



When to Outsource Your Finishing

For tricky finishes
or a durable tabletop,
a pro can do it better

BY MARK SCHOFIELD

For 11 years now, I've written and edited *Fine Woodworking* articles aimed at helping readers finish furniture they've made. Recently, while admiring Peter Gedrys's work finishing a Federal-style desk that I made ("Antique Finish that Holds Nothing Back," *FWW* #220), I had something of a Road-to-Damascus conversion. Why, I wondered, don't more woodworkers use a professional to finish some of their pieces? After all, most woodworkers don't like finishing and many struggle at it. So why do something you don't like, aren't good at, and at the same time risk ruining a piece you've invested a lot of time and money in?

When and why to use a pro

The two obstacles to using a pro are guilt and money. Many hobbyist woodworkers worry that if they have someone else finish their work, then it won't really have been made by them. On my desk, not only did I not apply the finish, but I also didn't saw and dry the lumber, slice the veneer, make the bandings, or cast the hardware. Still, I have no problem saying that I made the piece.

Regarding cost, if you are a pro it's fairly easy to calculate whether the time you'd spend finishing, multiplied by your hourly shop rate, is more or less than the cost of having a piece finished professionally. If you are an amateur, consider the cost of top-notch finishing tools such as a spray gun, a compressor, and a spray booth, as well as paying for classes in how to use them.

Unless you make a mess just wiping on a few coats of oil, I'm not advocating that you give up finishing your projects entirely. But there may be times when a particular finish is beyond your reach either technically or artistically. I had this in mind when I did some research around the country about what a professional finisher would charge. I gave each finisher three finishing scenarios to price (see chart at right).

Three finishes to farm out

A really bombproof finish for a kitchen tabletop is beyond most woodworkers because they aren't set up to spray. There is simply no brush-on—let alone wipe-on—finish that can match a sprayed, catalyzed finish in terms of toughness and durability. While brushing or wiping on polyurethane to the less-touched, lesser-seen base of the table is fine, having a pro finish the top will give you a better-looking,



The most durable tabletop finish



An antique look for a tiger-maple bed

3 test cases

I contacted several professional finishers, gave them descriptions of three pieces of furniture and the type of finish I would like, and asked them to quote me prices for labor and materials. The owner is responsible for shipping the piece each way.

Each finishing project will be different, but these will give you some guidance in how much you should pay. At the very least, the range of prices suggests that you try to get more than one bid.

—M.S.



A high-style finish for a lowboy

TYPE OF PROJECT	FINISH APPLIED	PRICE RANGE
Kitchen tabletop, 3 ft. wide by 6 ft. long, close-grained wood	Sealed both sides, then two coats of a solvent or waterborne catalyzed finish on top, no rubout	\$270 to \$600
Pencil-post bed in tiger maple, queen-size	Antique maple water-based dye, coat of sealer, then two coats of solvent or waterborne lacquer	\$600 to \$1,200
Lowboy in mahogany	Medium brown, water-based dye, grain fill, selective glazing, clear coat with shellac that is rubbed out	\$1,000 to \$1,800

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH A PRO



PREP THE PIECE PROPERLY

A properly prepped piece will not only look better when finished, but it will also save you money by letting the finisher stick to finishing (below). The last thing you want is to have the finisher sanding your work while the meter is running. Be sure to remove all machine marks and glue squeeze-out, and carefully sand the piece (left) up through the grit specified by the finisher.



longer-lasting table overall. No one will notice the differences in the two finishes, particularly if they are the same sheen.

Most woodworkers have a phobia of dyeing wood. They don't have the knowledge of colors and how to combine them that a professional finisher has. Nor can they anticipate how a wood will react to the color, and because they lack the ability to remedy a problem, the fear of a mistake is that much greater. So I asked for prices on dyeing and then clear-finishing a tiger maple pencil-post bed.

Finally, even if you are a reasonably accomplished finisher, you may one day make a really special piece that deserves an equally special finish. If you've invested thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours making a period piece, just wiping on a coat of oil is rather like planting a single shrub in front of a new house and calling it landscaped. My final price request was to dye, seal, fill the grain, glaze, and clear-coat a mahogany lowboy.

