactly what do with it: Salvage, sort and then deliver it to someone who can either sell it for reuse or process it for recycling. It's as simple as that, he says, adding that reducing waste and increasing recycling efforts can save builders money and even win them business.

Waste Management As Marketing

While the typical job site produces lots of waste, it also generates lots of revenue for the builder. Thanks to the growing popularity of green building trends, more contractors are discovering that less waste actually means more profit, as an increasing number of homeowners express their desire to support environmentally conscious builders. Contractors who reuse and recycle materials can therefore attract environmentally conscious customers, Reiff suggests.

"It truly becomes a marketing issue," he says. "Green is no longer a movement. It's mainstream."

When a builder recycles, it also shows homeowners that he or she is organized. "Builders might be surprised by the positive reaction they'd get—in terms of more business—from homeowners by talking about their services in terms of job site orderliness, cleanliness and their waste management game plan," Schilling says. "It shows attention to detail, and customers respond well to that."

Garbage or Gold?

Looking at the roll-off bin on a typical job site, it's hard to imagine that there's a lot of usable material inside it. In fact, deconstructing the average home of 2,200 square feet would yield 12 tons of reusable lumber, not including the doors, windows, cabinetry, plumbing, lighting fixtures and more.

Even on minor remodels, recycling and reuse opportunities are plentiful. According to Reiff, common job site materials that can be reused include:

- Cabinets
- Appliances
- Doors
- Clean and untreated lumber
- Bricks

Preparation and Planning

If you want to turn your job site into one that recycles, you have to start before you even have a job site, according to Schilling.

“The greatest area for gains is within the initial site preparation phase,” he says, “by foregoing demolition altogether and instead engaging in deconstruction.”

Deconstruction, Reiff explains, involves taking a building apart in order to salvage reusable materials, rather than simply tearing through it with a bulldozer. Deconstruction is more expensive and time consuming than traditional demolition, but offers long-term tax savings to building owners, since the monetary value of salvaged and “donated” materials is usually tax deductible.

Careful post-demolition planning is likely to yield good results, Schilling says. He recommends the following action steps for builders:

- Inform crews that you’re implementing a comprehensive recycling plan for all project sites.
- Identify and share a list of materials that you intend to reuse and recycle.
- Designate space on all sites for separating reusable and recyclable materials. Designate one lined trash container for personal, non-recyclable trash, such as food containers. Designate another for paper and plastics, and so on.
- Put one individual in charge of job site waste.
- Place recycling notices throughout the job site, on gates, fences, etc. Place additional signs on trash bins and roll-offs, indicating what can and cannot be placed inside each container.

Reiff also highlights the need to dispose of separated materials properly. While builders typically turn to landfills for waste removal, he says, landfill fees are rising, which means that builders can actually save money by separating recyclable materials and delivering them elsewhere.

Potential destinations include recycling centers (check with your local sanitation department to find facilities in your area) as well as local and regional deconstruction depots, not to mention retail outlets like Habitat for Humanity’s Habitat ReStores, which accept used and surplus building materials that they sell in order to finance the construction of low-income housing.

“Once you have a system that works for you, practicing reuse and recycling on the job site will become habitual,” Schilling concludes. “You’ll be able to do it without much thought or distraction from other pressing matters—like building.”