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To Our Friend, Debra



Rebecca Robledo
Deputy Editor PSN

I'M NOT GOING TO LIE: IT BRISTLES on me when I hear another woman's accomplishments qualified by her gender —when somebody is called, “The best female fill-in-the-blank.” As somebody who has walked this planet in a female form for more decades than I'm going to admit here, I know there's something of a junior-varsity implication there.

So it is that I hesitate to use this limiting qualification to frame the accomplishments of Debra Smith, a PSN Top 50 builder who passed away all too early on May 23 at the age of 69 after a brief battle with cancer.

Because the fact is this: Virtually anybody would envy the legacy she leaves, the example she set, the imprint she made on the industry — and the friends she made.

She was a standout businessperson, full stop. With a degree in Business Administration and a concentration in accounting, she entered the industry at a time when not many came to the table with a degree and no pool experience. Having started out by keeping Pulliam's books, she took arguably the oldest pool builder, a family-owned business, and elevated it to the next tier of its evolution, and eventually becoming its owner. She was a pioneer in the Texas industry, deciding to join her friends and competitors in the Lone Star State and establish a dedicated government advocacy organization there.

She accomplished these things like most people must under the circumstances — by educating herself at least as much if not more than the next person and working harder. After her pass-

ing, peers talked about her work ethic, saying she started her day earlier than everybody else and ended it later, then still made time to assemble a gift basket when somebody in her life celebrated a milestone.

These achievements on their own create an enviable legacy. But context matters. The dearth of women in the industry — particularly leading a contracting firm — made her accomplishments even more impressive. And she did it with such grace.

I spoke with a good friend of hers, Kim Westbrook, regional sales manager with Fluidra, and she summed it up better than I could: “She was very humble but she was incredibly smart and driven. She held people accountable. It's hard to hold people accountable with grace and professionalism, and you can't worry about being liked. But she still was liked and did it well. So that was a gift.”

And, yes, if you knew her long enough, she acknowledged that being a woman in the construction industry could come with its occasional snags. So she did her best to help other women succeed, whether in the industry or her local business community.

Over the past few years, the industry has produced several events and groups meant to promote women in the industry. Every time I hear about them, I think of Debra Smith. And that will continue to be the case. I will always be grateful to have known her and seen her example.

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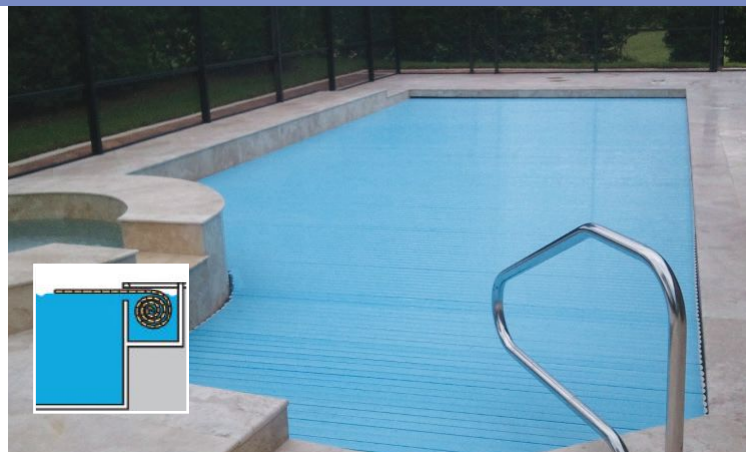
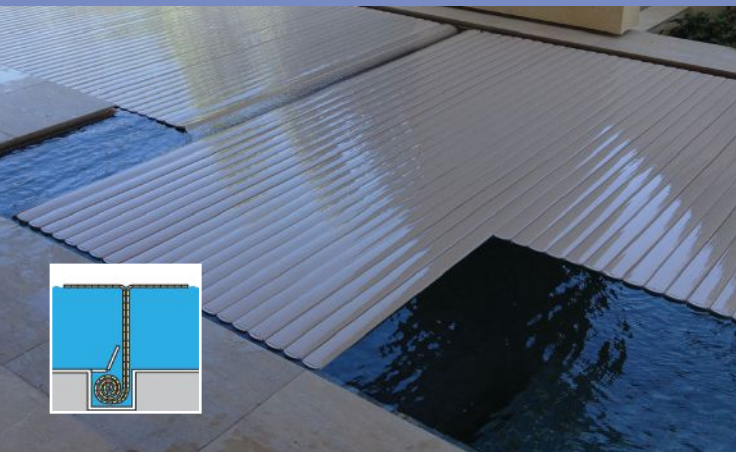


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Former Fluidra Exec Named Heritage President

DISTRIBUTION POWERHOUSE Heritage Pool Supply Group has named a new president. Scott Frost, former Executive Vice President of Sales and Service with Big Three manufacturer Fluidra, has taken the position.

Frost served at Fluidra for more than 30 years, beginning with Jandy on its sales team before the company went through the multiple acquisitions that eventually led to Barcelona-based Fluidra. He also currently serves as chair-elect of The Pool & Hot Tub Alliance.

