

I Like What

“I’m a painter. I get up every day looking forward to having to do what I do.” Nick Dunse has been a professional contractor since 1978. “I started when I came home from the Army,” says the owner of Think Painting in Taunton, MA. His practice has stayed a step ahead of the economy—he started with a good mix of residential and commercial, then the ’80s recession hit and it was catch as catch can. When the economy bounced back he painted malls when malls were going up, then he leaned more into residential when the malls were going nowhere. “The economy experienced another slowdown and all that bottomed out,” he recalled, “but we kept up existing clients and relationships so we always had work.”

BY JERRY RABUSHKA

Taunton is about 45 minutes south of Boston and 30 minutes east of Providence, RI, so there is plenty of

opportunity for Nick and his crew to do what they really like: repaint and restoration of older homes—“old work,” as he calls it.

“I always enjoyed that, inside or out,” he said. “I like old houses and that type of work. I find it more challenging.” Nick is a mixture of new school and old school; he keeps up with new products, internet technology, and marketing techniques but he likes the craft of painting as it was handed down from those who came before. “I’m 58,” he fessed up. “I learned from a lot of guys before me who were real craftsmen. Before faux finishing became popular they mixed their own colors and carried tint with them, and they made their own glazes and glazing tools,” he said. “We used to do a lot of faux inside churches to match the gold leaf and cool stuff like that.”

His crew, which usually runs three to five per job, subscribes to his viewpoint as well. Even the younger painters have adopted the old way of doing things. “Their fathers



I Do

After 35 years, this Massachusetts painter still likes getting up for work

were in the trades and they were brought up with a good work ethic,” he reports. He keeps them looking good with logo’d uniforms—hats, t-shirts and sweatshirts bear the name of Think Painting, and Dunse keeps his trucks and trailers organized and neat so equipment and tools are easy to find. “Plus, they like that we’re always doing something different,” he said. “We do a wide range of painting and I think they like that. They don’t get bored—not with me!”

These days, Dunse reports, he’s hitting about 75% residential repaint. There’s still plenty of old homes, but many homeowners have hidden their historic exteriors under aluminum or vinyl siding. “Some of them can’t do that unless they knock off the fancy trim and such, so they still have to paint them—there’s more than our fair share of old work,” he reports. Although it’s been repainted since, he once painted the home of the infamous Lizzie Borden,

accused but not convicted of ax-murdering her parents.

Lizzie isn’t around to give him a good recommendation, so Dunse makes sure he leaves behind plenty of customers who will speak well of him to the next. “I try to promote painting as a profession and as a craft, whether it’s one room or 20,” he explains. “I let the customer know I’m going to give the best price I can, but for that price they’ll get a professional paint job. They’re going to be well taken care of from how we protect their floor to cleaning up after ourselves when we’re done. I let them know that I take my craft seriously. Plus, I know the product line inside and out. I stay up to date on the latest products.”

While he still likes to use his own tints and glazes, he recently tried Gianni Granite, a faux granite finish, as a favor for a dealer who had just started stocking the product. “It came out really nice,” he reported.

Left: Thumbs up! Nick Dunse and his Think Painting truck. Below: before and after makes these look like completely different houses. We can only imagine the scraping on the top house.



Nick likes to explore and learn about new paints—he switched to latex primer before it became the norm so he could better learn how it works. Plus, by learning about the various brands, he can choose not only what type of paint, but what brand of paint is best for a particular job. “I don’t stick to any one product by any means,” he acknowledges. “I use what works.” Benjamin Moore, California Paints, Sherwin-Williams and several other brands have found themselves on the edge of his bristles.

It’s just a jump to the left

On almost every job, Nick likes to start on the top left and work his way down. If it’s one floor, he’ll start on the ceiling. If he’s looking at plans, he’ll plan from the ceiling to the floor. If it’s a two-story, he starts on the second story. He’ll estimate the same way. “I still find it easier to use a paper and pen and checklist and make notes,” he says.

The other trick to estimation is to listen to the customer and make sure you do what they want. “I learned that at a seminar,” he noted. “Listen to the customer before you open your mouth. Sometimes they will share a lot of what they want right away.” And sometimes they keep it a secret.

After the initial listen, Dunse will walk through the house and try to get a better feel for what the customer is looking for. But if it doesn’t feel right or the customer doesn’t seem truly interested, he’ll walk away. “I just did that twice last week,” he said. “If they want to supply their own materials, I’m not interested. It never usually turns out well. Also if they just want me to drive by and throw an estimate in the mail, they’re not serious about doing the job, unless it’s an existing customer and I’ve worked for them before.”

Go to www.thinkpainting.net

But as we said, along with doing it old school, he’ll new-fangle it as well. He posted his first web page in 2001 and has revamped it several times as tastes and styles change. “Google has changed the playing field and I try to stay up on what’s going to work,” he said. “The guy who does my site now ‘gets it’ and that’s why it looks how it looks. I’m very happy with it—you’ve got to roll with the changes!”

He hasn’t attended a lot of seminars lately, noting that there aren’t as many available in his area as there used to be, but the internet often makes a good teacher. He learns a lot from Blogging Painters (bloggingpainters.com, which is where we met Nick to begin with), YouTube, and networking with other pros online.

He even tweets. “I have twitter friends from England,” he says. “I do a lot of furniture painting and restoration and they use similar, but slightly different, products and techniques, so they have tips and tricks for that as well.”

References are important, he insists. Very. Very. Important. Ask your customers for a reference after a job, he recommends; you can even give them something to fill out if they’re not net-savvy. “Trying to get a Google review for your site is like trying to hit the lottery,” he noted. “It has to be a legitimate review, but it can be difficult for a customer who is not that computer literate.”

Plus, keep your references up to date. Sure he started painting in 1978, but a reference from the Carter years isn’t going to convince many folks to hire him. Dunse mentioned an extensive Victorian exterior repaint that came because of good references. “I sent photos of prior jobs we did along with the customer’s name and email and they called the people.” This made sense, because they only knew of Nick what they saw on his website. The former customer gave him a great reference, and he got the job.

It’s as important, he thinks, for a customer to know their painter as it is for a painter to know their customer. References are a great way to learn about someone after the initial glow wears off. “I see a lot of people looking for painters using lead sites which pit one contractor against another,” he said. “The customer is lulled into thinking they are getting quality contractors, but they need to check references. Customers should take their time to get decent references and email or call them to ask about your work and how you were in the house and go from there.”

When he’s not painting, Nick likes to ride a Harley, go fishing and of course spend time with his family. But after 35 years, there’s still an excitement about popping open a five. “I like what I do!” [TPC](#)

Before/after garage pics. Nick (right) is still thumbing it up, this time with long-time crew member Wade Brown.