Finding the right finisher

Finding a finisher who'll work with you may not be easy. Begin by looking in the yellow pages under furniture repair and refinishing and also furniture stripping. Online, Angie's List has a section for furniture refinishing and repair with customer reports on individual companies. Contact furniture makers, both one-man shops and medium-size operations. If they don't outsource their finishing to a professional, they may have one in-house, or they may be willing to do some extra finishing themselves. Check with local woodworking clubs. There may be a member who specializes in finishing and is happy to finish another woodworker's piece, often at a lower price than a professional would charge.

In all cases, ask for references, look at their past work, and if possible, visit their shop. With finishing you get a much better



BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT

Both you and the finisher should have a good understanding of the finished look before work starts. Schofield shipped sample boards using different veneers from his desk to Peter Gedrys, who then applied a range of dyes and clear coats for Schofield to approve or suggest changes.

idea of the quality by seeing a piece in person rather than in a picture. Running your eyes over a surface lit with a raking light will show imperfections no photograph can reveal (I know, I've tried to capture them to illustrate finishing faults).

Clear communication avoids a disappointing finish

Once you've picked the finisher, you must agree on the finish. Unless you're just having a tabletop clear-coated, send photos of finishes that you like and of your unfinished workpiece, and sample boards of all the woods used. The finisher, for a fee, should work up different colors and/or sheens on these boards for you

HIRE OUT THE WHOLE THING OR JUST PART OF IT?

You may not need to have the whole piece finished by a professional. Sometimes it makes sense just to have the pro finish part of the piece or handle part of the finishing process, and do the rest yourself.

Spray the case, wipe the legs. Brian Sargent, a professional furniture maker in New Hampshire, isn't set up to spray, nor does he like the fumes of solvent lacquer. To obtain the durability this finish offers, he had a professional spray the case part of this lingerie chest. He finished the legs himself by wiping on Waterlox and then attached them to the finished case.



Spray the top. Another New Hampshire furniture maker, David Lamb, estimates he does 85% of his own finishing. However, "a furniture maker can't specialize in everything" and there are occasions when he goes to a pro. On this library table, Lamb finished the base with shellac. Another woodworker sprayed lacquer on the top, and then Lamb rubbed out that surface.

to approve. If you don't like the look, say so. It is better to correct the sample boards than to be disappointed with the final results.

The finisher should also tell you how to prepare the workpiece. Finishers' number one complaint was shoddy prep work by woodworkers, and all of them included some prep work in their prices. See if they'll reduce the price if you do the prep work properly.

Sand the surface to whatever grit the finisher specifies. Do the final sanding within two days of delivering the piece so that the surface doesn't get time to oxidize. Check the whole piece minutely for glue residue. Break all the sharp edges. To make access to the piece easier, don't attach backs to cases or bottoms to deep drawers. Remove any hardware, including drawer slides.

You want the table when?—Don't deliver the table to the finisher on December 20 and then tell them you need it for Christmas lunch. Even the simple catalyzed clear finish on the kitchen tabletop will take a couple of days to spray and should rest for three days before being wrapped and shipped. And if the topcoat needs to be rubbed out, it has to cure first for at least 200 hours.

How to get a finished piece home safely—To get the workpiece home without damaging it, it's a good idea to invest in one or more moving blankets or quilted pads (\$15 at U-Haul) and also some stretch plastic wrap to hold them in place around the workpiece. Don't wrap a finished piece directly in plastic or bubble wrap as this may imprint the surface, especially in hot weather.

Once the piece is home and all your friends, relations, and fellow woodworkers are admiring it, then you'll know that going to a finishing pro was money well spent. And you'll be halfway done with your next project already. □

Mark Schofield is the managing editor.



Start to finish. Schofield tasked Gedrys with the entire job on this Federal desk. With a multi-step finishing process like this, it may make more sense to let a pro handle everything. This avoids disputes about who is to blame if things go wrong.