“Scott has been known throughout his career for building strategic relationships with customers and suppliers and, most importantly, for his servant leadership in helping his teams thrive,” said Dan Tinker, CEO of SRS Distribution, parent company to McKinney, Texas-based Heritage. “Scott is a trusted friend and mentor to many and a true steward of the industry.”

Frost will oversee sales strategy and operations, strategic initiatives, and continued expansion efforts for the company, which has been aggressively growing and acquiring since its founding in 2021. He succeeds Matt McDermott, who was promoted to the newly created position of President, Heritage Family of Companies at the beginning of the year, but is expected to continue supporting Heritage Pool Supply Group through more rapid growth.

McDermott said Frost’s strengths align with Heritage’s culture and plans for the future. “Scott’s deep industry relationships and decades of industry experience make him the ideal leader to guide Heritage into its next phase of growth,” he said. “His commitment to customer service and employee engagement as well as excellence and innovation aligns perfectly with our mission to empower pool professionals and elevate the industry.”



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Note: Each licensee or franchisee must apply as a separate entity. Multiple franchised or licensed offices may only apply together if owned by the same individual or entity.

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Final deadline: Thurs., July 17, 11:59 p.m. PT; \$199

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Remembering Debra Smith of Pulliam Pools

The owner and longtime manager of one of the country's oldest pool builders painted an early picture of how female leadership could look in this industry's construction sector.

by **REBECCA ROBLEDO**

DEBRA SMITH, FORMER OWNER AND PRESIDENT of Fort Worth, Texas-based Pulliam Pools, has died. She passed away on May 23, six months after being diagnosed with cancer and just a week after her 69th birthday.

Known as an astute businessperson from the time she joined the industry more than 30 years ago, Smith also is credited with establishing government advocacy in Texas and helping create an environment where competing builders in Texas and the Dallas/Fort Worth area specifically could join forces. While a pioneer among women in the industry's construction segment, she is credited for mentoring and setting an example for other business owners regardless of gender.

Born May 15, 1956, Smith grew up in Ohio. She earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree with an accounting concentration at Mesa State University in Grand Junction, Colo. Before making a home in the Fort Worth area, Smith and her husband were said to travel and live in places as far-reaching as Cairo.

Upon settling in, Smith worked in the banking and auditing industry until 1992, when she joined Pulliam, one of the oldest pool builders in the country. She came at the front end of a trend that has gained steam since she joined the company — people who entered the industry not with construction experience, but rather business education and training. Pulliam, which celebrated its

centennial in 2016, remained owned by the founding family until she purchased it with partner and fellow employee Mike Clark in 2009. She gained sole ownership in 2021. Later that same year, she got ahead of another trend, selling Pulliam to Riverbend Sandler, which has consolidated construction companies at a time when roll-ups have mostly focused on service and maintenance. After a short time guiding Pulliam through the transition, she retired.

Smith's business acumen led her firm to rank on the *PSN* Top 50 Builders list every year since the program's start in 2003, a distinction enjoyed only by Pulliam.

She also made her mark as the first woman to earn her Certified Building Professional designation from the Association of Pool & Spa Professionals (now PHTA).

She leaves a significant mark on the Texas industry, initiating the formation of its lobbying group, said Charlie Claffey, president of Claffey Pools in Southlake, Texas. He worked with Smith in the association, first called APEC and now known as the Texas Pool and Spa Coalition.

"It was her brain child, her passion," Claffey said. "She stepped up when no one else would. I jumped in after, but without Debra... [the Texas Pool and Spa Coalition] doesn't exist. She was just an incredible woman who did so much for Texas, so much for the industry."

Claffey also credits her with encouraging him to become involved in the in-



Debra Smith

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dustry. For him, what started out with APEC eventually lead to him becoming chairman of PHTA. “Without Debra’s asking me [to work on APEC], who knows if I would ever have been as engaged as I turned out to be,” he said. “It was all as a result of her.”

Smith held another distinction, as a woman leading Pulliam’s operations by the mid 1990s, when it was rare to see women in this position on the construction side.

Kim Westbrook, regional sales manager for Fluidra and a close friend of

Smith’s, said becoming the first female Certified Building Professional exemplified Smith’s strategy for success in a male-dominated field.

“She always spoke from a place of knowledge,” Westbrook said. “She had the facts. She could back up what she was saying. When she came to the conversation, it wasn’t what she thought or felt — it’s what she knew. She learned it, mastered it and was able to communicate it in a way that reflected that. She invested in herself and knowledge.”

Industry friends said she was very generous with her time and guidance throughout her dealings. “I learned a lot from her: Stay committed to the community you serve, do things for the right reasons, service the community and good causes, and God will take care of the rest,” Claffey said. “...Taking care of the industry was important.”

In a social media post, pool builder Scott Cohen added: “Over the years, she became someone I could always count on — not just for her brilliant insights into contracts and business practices, but for her strength, grace and unwavering generosity,” said the president of The Green Scene Landscaping & Pools in Chatsworth, Calif.

Bruce Mungiguerra, CEO of Riverbend Sandler, said the same held true for her approach to managing.

