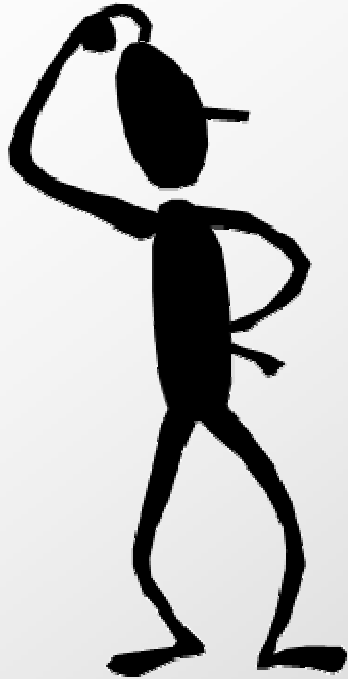




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Avoiding Problems with Decorative Concrete Starts Early

Seven Steps to Success Before You Start

By Chris Sullivan, QC Construction Products

Living by the motto “The customer is always right” can be a frustrating and painful experience in the decorative concrete world. Decorative concrete is a magnet for scrutiny. As an installer of architectural concrete finishes, you are held to a much higher standard than those pouring plain gray concrete. After all, you are dealing in color, texture, and tone, in other words, art. It just so happens your canvas is concrete. The ability to provide high quality work, collect your hard earned money, satisfy your customers, and gain referrals can depend, a lot of the time, on steps you take before the job even starts. [*Continue >*](#)





Troubleshooting is not only understanding what went down and solving problems after they occur, but also establishing a routine, working smarter, and setting yourself up for success before the work even begins.

Before you read any further, ask yourself a question. Why am I in this business? There really is only one reason—to make money. The ability to use your artistic talents to turn concrete into something colorful and unique is secondary. With decorative concrete, the client receives a value added product, while the installer receives a significantly higher paycheck. This is as it should be, considering all of the time, training, and risk required of you, the Decorative Concrete Specialist.

Doesn't it make sense then, that it would be a good idea to put even more thought into understanding, controlling, and selling these value added products and services you offer? This is where the Seven Steps to Success Before You Start come into play. Problems with architectural concrete projects, real or perceived, can all be traced back to a breakdown of one or more of these seven steps.





Whether you are established in the decorative concrete business, or just getting started, think about your first stamp or stain projects. The stresses of trying to remember all the steps, when and how to apply the products, and worst of all, will the colors come out as promised? There is no easy road to being a great decorative concrete specialist. One "problem" can cost you all of the profit and momentum you have developed, or worse, can cost you your well-earned reputation as someone the industry can count on for quality work. Practice, practice, practice! I encourage you to not only read the seven key steps, but also actually try to incorporate them into future projects. These steps are designed to help avoid certain problems, set yourself up for easier resolution if problems do arise, and increase your profit margin.

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Step One: Understand the Products / Understand the Process

I think step one has more to do with common sense than any age-old trick of the trade. Unfortunately, common sense is not always so common. It is always good to start with the basics, and that is just what this is. When is the last time you read a product label, reviewed the spec sheet, or sought factory advice on new and different ways of application? Take a class, talk to the manufacturer, and get your hands dirty! For those thinking about getting into architectural concrete, this exercise should be mandatory!





Problems such as a marred or scratched floor due to sealer incompatibility can be avoided if you take the time to learn and ask questions about decorative concrete products.

If you don't know how the product works, have a basic understanding of what it's made of, or have never been involved in its application, how can anyone realistically expect a professional outcome? You can of course enroll in the school of hard knocks and learn via trial and error, or take a few minutes and save yourself a fair amount of heartache, time and money. For example - I can't tell you how many times I have received a call from a contractor, on his or her way to a job, only to find that they have neither the tools, the manpower, or the preparation in place to actually do the work! I am continually reminded of just how powerful the lure of easy money can be. The realization that decorative concrete pays more, often clouds the fact that there is much more involved in product and application in order to earn that fat check. Take a moment to think, do I really understand everything about the process and the products I use everyday?

Step Two: Expectation Management

I first heard about expectation management from Steve Hicks, founder of Concrete Science. I immediately thought about how powerful this simple concept is in relation to decorative concrete troubleshooting. Manage your client's expectations up front. Under promise and over-perform in regard to application, and a vast majority of potential perceived problems go away.





