

In Depth: Fasteners

The Market Spoke, And Manufacturers Listened. The result: today's advanced fasteners offer better value, more efficiency and improvements in colors, coatings, packaging sizes and versatility.

By Craig A. Shutt

The housing downturn has impacted every product category, and fasteners are no exception. But manufacturers are finding that higher-end fasteners are holding their own. Dealers can maintain those sales by understanding the benefits of the latest products and ensuring customers use the best fastener for the job.

"Business has changed a lot in the past year," says Paul Mehok, vice president of new business development at National Nail Corp. in Grand Rapids, Mich. Last year, due to rising steel costs, the company focused on creating smaller packs to ease sticker shock and made size more convenience for individual projects. This year, even with steel prices plummeting, the company has taken that approach a step further.

PACKAGES ADAPT

"Cash is king in a bad economy, and dealers want to reduce their inventory, because it's not turning as much," he explains. In the past, the company's "bread and butter" 1- and 5-pound cartons were packed in master packs of 25 1 pound or eight 5-pound boxes, he explains. "Customers were happy with that, because they didn't have to restock so often, and the products were turning." Turns have slowed, so National has adapted to offer a 12-pack of 1-pound nails and a four-pack of 5-pound nails. "Dealers are watching their inventory a lot closer, and we needed to help them out."

The longer life of a carton of nails as contractors find projects slowing has created other changes to packaging, he adds. Some 5-pound cartons have been replaced by plastic pails, which are more durable. The company also has begun a review of all of its packaging to make it more efficient. Rather than use a one-size-fits-all approach for boxes, National Nail wants to create more customized boxes that will ensure less crushing due to air spaces in the cartons. "We want to reduce quantities while also improving the value and creating a longer-term package."

Packaging also is undergoing an evolution at Simpson Strong-Tie in Pleasanton, Calif., which purchased Swan Secure Inc., last year and integrated it into the Simpson operation in January. The Swan Secure products will remain intact, but Simpson has begun efforts to unify the brand image across products and making improvements to the packaging, says Bart Swan, formerly with Swan and now head of new product development and sales training for Simpson. "The change will be a slow process, because there is brand loyalty to the Swan name, but we want to create a unified look under one roof to reassure customers."

PREMIUM PRODUCTS POPULAR

The Swan Secure line's focus on high-end products has kept sales strong in a down economy, Swan notes. As higher grade products gain popularity and extend their warranties, they emphasize the need to use higher-grade fasteners for the installation. Products such as fiber-cement siding and composite decking pay particular attention. "More product manufacturers are recommending a higher-quality screw, and all we sell are stainless-steel and nonferrous high-end products," he says. "The project is only as good as what is holding it together. All product manufacturers want to make sure that their products are installed properly and will hold up through their service life."

Indeed, manufacturers that focus on high-grade fasteners have found their business has been less impacted than those who rely on production builders. GRK Fasteners in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, for instance, has seen sales rise in recent months due to its focus on custom builders, renovation, and high-end deck projects, says Mirco Walther, president. It also has been selling products to log-home and timber-framed home builders. "Our line is extremely high-end, so we don't lose much business when tract-home builders are doing less business."

Deck projects, which often are part of a renovation or addition, are more popular than other projects, providing a key focus for fasteners. Composite products typically require a special screw to avoid the "mushrooming" effect that occurs from the material pushing up out of the hold. GRK's Kameleon screw was introduced last year to meet that need. "We couldn't keep it in stock, and in fact could have doubled our production and still been out of stock," says Walther. Likewise, Swan reports that "sales are doing very well" for fasteners needed for composite decking.

Deck projects in particular are spurring the growth of colored-head fasteners for a variety of products. Simpson has introduced screws with a powder-coated head to match PVC decks, while GRK offers a line of white trimhead screws that are fully coated to ensure the paint won't wear off the head.

NEW COATINGS ARRIVE

In addition to colorful coatings, new technologies are changing some of the coatings that provide more benefits. A key driver is the new Accepted Criteria standard, AC-257, which took effect in January. It requires any fastener other than a hot-dipped, galvanized-steel fastener to meet or better that level of performance before it is accepted for use with treated wood. To test a fastener's acceptance, the company must submit samples with the proprietary coating as well as the same fastener in a hot-dipped galvanized form for comparison. More fasteners are expected to meet and promote their acceptance with AC-257 as the year progresses.

A variety of other coatings also are gaining traction. PrimeSource recently introduced a new corrosion-resistant coating cobranded with Rust-Oleum, which provides superior rust protection, says Paul Redwood, vice president of sales at PrimeSource Building Products in Carrollton, Texas.

Simpson is working to expand the types of fasteners in its 500 Series line, which provides the strength and hardness of a 410-grade stainless-steel line plus the corrosion protection of a 304-grade steel, explains Bill Tucker, head of product development and technical support. "We're looking to improve our mix of products in that line, especially to aid applications such as connecting fiber-cement siding to steel studs or wood siding to steel studs," he says.

National Nail has seen more emphasis placed on durability throughout the industry, notes Mehok, with the typical standard of 1,000-hours of salt-spray exposure increased to 1,500 or 2,000 hours. Soon, 3,000-hour stainless-steel products will be more prevalent, he says. "The smarter companies are definitely looking to increase their corrosion resistance." There also is more focus on applying coatings to ensure better gripping, switching from spin coating, which can leave deposits in niches, to electrostatic charging that evens out layers.