“She was looked at more as a mentor than a boss or owner,” he said. “She did a lot with her team to insure they were mentored for great success, which was a very interesting characteristic for us.”

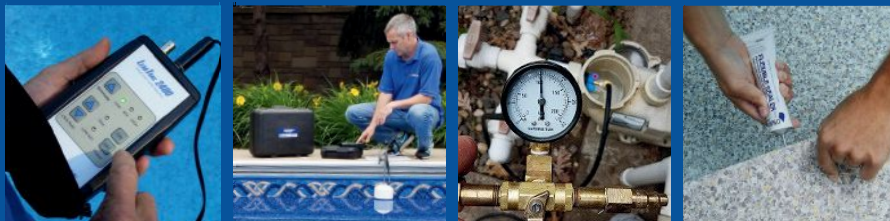
Those who worked with her said they’ll remember her combination of business prowess, kindness and humility. “I attribute Debra’s success to not only her brainpower, but also to her work ethic — she was truly all-in with whatever she was involved with,” said Matt Gohlke, president of Gohlke Pools in Denton, Texas. “She was the hardest worker that I had ever seen in any line of work... Debra was one who definitely gave more than she took.”



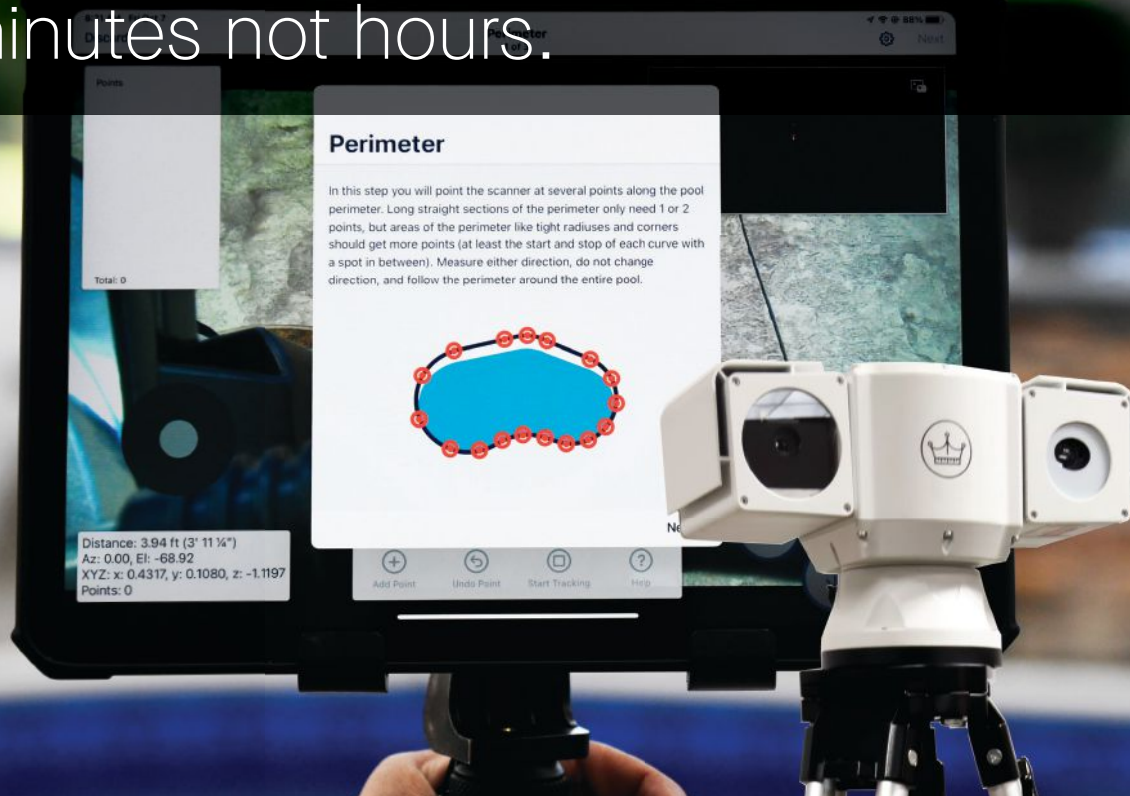
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AURINGER NAMED NPC DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

The National Plasterers Council has appointed Jana Auringer as its director of education.

Before taking the NPC staff position, Auringer worked for 11 years as a quality assurance technician for Pebble Technology Intl.

Auringer has held several volunteer positions for NPC, including past chairman of the Research Committee, vice chair of the Technical Advisory Committee, and a member of the Technical Advisory Committee and Education Committee. She was honored as Volunteer of the Year in 2023.

"Jana has been an integral part of NPC's educational offerings for many years," said NPC Chairman Shaun Goldberg.

PHTA CALLS FOR COMMENTS ON SPA STANDARD

The Pool & Hot Tub Alliance is beginning its cyclical update of the American National Standard for Permanently Installed Residential Spas and Swim Spas. As part of the process, it is calling for participation in the new PHTA-3 Standard Writing Committee, and for change requests.