Each year I am asked to troubleshoot hundreds of decorative concrete “problems”. I find that many of the problems are perceived. If the client’s expectations had been properly managed during the sale, the perceived problem would have never been an issue. This is such a powerful concept in regard to architectural concrete because of color and design. The very thing that provides value and premiums can also cause significant loss of time and money if not managed properly before any contract is signed.

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What is common knowledge to you and me (colors in concrete can vary, stains produce variegated color tones, sealers require maintenance, all concrete cracks, etc.) requires in-depth explanation to architects, general contractors, and homeowners. Showing realistic, reproducible samples, explaining the processes, outlining the products’ limitations in contract form, and making sure your clients are comfortable with the required maintenance, are all factors in managing expectations.





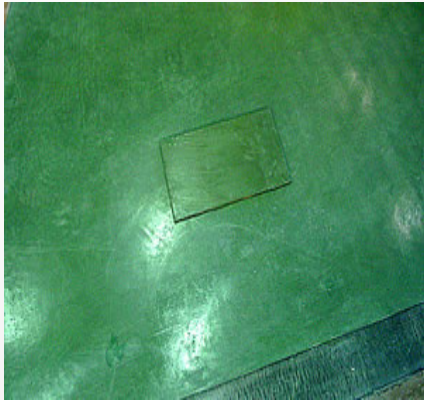
Step Three: Selling Perception and Value

While this step has less to do with avoiding problems, and more to do with sales, it is important. If all you do is manage expectations, you won't make much money. Decorative concrete provides the perception of stone, tile, wood, or something totally unique, combined with the value of concrete. How often do you sell the benefits of decorative concrete?

Try using words such as unique, durable, endless color options, versatile, and multi-faceted next time you sell yourself and your work. Always end with the understanding that this is an investment, not just a driveway, floor or wall. The commitment and understanding to the investment from the client is what will make this partnership work.

Step Four: Samples

What is standard practice before installing tile, wood, carpet, paint, or any common flooring or finish? Picking a color and style, bringing it home, and seeing how it looks in its new surrounds. Why should decorative concrete be any different? The decorative concrete sample process can be accomplished in many ways: making samples in advance, having a showroom, custom samples prior to each project, and applying various finishes to the actual floor to name a few.



Samples can help eliminate possible disputes, such as this green microtopping sample proving a color match.





A professional photo portfolio of your work also adds to the overall sample process. In my opinion, certain processes like staining, require mandatory on site samples, while others, like stamped concrete and overlays, can be illustrated with pre-made samples and showrooms. Make sure to note recipes, surface conditions, and application procedures so results can be reproduced years later. Sampling is the cheapest form of insurance any applicator can take out, so why don't more take advantage of it? As a side note, once your samples are approved, keep them in a safe place. Too many times I have seen situations where samples would have solved a dispute, but were destroyed or covered up prior to job completion. If your work resembles the sample, disputes tend to be settled quickly.

Step Five: Resource Network

Where do you turn when problems do occur? That stack of business cards of established and trusted industry specialists that you have been collecting for years is a good place to start. Product representatives, distributor sales staff, other installers, and related trades are often the most common people found in decorative concrete applicator resource networks. Not that you can't go looking when a problem occurs, but once again planning ahead can save time and money when things turn ugly on a project. I need to stress how your local distributor sales and counter staff are invaluable in this situation. They quite often can get you in touch with people in the know when "problems" do occur. Other places to look include books, like Bob Harris' Decorative Concrete Series, web sites like www.ConcreteNetwork.com, trade shows, like World of Concrete, industry meetings, and manufacturers' technical hot lines. Too many times I've seen a small problem turn into a huge problem only because an applicator did not know where to look or who to talk to.





Questions to Consider When Researching Schools/Seminars

- How much time is spent in the classroom versus in hands-on demonstrations?
- Exactly what products/techniques are covered?
- Is the training “how-to” or just product information (sales pitch)?
- Is the training too broad or generic?
- Does the training focus specifically on what I want to learn?

Step Six: Systems Approach

Almost all reputable manufacturers of decorative concrete materials (color, stain, overlays, sealers, etc.) design their products to work in conjunction with one another. Materials for surface preparation, coloring, cleaning, sealing, maintenance and even stripping, are sold under one label. This is known as a system. Using a system will greatly help reduce potential problems. For one thing, reputable suppliers will have tested their materials to assure compatibility. This is worth its weight in gold both before the project when you need advice or clarification, and then when a problem occurs and you need only deal with one supplier to get resolution. Secondly, you simply can't always be the one to make sure things are done as they are supposed to. Consistency in the system you use helps develop a comfort level, and allows for more reproducible results.

