

# Auto Focus

Right now, subcontractors may not have the means to make huge investments in products they want, let alone need. But they may not have to. Several manufacturers are targeting rental yards to purchase more expensive tools and equipment that the subcontractor can rent.

“Renting these machines has several advantages for all parties involved; the manufacturer can monitor and control where the machines are for measuring successes and improvements,” says James Woolfolk of L&W Supply. “Renting as a distribution limits the risk of being held with the initial stages of developing technology in a purchasing consequence. From a contractors’ perspective, it also limits the risk of having to take on a large investment and allows any size contractor to utilize this technology job by job.”

Ann Arbor, Mich.-based subcontractor, Acoustic Ceiling & Partition, is one company enjoying the benefits of rental units. Recently, its supplier L&W—along with the promotion and sales team at Structus Building Technologies—have introduced

Michigan-based drywall contractors plow through rooms using a state-of-art finishing system. **By John Wyatt**

ACP to the Autoslam product. This new machine, produced by Structus, automates drywall corner trim application by using a single 500-foot roll of its Autoflex product to produce outside/inside corners of any length or angle. It allows contractors, as ACP demonstrated at a job site to *Walls & Ceilings* in February, to input large sets of specified corner trim lengths and profiles at one time. Once the data has been entered on the machine’s computer module, the Autoslam applies joint compound and cuts those corners.

“In the last few years, the major tool manufacturers have come out with faster guns to help productivity. The major drywall manufacturers have come up with products that cut easier and are lighter. The product that I think has made the biggest impact to our cost savings has been the use of No Coat bead and [its] Autoslam machine,” says Garrett R. Wickham, president of ACP.

## ROLLING WORK STATION

Structus’s Tony Pitocco, regional manager, along with the company’s Field Application Engineer Alex Manzo came to the Citi Center project in Ann Arbor to assist ACP’s finishers with training on the Autoslam. Upon W&C’s visit to the job site, the laborers were raving about how the product helped them run a floor on the job site “like an assembly line.” ACP workers say the learning curve is relatively quick. In approximately half a day or as long as needed, with training and factory representation, users can be operating the machine. Its maintenance is minimal but users want to keep mud from clogging the functions so consistent flushing at the end of the workday is a good idea, says Pitocco.

The rolling “workstation” has a computer module face that controls the length of cornerbead and its type (inside or outside corners). Through its controls, the machine will feed out in any length from 27

inches up to as much product and mud is available loaded in the Autoslam. For subcontractors working on different floors with the same blueprints, pre-set memory options can be recorded for ease of moving from level to level.

It is a complex piece of machinery, in that it is obviously a highly engineered product. But, as ACP's workers showcased, its ease of use after a day's work shows its user-friendly attributes.

### SLAM-A-RAMA

For the Citi Center project, ACP's scope of work is the metal stud framing, drywall, acoustic ceilings, carpentry, millwork, doors, frames and hardware, and spray fireproofing. Quite a large contract and a big job that will eventually be a multi-unit with small business offices, dorm rooms and more.

L&W Supply, the distributor arm of USG, has been working with ACP since 1984. The distributor picked up Structus's Autoslam last year. L&W's Regional Sales Manager Woolfolk likens the release of the Autoslam to when lasers were first introduced to subcontractors.

"Lasers are what I consider a revolutionary product change in our industry where it not only quickened how we measure and plumb walls and ceilings but it also elevated a labor intensive practice and trade to a more mental and intellectual process," says Woolfolk. "Until the Autoslam, we have not had a tool and/or machine for interior construction that uses technology that completely revolutionizes a change in how a trade performs."

"We have been fortunate to have secured some larger projects last year. This will allow us to stay busy for the first two quarters of this year," says Wickham. "We have seen quite a drop in new project bidding so the competition has increased significantly."

Asked in what ways the use of the Autoslam has helped the company on the Citi Center job, the president of ACP says labor.

"There was a 10 to 15 percent savings in labor when we first started using No Coat bead. The beads are run through a hopper and pre-coated as they are installed. This saves the finisher a step," says Wickham.

Dave Potts, of ACP, uses the Autoslam at the Citi Center project in Ann Arbor, Mich.



Photo by Matt Britcher

"Now, the Autoslam takes it a step farther with being able to automatically pre-cut the bead to exact lengths. This added another 10 to 15 percent [in] savings. Another benefit is when not installing beads, our finishers use the Autoslam as a mixer to fill their tools. It allows for faster mixing and quicker clean up."

### COAT OF ARMS

When asked about the benefits of using larger, more complex tools and systems such as the Autoslam, Wickham says as a union contractor, ACP's labor is about 65 percent of total project cost, adding that the labor savings outweigh the small material cost increase. Also, he adds this product will primarily be used on large multi-story projects. These types of projects usually have the tightest schedules. Money will be saved if the owner can trim two to three weeks off the schedule.

Wickham says that even if this wasn't a rental tool, he could jus-

tify the cost for purchasing the Autoslam. Structus President Bill Scannell says for now the product is strictly a rental unit with no immediate plans to market as a retail product.

"The problem is that sometimes the higher cost of something new usually prevents you from trying it. Also, people tend to stick with what they know, so it's hard to step out and take the time to train your employees on something new," says Wickham. "When we got introduced to the No Coat system, it just happened that we had a perfect job to try it on. The savings were seen instantly."

And what advice does the president have for drywall contractors out there trying to survive in this financial climate?

"You better know a good banker! With financing tightened up, this is going to cause slow pay and bad receivables for everyone. You need to have access to cash or you are not going to survive." **W&C**