PHTA-3 provides recommended minimum guidelines for the design, equipment, operation, and installation of permanently installed residential spas and swim spas. It also is meant to provide guidance for regulatory bodies.

PHTA is accepting applications to join the standard writing committee until Aug. 8. Change requests for the standard will be taken until Sept. 12. More information can be found at phta.org.

CAMERON TAKES AQUASTAR NORTHEAST POST

AquaStar Pool Products has hired Jeff Cameron to serve as Northeast sales/technical manager. Cameron brings 23 years of industry experience, most recently as a field service technician for the last 14 years.

Cameron has expertise in multiple aspects of the industry, including sales, training, field support, and troubleshooting.

Cameron enjoys training others. "We are excited to add Jeff to our AquaStar family. His experience and expertise will be a great addition to our team," said AquaStar President Todd Pieri.



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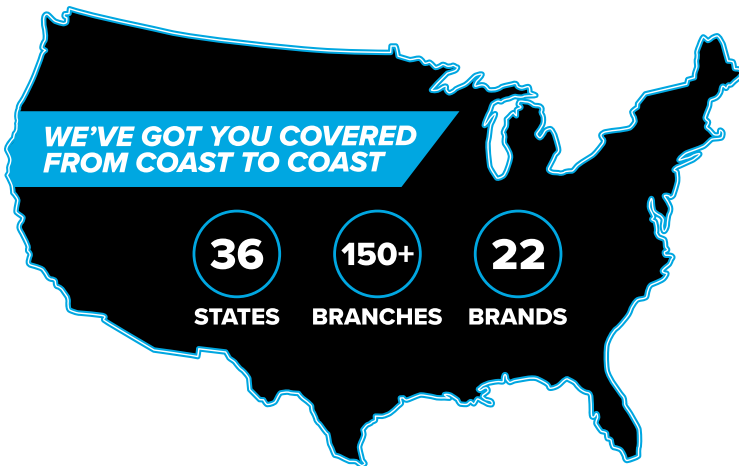


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The Reluctant Salesperson

A different (and more effective) approach to selling.

by DALE NIKULA

I WENT INTO THE CONSTRUCTION BUSINESS BECAUSE OF MY passion for building. I love walking through a building under construction or being remodeled and visualizing what it will eventually become. I didn't go into construction to sell but soon realized that I couldn't build unless I sold. So, over the years, I spent a lot of time and money learning different techniques to sell and close, and through practice and going on tons of sales calls, became very good at both. But I never really enjoyed selling. It was just something I had to do so I could build. Don't get me wrong, I loved the rush when I closed a sale (especially if I had "beaten" my competition) and that feeling of winning and being a winner. But I

hated losing a sale, because that meant that I had failed and had been beaten. And this feeling became almost unbearable if I had lost several projects in a row.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Then later in my career, I came across a video series by the author and coach Michael Neill, called a Different Way of Thinking About Selling, in which he asks "what if we change the definition of selling?"

A commonly accepted definition of selling is "the act of persuading someone of the merits of a product, idea or service." Just by definition, this requires learning techniques to persuade someone, and then being able to use those techniques on actual sales calls without appearing that you're trying to persuade them. Just thinking of this makes me nervous as this never became second nature to me and I always had this lingering thought that I wasn't doing something right or sounded "salesy."

But Michael Neill suggests we change the definition to "Getting to know someone and then seeing if and how we can help them" This made so much sense and was the key for me to start enjoying selling all the time -not just when I made a sale. I've been getting to know people most of my life without using any techniques. It just requires being open, friendly, asking questions about them and being genuinely interested in what they say and feel. Approaching sales this way shifted my focus from "what can I get" to "what can I do for them." Think of how you would help a friend that wanted you to remodel their home. Wouldn't you want to learn all that you could about their needs and expectations? Wouldn't you be open and honest about what some of the potential problems could be? Wouldn't you want to make sure that you were the best fit for their project and didn't do anything to jeopardize



Super Mesh - Tan

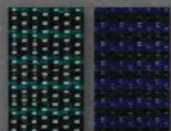


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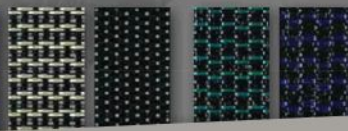
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Let's imagine that you haven't sold any jobs in a while and now you're going to meet the owners of a home that want to expand and remodel their kitchen and have a budget of \$75,000, including the appliances. They are new to the area and plan on meeting with five different companies. Knowing these facts, you likely wouldn't have agreed to meet with them, but as I said, you need the work. What are some of the thoughts you might have on your way the meeting? Can I get them to increase the budget? Can I get them to reduce the scope of work? How am I going to get this job? Why did I agree to meet with them?

On arriving, one owner answers the doorbell and you discover that she was a good friend from high school that you haven't seen in years. She comes over and gives you a big hug and says how great it is to see you again. Now what are your thoughts about the meeting? More positive, more willing to spend time with them? More empathetic and caring? More focused on how you can help them than sell them?