Step Seven: Be An Expert

Continue your education as often as you can. Schools, seminars, and product demonstrations are available everywhere. Take advantage of them. Be aware though, not all are equal. Do your research before spending any money. How much of the seminar is spent in classroom and how much in "hands on" time. Exactly what products/techniques will be covered? Is the training so broad as to be only a "sales pitch" for a company and not specific to your needs? Also, be wary of "deals" or "franchises" only available at the training. Keep asking questions. Keep learning. Strive to be an expert on what makes you money!





Summary: The ideas discussed only go so far. They won't help much if the work is sub par, or the actual products don't perform as advertised. But these Seven Steps to Success Before You Start are an important first part in avoiding and solving problems. The steps are common threads that will appear over and over as we begin to look at frequent problems with decorative concrete. In future articles, we will troubleshoot the how and why behind the most frequent decorative concrete problems, and of course provide solutions so you can collect your hard earned money.



Chris Sullivan writes feature articles for The Concrete Network (www.concretenetwork.com). He is the National Technical Director and Regional Sales Manager for QC Construction Products, a leading systems manufacturer of decorative concrete systems.



Sherpa info

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SUMMIT DATE

This document reached the summit (was created) on May 17, 2005 and is based on the best information available to the Sherpa at that time. To check for updates please click here <http://www.ConcreteSherpa.com/avoid>

NAVIGATION & USER TIPS

You can move around this guide by using your mouse or keyboard arrows. Left mouse button goes to the next page, right mouse button goes to previous page. Click on the right arrow (→) for the next page and the left arrow (←) to go the previous page.

KEYBOARD SHORT CUTS

	PC	MAC
Zoom in (Larger)	[Ctrl] [+]	[⌘] [+]
Zoom out	[Ctrl] [-]	[⌘] [-]
Full screen/normal screen view	[Ctrl] [L]	[⌘] [L]

ABOUT THE CONCRETE SHERPA

The Concrete Sherpa is a team of people that represent the experience, teaching and learning of our team members and other industry leaders *on a mission to make life better for the concrete contractor*. We are an idea center striving to deliver thought provoking ideas based on “Concrete Advice for Business and Life” to stimulate you to reach new heights. As a user, you should remember to consider all information you receive, here at the Concrete Sherpa or elsewhere, not as a *cast in concrete* recommendation, but rather as an idea for you to consider and ponder.



Sherpa info

THE JOURNEY LEADING TO THE CONCRETE SHERPA PROJECT

The Concrete Sherpa Project (A [Sherpa](#) is a “guide”) was born at The Concrete Network in mid 2004. Here is how it happened:

The biggest surprise, or gift, since starting The Concrete Network in 1999 has been the concrete contractor friends from around the country we’ve made and witnessing the passion they have for what they do. These people include Dave Pettigrew, up in the San Francisco Bay Area, or the Verlennich brothers in Minnesota, or Bob Harris in Georgia, the list goes on and on. It’s quite inspiring.

We were once asked, “How are you so excited every day about concrete?” Well the answer is simple, it is impossible to not be excited about concrete when you have the job we do—interacting with hundreds of concrete contractors from every state in the country.

The thing we’ve learned about concrete contractors is that most are passionate *craftsmen*—they are often less passionate and experienced in the “office stuff”. Human nature channels us to do what we are most comfortable with; learning how to use a new saw-cutting tool is comfortable; learning and implementing a new estimating strategy, or job management tool, is not so comfortable.



Sherpa info

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

So Sherpa was born to provide FREE and easy to use information on topics many contractors are not too comfortable with.

- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help to contractors who are often ‘Lone Rangers’ and don’t have anyone to get solid business advice from.
- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help for contractors who have to work too hard and too many hours in their business, and one day realize they need to work *on their business, not in their business*.
- Have fun with Concrete Sherpa and go faster towards reaching success than you might have on your own.
- To skeptics who think something free can’t be valuable, or there must be a trick- visit Concrete Sherpa and decide for yourself.

We hope you make great use of the Concrete Sherpa and it helps you to become an awesome success for yourself, your family, your church, and your community.

VISIT THE CONCRETE SHERPA

To visit the Concrete Sherpa click here <http://www.ConcreteSherpa.com>.