GRK is conducting test to find new alloys to create longer screw lengths, because the longer lengths sometimes bend during heat treatments, explains Walther. "We're always looking for improvements where they're needed, although the regular length screws don't need to be improved. They have a tried-and-true approach that doesn't need to change."

GREEN BUILDING GROWS

Interest in sustainable-construction techniques also is spurring new products and benefit statements. Maze Nails has introduced a line of Eco-nails to meet this growing need, says Kim Pohl, marketing director for the Peru, Ill.-based company. "We are seeing a genuine interest in 'green' building, and we are fully committed to manufacturing truly environmentally friendly fasteners. Building 'green' is less wasteful, saves money and is more efficient."

The products have been certified by Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) for their recycled steel and zinc content. They also are an "environmentally preferred product" (EPP) as defined by the U.S. Green Building Council. "We're very proud to have earned this certification," says Roelif Loveland, president. The use of the nails also will earn points toward certification in the Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) program from USGBC.

Maze is promoting its Eco-Nails with a new planogram that includes a four-color "green"-oriented header board, and it offers a full-color "eco-brochure" outlining the company's commitment to producing environmentally-friendly nails. The company also promotes that all of its fasteners are made in the U.S.

SELLING MORE FASTENERS

Emphasizing the potential to aid LEED projects and green-marketing options can help dealers open new markets or upgrade customers to better products. Fasteners sometimes are overlooked in the total project or seen as a way to shave a few dimes from the budget. Selling highergrade fasteners often comes down to education and understanding the options available and benefits offered, says Prime-Source's Redwood. Those needs start with the dealer's own education.

"Someone may be willing to spend thousands of dollars on lumber to get just the right look to the deck they are building, but they will balk at spending an extra \$50 on the correct fasteners to hold it together for a lifetime," he says. "An educated dealer can show the user that the extra few dollars will pay for themselves over time with greater holding power, less corrosion, and peace of mind."

Builders and contractors typically grasp the benefits of higher-grade fasteners if they're pointed out, says GRK's Walther. "Most builders understand you get what you pay for, and they look for the best price/performance ratio." Those benefits can be hidden unless pointed out, he notes. The company has had good response to its new Top Star shim screw, which shims doors automatically. Although six are needed per door, they are selling well because they save time, cutting labor costs. Similarly, its Rugged Structural Screw (RSS) is selling well because it doesn't need to have a hole predrilled for installation, cutting steps and saving time.

The company also is looking at ways it can combine the benefits of its Top Star screw with its Caliburn concrete screw to make hanging doors in hurricane-prone areas easier. "In this economy, people are looking for versatility to reduce the number of products they need in their toolbox, and dealers are looking to reduce their SKUs," he says.

Added values of all types are growing in popularity. "People are looking for value in all ways today," says National Nail's Mehok. National is considering a variety of pack-aged benefits, including coupons offering discounts off the next purchase, MP3 downloads, carpenter's pencils, t-shirts and other on-pack promotions. "We want to create some value-added benefit right in the box."

Looking to new markets also can boost sales, notes PrimeSource's Redwood. It has seen some of its niche products gain sales as traditional products have slowed, refocusing the company's attention. "We've become more active with buying groups, especially those that are more commercially oriented, and we've put a lot of resources into developing fastener offerings for niche opportunities."

The opportunities include hanger wire for ceiling applications, threaded rods, and steel-to-steel screws and other products for HVAC contractors. "I'd like to say we anticipated this movement and prepared for it, but in fact we saw it happen and have evolved our products to meet the demand." Maze likewise promotes its stainless-steel line of fasteners as a strong option for marine and coastal applications, says Pohl.

The key to increasing sales even in a down market is to learn more about the customer's true needs and ensure they buy the product that will produce the best result. "The way for dealers to sell more is to ask a few questions about the job rather than simply filling the specs that the customer requests," says National Nail's Mehok. "If you ask what the fastener's for and ensure they have the best product, you can provide a better value and ensure the project is done right."

CRAIG A. SHUTT, a senior contributing editor of LBM Journal, has nearly 30 years of experience covering the LBM industry.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE COMPANIES' PRODUCTS, VISIT THESE WEB SITES: (COMPANIES IN BOLD PARTICIPATED IN THIS ARTICLE)

Arrow Fasteners: www.arrowfastener.com

Grabber Construction Products: www.deckmaster.com or www.grabberman.com

GRK Fasteners: www.grkfasteners.com

ITW Brands: www.itwbrands.com

Maze Nails: www.mazenails.com

National Nail: www.nationalnail.com

PrimeSource: www.grip-rite.com

Screw Products, Inc.: www.screw-products.com

SENCO: www.senco.com

Shur-Fast: www.shur-fast.com

Simplex: www.simplexnails.com

Simpson Strong-Tie: www.strongtie.com or www.swansecure.com

Spotnails: www.spotnails.com

Stanley-Bostitch: www.bostitch.com

Universal Fastener Outsourcing LLC: www.911-nails.com

USP Structural Connectors: www.uspconnectors.com

IN DEPTH TESTING NEW & FREE FROM LBM JOURNAL

Today's tough market requires that your salespeople understand new products and industry trends. Here's a sales training tip: make this InDepth feature a reading assignment for your salespeople, then test their knowledge at your next sales meeting. We'll provide the test and answer key for free. Just email Rick@LBMJournal.com to request this month's testing materials. While you're at it, why not set them up with their own free subscription to LBM Journal at: www.LBMJournal.com/subscribe