As this thought experiment shows, we live in the emotions created by our thinking. As soon as you recognized a friend, your thinking shifted from self-oriented to other-oriented and you started focusing on their needs and not yours. And focusing on their needs is what builds connection and trust. And trust is the ultimate selling differentiator. I'll say that again - trust is the ultimate selling differentiator. Don't get me wrong, you still need to an

expert in whatever type of work your company does and have a good reputation for reliability and quality. No sales approach can replace those.

In the book "The Trusted Advisor" by David Maister, Charles Green, and Robert Galford, the authors present a trustworthiness equation they developed after conducting thousands of interviews with their clients. The equation is (Credibility + Reliability + Intimacy) / Self-Orientation, where:

Credibility is your expertise, knowledge, how believable you are when you speak: Do you know your stuff?

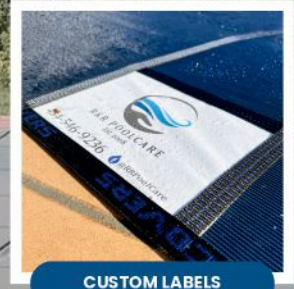
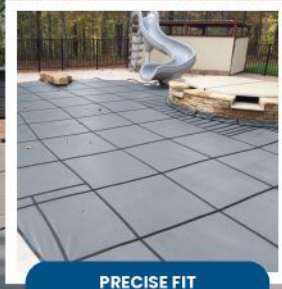
Reliability is your dependability and follow-through on commitments: Do you do what you say you'll do, when you say you'll do it?

Intimacy is the safety and security that people feel when entrusting you with something: Do people feel comfortable being vulnerable with you?

Self-orientation, which is considered the most crucial factor, refers to your focus: Are you primarily focused on your needs, agenda, ego, gain or the other person's needs, goals and interests?

As you can see from the equation, the lower your self-orientation, the more trustworthy you are considered. So again, the more you are genuinely focused on the needs of the person you are meeting with, and the less on yours, the more trusting they will feel about you.

This approach doesn't mean you will close every opportunity. Just as with people in general, you are not going to connect with everyone you meet. Who we are and what we offer professionally will not be a good fit for some people - they may not be able to afford you, have a schedule that doesn't work for you, or you may just not connect. But this approach will help you to realize that so that you can politely decline the project instead of trying to force a square bolt into a round hole.



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Even though this approach doesn't require any special techniques, there are some skills that you can develop that will help you use it effectively:

Listen. I define active listening as the ability to listen without assuming what is going to be said or formulating a response before the other person is done speaking. As Michael Bungay Sanier said in his book "The Coaching Habit", stay curious a little longer, and rush to action and advice giving a little more slowly. Your goal is to find out as much as you can about them and what is motivating them to do this project. That requires listening, not talking.

Question. Ask open ended questions, such as: What's motivating you to do this project? What would make this project a success? What's your biggest concern? What will you do if the cost is higher than your budget? Questions like these require some thought and often times the answers will open up potential problems and solutions that might not have been considered.

Breathe. Using breathing exercises prior to the meeting will help you remain calm, which in turn will help you to stay focused and present.

I discovered a significant benefit to adopting this approach was experiencing less discouragement when I lost

a sale. I no longer considered losing a sale as failure; it was simply confirmation of the reality that we and our service are not a fit for everyone. And when selling became enjoyable, the need to win faded away. It still felt great when I sold a project, actually even better, because I knew my company was the best fit. But it was okay when I lost a project, because I didn't need the win to feel good about myself or what I was doing. So instead of fretting about what I did wrong and getting discouraged, I looked forward to meeting the next person I could get to know and help.

Dale Nikula was the founder and President of Encore Construction in Dennis Port, Ma. until selling the company in 2021. He is currently a business coach with Remodelers Advantage. This article previously appeared in sister publication JLC.

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JADUE STOCK

An aerial photograph of a pool construction site. In the foreground, a curved stone retaining wall borders a gravel area. To the left, a circular structure, possibly a hot tub or a small pool, is under construction. The background shows a house with a shingled roof and a driveway. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

AVOID THESE PATHS TO LITIGATION

Expert witnesses who specialize in pools reveal what mistakes most frequently land pool builders in court.

BY REBECCA ROBLEDO

EXPERT WITNESSES ENJOY A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE ON THE pool/spa industry and its work.

These experts are called into a case to inspect a project and find any construction defects that were committed, then assign a cost to those.

While they may be hired by a defendant, their job is not to build a case for the defendant, but rather to make a completely objective assessment of the job.

“The definition of a construction defect expert witness should be completely neutral with no skin in the game and give you unbiased opinions based on codes and standards of care in the industry,” says Scott Cohen, president of The Green Scene Landscaping & Swimming Pools, based in Chatsworth, Calif. “You’re basically an umpire calling balls and strikes.”

In fact, these experts can actually hurt their clients’ case if they’re caught lying or contradicting themselves, adds Rob Holmer, president of H2 Engineers, based in Sacramento, Calif. “If you testify one opinion on one case, then give a contrary opinion on another, you’ve just destroyed your credibility and really hurt your client by doing that.”

Here, these expert witnesses bring their objectivity to bear in sharing the mistakes that most frequently lead to lawsuits for pool and spa builders.

