

CONCRETE STAMPING TODAY

A LOOK AT FOUR TRENDS EMERGING
FROM OUR CHANGING INDUSTRY

BY CHRIS SULLIVAN

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....**03**

Trend 1: Hand tooling and unique color effects.....**04**

Trend 2: Customizing with accessory tools and larger patterns.....**06**

Trend 3: Matte-finish sealers.....**08**

Trend 4: Strategies for staying profitable.....**09**

Conclusion/Resources.....**12**

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INTRODUCTION:

A CHANGING INDUSTRY

After more than 50 years of colorful history, stamped concrete remains the backbone of the decorative concrete industry and a staple product offering for many contractors. Along with the positive changes that have molded the industry as we know it today, the problems and struggles the industry faces have changed as well. The pressure of maintaining profits is more difficult than ever, as selling prices have eroded and raw material prices continue to rise. At the same time, the demand for quality and innovation increases, as the stamped concrete market faces strong competition from other materials, such as precast pavers and natural stone.

Today, stamped concrete installers must be able to run a business as well as they imprint concrete. Those that educate and reinvent themselves and hold steady in regard to pricing and product quality will be in a strong position when the market rebounds.

In an effort to gain insight into a complex and changing industry, I talked with several veteran stamped concrete installers from different areas of the country (see list of contributors on page 2). Their experiences and advice in regards to the current trends will help you respond appropriately to price pressure, differentiate your company's work and equip yourself for success in today's market.

“We use the same seamless texture skin we have been using for eight years to achieve a base pattern, and then we sawcut the design we want and come back and post-color using our own color wash system.”

— CHRIS BECKER

TREND:

HAND TOOLING AND UNIQUE COLOR EFFECTS

For the most part, what was popular 20 years ago in the stamped concrete industry is still popular today, but with a twist. “It’s all about custom and different,” says Terry Grumble, director of technical services for Bomanite Company, Denver, Colo. Contractors are taking existing stamp patterns and coloring systems and adding their own creative touches to create looks that are all their own. For the installer, it becomes less about a new product and more about taking what he or she already has and using that to create something unique and appealing to the customer.

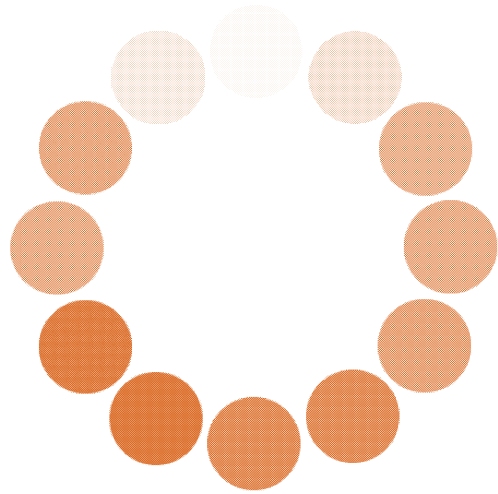
HAND TOOLING

One way to accomplish a custom look is to use existing large pattern stamps or seamless texture skins and hand tool custom joints or patterns. This requires time and craftsmanship, but can produce an amazing custom look that is not easily reproducible.

CREATIVE CUSTOMIZATION IDEAS

“Combining different concrete finishes, such as integrally colored exposed aggregate or a sponge float finish, can help take a stamp concrete project over the top,” says Bob Harris.

“We mix multiple store-bought seamless textures and even some of our own custom textures to achieve a unique look. We try to add our own personal touch on every job,” says Tom Ralston.



“The stamp establishes our canvas, and from there we add our own unique look with grouting and our coloring process.” — C.J. SALZANO

POST-COLORING

With the push for customization, post-coloring has become increasingly popular. The process involves stamping the concrete with some or no color, then waiting until the concrete has set to post-color or highlight the work.

Why more installers are using the post-coloring method:

- It's easier
- It's cleaner
- It allows greater color control

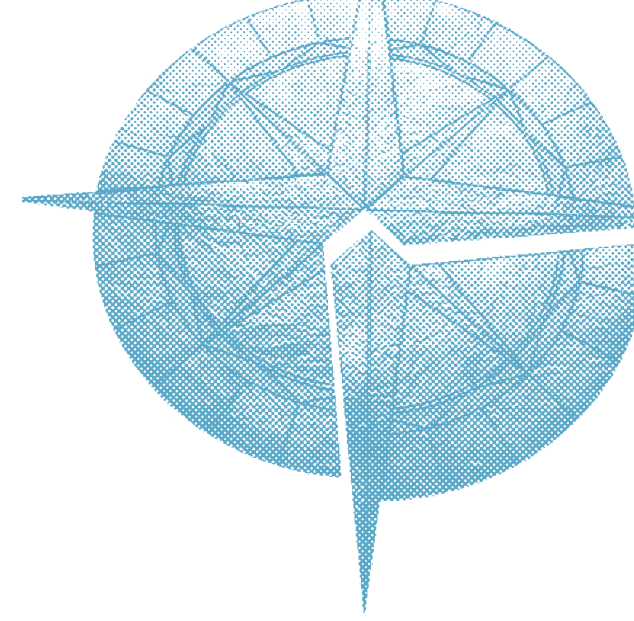
BLENDING MULTIPLE COLORS

Another coloring trend involves blending multiple colors to achieve more realistic effects. After all, stamped concrete is the art of finishing concrete to have it resemble some other natural material. This can entail the use of multiple colors within a product family, like release powder, or blending different colors from different products, such as release powder and a post-applied color wash or stain.