DEVIATING FROM DESIGN PLANS

Sometimes the equipment or materials specified in a set of plans may have become unavailable before it’s time to order. Some contractors will make the replacement that they believe most appropriate.

But while it’s true that pool/spa contractors are specialists in the niche, they still should not make product substitutions without consulting the entire design team, especially on commercial projects. Other experts on the team may know something that you don’t about the ramifications of that change.

Matthew Reynolds recently helped in a case that demonstrates why. His company, Rowley & Reynolds Forensic Engineering, based in Palos Verdes estates, Calif., recently looked at a commercial pool with a waterslide. Main drains were specified in the waterslide exit. The original plans called for unblockable, 24-by-24-inch drain covers, which could sit flush with the floor since they are too large to be blocked by a person’s body. When those drain covers were not available, somebody decided to substitute them with blockable drains, which must protrude from the floor so that a person’s body can’t block them and create a seal. When some swimmers used the waterslide, they hit the protruding drains and became injured upon exit.

Before substituting equipment, products or materials, go through the established review and approval process.

“You don’t want decisions made in a vacuum,” says Reynolds, president of the company. “Coordination is crucial — amongst the design team, the owner, authorities having jurisdiction, and the construction team. Things are going to inevitably happen on an aquatics project... but it’s how those teams communicate to have a successful project.”

BUILDING ON UNSUITABLE FILL

One of the biggest culprits for structural lawsuits comes from building on fill that’s not fit to support a pool or spa, these expert witnesses say.

Because they are built in the ground, the stakes for pools and spas are even higher than for the adjacent homes.

“Pools usually have a lower tolerance for movement than the surrounding buildings because they’re watertight structures, so they need to remain level,” Reynolds says. “If we had a gutter system or a vanishing edge, we’d have an even tighter tolerance of movement.”

This means that some soil may have been compacted enough to support a home, but not the pool. That’s why some drawings specifically state the fill is not suitable for pools.

“A lot of times, I see contractors will build a swimming pool in ... fill that was graded by the developer,” Holmer says. “They will just take it for granted that the fill soils are suitable to support the pool, when often that’s not the case.”

Some pool builders include disclaimers in their contracts stating they are not responsible for damage related to soil conditions. “It’s generally been my experience that those clauses do not stand throughout the litigation process,” Holmer says.

If the pool contractor hires an engineer to evaluate the soil for a pool, they will receive more protection in court, he says, as the engineer was meant to function as the expert. However, if



the pool builder assumed the soil was sufficient because the home contractor had it evaluated, they likely will not be protected.

“Sometimes during litigation it falls on the contractor that they chose not to hire an engineer and took it on face value that it was suitable to support the pool,” Holmer says.

If a pool builder works as a subcontractor for the home builder, that GC may bear the liability in court, Holmer has seen.

If building on the site of a new home, make sure that the fill has been evaluated and approved specifically for swimming pools, Holmer advises.

“If they’re building the house and pool concurrently, then often there’s already a soils report,” Holmer says. “The first thing the pool builder should do is ask the general contractor for the soils report.”

Often enough, the engineer hired by the home will note on the plans that the fill is not suitable for a pool.

If you’re using standard pool plans on a project, look for notations stating whether or not they apply to pools built partially or completely on fill.

“If you build a pool in fill, and the engineering drawing says ‘This drawing is not suitable for use in fill,’ then you’re deviating from the approved engineering, which will get you in trouble in litigation,” Holmer says.

INCORRECTLY SUPPORTED SHALLOW FEATURES

Because beach entries, sunshelves and other very shallow features sit so much higher than the pool floor, they have the potential to move at a different rate than the main pool.

This can lead to a hinge effect, where the shallow feature moves while the main pool stays put, leading to structural

cracks on the shell. To prevent that from happening, dig these features as deep as the rest of the pool and fill the difference with concrete, Cohen says. This way, the whole pool moves the same way.

“If you have completely nonexpansive soil, you can get away without doing this,” Cohen says. “But any type of clay or freeze/thaw situation and it will crack.”

INSUFFICIENT WATERPROOFING

Raised walls on pools and spas present a special challenge that can have an impact on the structure if not addressed correctly. Whether for a vanishing edge or simple spillway, raised walls attract water migration from one side of the wall to the other, creating the potential for a number of issues.

To avoid these issues, Cohen says, not only should raised walls be waterproofed on both sides, but the barrier should be applied all the way down the pool wall to the floor.

“It is a big problem with vanishing-edge walls, but also on any raised or exposed area where moisture migrates through and causes delamination of tile, stone, or stucco,” Cohen says. “You might have waterproofed

behind the tile, but if you didn't stop the water from getting into the shotcrete behind it, it's going to find flaws in the exterior waterproofing."

Some builders will only waterproof the outside of the wall, but not the interior, he reports.

"Let's say the pool is raised 24 inches on the outside, and the sun is baking outside of that," Cohen explains. "That heat draws moisture from inside, and that pulls it through."

He has worked on at least one case where the builder had to completely tear out the plaster and redo it to fix the issue.

"Plaster is watertight but not waterproof," Cohen reminds.

ISSUES WITH CONCRETE OR ITS PLACEMENT

If there's a problem with the pool structure, one of the most common causes lies with the handling of the reinforced concrete, Reynolds says.

The rebar may have been set so that it doesn't get proper coverage when it's time to shoot the concrete. The concrete may not be the right mix. Or it may not have been applied properly.

Install the rebar with enough distance between it and the ground or form so that it will be covered on the outside by the thickness of concrete specified in applicable standards. Make sure the rebar installation doesn't prevent the shotcrete nozzle from being able to reach around the entire cage and ensure complete encasement of every bar, with no voids. This problem sometimes arises if the bars are too close, for instance.

If using wet-mix shotcrete, be sure to check the mix when

it arrives. If applying dry shotcrete, otherwise known as gunite, make sure the component ratios are correct, especially the water, which can weaken the material in excess.

When shooting the material, make sure the rebar is completely encased, with enough concrete covering the rebar on the internal and external sides of the shell, and with no voids. Errors here can lead to structural cracking and costly repairs.

The risk of poorly placed concrete lay not only in the possibility of it cracking on its own, Holmer says. Even if it isn't bad enough to just crack, it can exacerbate other issues.

"Sometimes poor-quality gunite is the primary cause, but oftentimes there's something else that will cause the initial damage," Holmer says. "But the damage is exacerbated because of poor-quality material."

INCORRECTLY INSTALLED MOSAIC

The glass mosaic tile that can instantly give a high-end and incandescent look to a pool also can prove a headache if not chose and installed correctly.

"If it's a 50-foot vanishing-edge pool and they're going to surface the whole vanishing-edge wall with a mosaic tile, that's a very difficult application, so the contractor needs to be very skilled," Holmer says.

This especially applies to glass mosaic tile with a mesh backing. While this may ease application, freeing tile setters from having to set paper-faced tile, the mesh backing can impede the ability to meet a crucial part of the standards. The Tile Council of North America states that, in pools and spas, 90% of the surface area behind the tile must make contact with the thinset that adheres it to the shell. That's often not possible with a layer of mesh between the tile and the substrate.

"Specifically with mosaic tiles that suffer wetting and drying, I often see individual mosaic pieces delaminate and pop off," Holmer says.





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It's Google's World; We Just Live In It

Recent changes to Google search do not spell good news for organic traffic. Here's why and how to adapt.

Search...

BY JENA COLVIL AND ALI REYNOLDS

IT'S NO SECRET THAT THE DIGITAL landscape shifts constantly. Recent changes made by Google may be strategically steering us toward ads at the cost of organic discovery.

Between degraded results quality, AI-driven summaries, and the overwhelming presence of ads, visibility on search-results pages is no longer earned by merit alone. It's purchased, positioned, and packaged by algorithms. For brands in the luxury pool, spa, and outdoor living space, this means one thing: Evolve or disappear.

This really is Google's world, and we are all throwing spaghetti at the wall trying to find effective ways to keep up. The good news? With a smart blend of SEO, paid strategy, and AI-aware content, your brand can still rise to the top. But now more than ever, strategy isn't optional — it's survival.

It's Google's world, so we need to play smart in it. Here's how.

TOO BIG TO FAIL

Google's dominance means people are "locked in." Documents from a recent court case revealed that the behemoth

moth tested significantly lower-quality search results to see how it would affect Google's bottom line. It found that its own business did not suffer at all when its search results declined in relevance and usefulness.

In fact, you could say it worked in Google's favor. Why? Because users stayed anyway. Not only that: Consumers kept searching, kept clicking, and stayed on the search engine longer than they might have if it had served up satisfying results at the top of its results pages.

This experiment confirmed what Google likely already knew: Its dominant market share insulates it from accountability.

This means your high-quality content may be pushed down or ignored in search results in favor of ads. High-effort, quality content can be outranked if it doesn't align with Google's monetization goals. What ranks isn't always what's best — it's what's most profitable for Google's ecosystem. Even navigational searches (e.g., "Strong Spas dealer near me") can now return maps, AI-generated text, shop-

ping ads, or videos before your organic listing ever appears.

Google's algorithm updates increasingly prioritize featured snippets, paid placements, and AI-generated answers over traditional links to websites. This isn't random or accidental: Poor organic results indirectly benefit Google's revenue. When users don't click through to websites, they stay on Google properties longer, and the more likely they are to interact with additional ads.

This forces businesses to "buy back" their own visibility, even when they've done everything right organically.