Salzano typically uses three or four accent colors to produce a multicolor flagstone or bluestone look.

SALZANO CUSTOM CONCRETE



TREND:

CUSTOMIZING WITH ACCESSORY TOOLS AND LARGER PATTERNS

There is no shortage of stamped concrete tools and patterns these days. Whether it is the actual tool or the accessories, the selection is wide and diverse. An increased demand in recent years by architects and consumers for unique stamped concrete finishes has driven the tool industry to come out with a slew of new accessory and accenting systems. These include edge forms for stair risers and slab edges, specialty tools and molds for fireplace rings, and a much broader line of chisels, rollers and detail tools.

There is also a trend toward larger patterns and lighter textures which comes in large part from the industry working smarter, not harder. Larger stone patterns and lighter textures are more realistic, require less labor to cover the same surface area as smaller tools, and give you more bang for your buck. An installer would need almost twice the number of smaller tools to cover the same area as the larger tools.

“Today’s market offers a wide variety of custom medallion designs, wildlife and aquatic stamps, intricate border designs as well as unique textures that we simply did not see way back when.” — BOB HARRIS

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A TOP-QUALITY STAMPING TOOL

Most stamping tools today are manufactured from elastomeric polyurethane rubber. Many installers have a favorite tool that they have been using for years made of this material, a testament to its durability. When asked what they look for when they buy a new tool, contractors seem to agree on a few key points.

- “The tool needs to look and feel sturdy,” says Tom Ralston of Tom Ralston Concrete, Santa Cruz, Calif. And the only way you can determine that is by touching and feeling the tool. He pays special attention to the handles and how they are molded into the tool itself. “The handles need to be thick and made from sturdy nylon,” he says
- Tool weight and thickness are also important, especially when purchasing larger stamping tools, which are the trend in today’s marketplace. If the tool is too thick and dense, it becomes too heavy for one man to handle. The weight can also be an issue when working on larger jobs or with a smaller crew.
- Stamping tools need to be thick enough so they can support multiple installers standing on the tool, especially when working with seamless texture mats.
- The quality of the rubber also needs to be good, so the tool imparts a crisp and clean texture. For medium to lighter textures, which are a popular trend these days, it’s much more important that the texture on the tool face be clean and flawless. Lighter textured tools are not as forgiving as aggressive textures, making it hard to hide mistakes. You always want to look at the face of the tool and make sure you don’t see air bubbles or any other type of blemish.

RAMP UP YOUR TOOL ARSENAL

Tom Ralston stresses making an investment in tooling right from the start. “Make a bigger investment in stamps upfront. You can never have enough,” he says, relating how he struggled when he first started out with too few stamping tools. He tried to make it work with the minimum number of tools, thinking he was saving money. In the end, he said that the few thousand dollars more it would have cost him to double or triple his tool arsenal would have saved him considerably more down the road.



Stamping tools should look and feel sturdy with thick handles and crisp, clean textures.



“I hardly ever get any customers asking for a gloss look anymore. The trend is matte or a no-gloss look, very natural.” — C.J. SALZANO

TREND:

MATTE-FINISH SEALERS

Aside from coloring and texturing systems, the product that has the biggest influence on the final look of stamped concrete is the sealer. Today, we are finding that clients are asking for more realistic and natural looking hardscapes. As a result, installers are turning to matte finish sealers.

For years, the predominate trend has been the use of high-gloss, or “wet-look,” sealers, which enhance color, but can give the surface an unnatural glazed-donut appearance. The use of high-gloss sealers is also a leading cause of sealer failures causing applicators to move to sealers with a lower solids content. The problem with a higher solids content is it makes a sealer less able to penetrate the concrete surface and doesn't allow for moisture vapor to move out of the concrete.

You can find sealers on the market today that provide color enhancement without producing a wet or glazed appearance. These new-generation sealers for stamped concrete can be found in both solvent- and water-based versions. Another new trend is the use of penetrating sealers, which were rarely used on stamped concrete in years past. These sealers, which include silanes, siloxanes, and silicates, penetrate into the concrete to form a chemical barrier that shields against moisture penetration and deicing chemicals.



Matte finishes, prized for their natural appearance, are gaining in popularity over high-gloss sealers.

VERLENNICH MASONRY & CONCRETE

TREND:

STRATEGIES FOR STAYING PROFITABLE

“When we started stamping concrete in 2004, I was getting \$12 per square foot comfortably. Today, I have to fight to get \$12 per square foot, and often have to come down in price if I really want the job.” — C.J. SALZANO

Price points, and how to keep stamped concrete profitable, are often at the top of the list of concerns for stamped concrete installers today. The price per square foot of stamped concrete has held steady or come down, and the cost of everything going into making that square foot of stamped concrete has gone up. The constant struggle for installers is how to maintain profits in an industry that has seen constant price pressure from low bidders and raw material price increases.

These pressures are real, and they have real consequences. The last four years have seen a significant number of concrete installers get out of stamped concrete or shut down completely. Even more have had to lay off workers or cut benefits. So how do you combat this trend?

DIFFERENTIATE YOUR PRODUCT

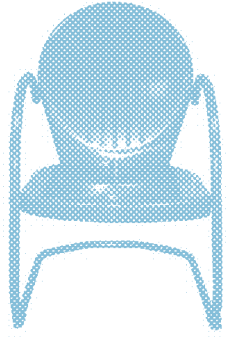
To make a profit in today's marketplace, you can either increase volume, or you can differentiate yourself and your product so

you can ask a higher price. The latter is the approach that most successful stamped concrete installers have embraced.

The market is split between those installers who sell on price and offer a non-specific style of stamped concrete, and those that offer a unique and different look, which demands a higher price. Quality is not necessarily the issue, as both can offer a high level of quality. It all comes down to selling the added value and creating a unique style or brand that brings a higher price.



Installers are struggling to maintain profits because the cost of materials continues to rise while the price per square foot drops.



EXPAND YOUR MARKET

Outdoor living spaces have become a trend in recent years. More and more traditional stamped concrete installers are starting to offer expanded services to create multifunctional outdoor living spaces. These include kitchens, water features, fireplaces or fire pits, and built-in concrete benches and seat walls. In some cases, the installer will perform all the work themselves, while others will sub out the work they are not capable of performing.

SELL STAMPED CONCRETE AS THE CENTERPIECE OF OUTDOOR LIVING SPACES

Chris Becker of Becker Architectural Concrete, Minneapolis, Minn., has jumped on the outdoor living room trend. A few years ago, his business offered stamped concrete as a stand-alone option for homeowners or designers. “We provided high-end stamped concrete, and that was all. We would watch as it was being incorporated into the larger theme and design of a backyard or outdoor living space,” he says.

It wasn't long before Becker realized that the stamped concrete could be the centerpiece on which the entire outdoor living space could revolve, and now he uses this as an upsell when working with clients. Today, Becker Architectural Concrete will not only provide you with a high-end stamped concrete patio or pool deck, but also make it part of an entire outdoor living space. “We start with the stamped concrete, and very quickly we are talking about concrete countertops for the bar or outdoor kitchen as well as a concrete fireplace hearth and surround,” he says. Everything is designed to work with and around the stamped concrete.

“We have had to come up with new and different looks to get higher margins.”

— BRAD WALKER



TOM RALSTON CONCRETE

Beyond just providing stamped concrete, installers can benefit from helping to create entire outdoor living spaces.

“Despite today’s tough times, I feel strongly about holding your ground and not giving your work away.” – Bob Harris

DON'T GIVE YOUR WORK AWAY

The historical trend with stamped concrete has been a slow but steady erosion of prices. This price erosion has moderated in recent years, and in most markets prices are steady. As the economy rebounds and inflationary pressures increase, the base price of stamped concrete will probably rise. When and how much are better left to the economists to examine. What we do know is that stamped concrete is a product in demand and will be even more so as the market recovers.

GENERATE A NEW REVENUE STREAM

Brad Walker takes stamped concrete to a new level by targeting the homebuilder. He has established a new revenue stream by selling stamped concrete as an upgrade for these otherwise tract homes. “We worked hard for one year to get in with certain homebuilders in our area. These builders now offer stamped concrete as an upgrade on every mid- to upper-end home they sell,” he says. The message that Walker conveyed to builders is that stamped concrete is a hardscape that adds value to the home. The other great outcome of offering this upgrade option is that once one house gets a stamped concrete driveway or patio, all the neighbors like it so much they want stamped concrete as well. It took Lone Star Concrete a lot of time and energy upfront, but now that they are in with a few builders, installing stamped concrete as part of a residential housing development has led to big profits.



CONCLUSION:

WHAT'S NEXT?

No matter the trends, the heartbeat of the concrete stamping industry has always been and still is the professional installer. They are true artisans who use color and texture to transform concrete into something with high artistic value. I am confident they are up to the difficult task of maintaining the high quality, durability, and diversity of stamped concrete so the industry will continue to grow and flourish, just as it has done for the last 50 years. — **Chris Sullivan**

BONUS: Avoid the school of hard-knocks with additional hindsights from these veteran installers at <http://www.concretenetwork.com/products-stamps-skins/hindsight.html>

RESOURCES:

STAMPED CONCRETE Q&A

Have technical questions about stamped concrete? Visit Chris Sullivan's Corner: <http://www.concretenetwork.com/fix-stamped-concrete/>

FIND STAMPED CONCRETE PRODUCTS <http://www.concretenetwork.com/suppliers/>

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THE END