AI TAKES TOP BILLING

Among the major changes, Google reshaped how it provides information with the rollout of Search Generative Experience and the evolution of Gemini. When a consumer searches a term or question, the platform now generates a conversational, AI-generated answer, based on content it has found and populated from a variety of resources. That summary is placed at the top of the search results, above the paid or organic links to web-

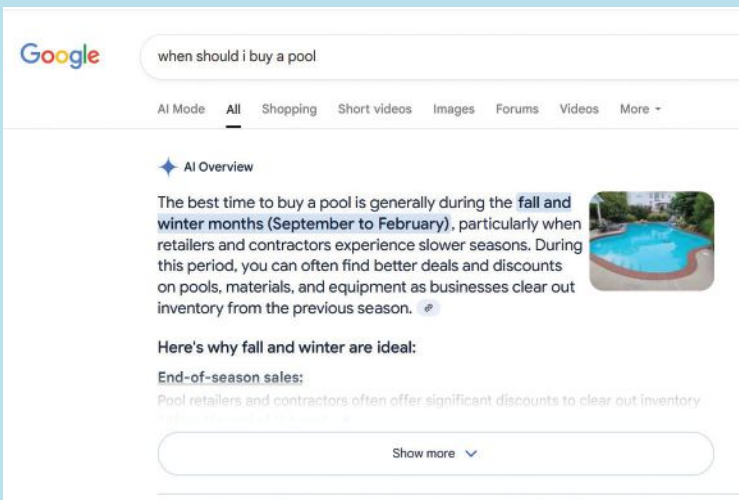


sites that also provide the needed information. The AI-generated content often is sourced from multiple sites, but doesn't always credit them.

That's a massive shift: If you're the expert, but your name isn't cited, your content fuels the AI, but you don't get the click. This threatens industries (like luxury outdoor living) that rely on long-form content and visual sales journeys.

So this somewhat changes the objective of SEO. Now companies must optimize for visibility within AI, not just search rankings. However, Google has not yet monetized the AI summary at the top of the search page. It takes six to 10 times more computing power to deliver the AI results than a standard Google search result. We're predicting that Google will begin showing ads in the AI summary sooner than later.

SEO also is becoming more competitive and less predictable. Previously, strong SEO resulted in more dependable traffic over time. Now? Even top-ranked pages may see traffic plateau or decline. This generally happens because of zero-click searches, where people see the results but don't click



→ **Optimize for AI-first search. Make your content attractive for Google's AI. In the best-case scenario, the AI information at the top of the search results page will come from your site and you'll get credited.**

To do this, you want structured data, concise answers, FAQs, and clear headings. This makes it easy for AI to pull accurate, branded content to provide the best summary.

It should be clear in each section what topic is being covered, or what question is answered. In the content, you're addressing questions that people might type into google — something like, "What's the difference between a fiberglass pool and a vinyl-liner pool?" So not only will your content be relevant, but Google can find a whole section about that topic in one place. You're almost formulating the conversation and content like an FAQ.

The content should contain clear headings, such as "Frequent questions we get about pools," or "What to know about the different types of pools," or "How to know what type of pool is best for you." This helps the AI find and identify the relevant material.

You still want to make sure your brand and market area are prevalent. Throughout the entire section you'd want to say, "Here at ABC Pools we perform XYZ services," or, "We use XYZ method at ABC Pools." So you're constantly mentioning your name and the areas you serve.

But there's a challenge — writing it so it's clear, concise and readable, while incorporating all the needed key words. So, if you're going to use an AI application such as ChatGPT to generate your copy, make sure to have a human edit it to ensure its accuracy and readability. We use AI to add search terms, taking a whole article we've written and saying, "Incorporate these key words in places that make sense." But AI-generated copy is notoriously clunky, and it sometimes fabricates information, so you absolutely need to have that human oversight.

on any of the web pages. They often stop because of those AI-generated summaries you now see at the top of the search results. More aggressive ad placements also play a role, as companies that spend more on advertising will receive more favorable placement in search results.

And when Google implements its updates, it often doesn't disclose exactly how ranking will work, or provide much notice for those changes. So SEO is no longer just content + keywords + backlinks. It's a constantly moving target that favors brands with paid media budgets. Organic SEO isn't dead — but it's no longer reliable on its own.

Users spend more time navigating poor results, increasing exposure to ads, but increasing user frustration and downgrading the efficiency of SEO.

But since Google commands more than 90% of global search traffic, it doesn't have to work hard to keep users. Even when organic quality slips, users default to Google because there simply aren't viable alternatives with the same utility.

THE BLOWBACK

These changes carry implications for both businesses and consumers — especially when it comes to high-ticket items such as pools and spas, which require a high level of research and trust on the consumer's part.

So across industries, even well-optimized websites report drops in organic traffic.

Companies must do three things: pay to protect their own brand terms from competitors' ads; compete against AI that "borrows" their content; and accept that success in organic search results alone won't drive growth.

Now, many businesses are forced to pay for visibility, even on searches for their own brand name. If you sell high-ticket products where buyers research deeply before purchase, you can't afford to be invisible — especially on mobile platforms.

For consumers, the shift to AI answers and ad-stacked search engine results pages changes how to discover and evaluate businesses. Potential buyers often assume that the top result carries the most weight, but that position is increasingly bought or AI-curated, not earned. This erodes trust. Especially in industries where authenticity, quality, and expertise matter, AI-generated summaries often flatten nuance, strip brand identity, and reduce everything to the lowest common denominator of information.

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS FOR MARKETERS

In this new environment, success requires agility and a dual-channel strategy. Here's how to stay competitive:

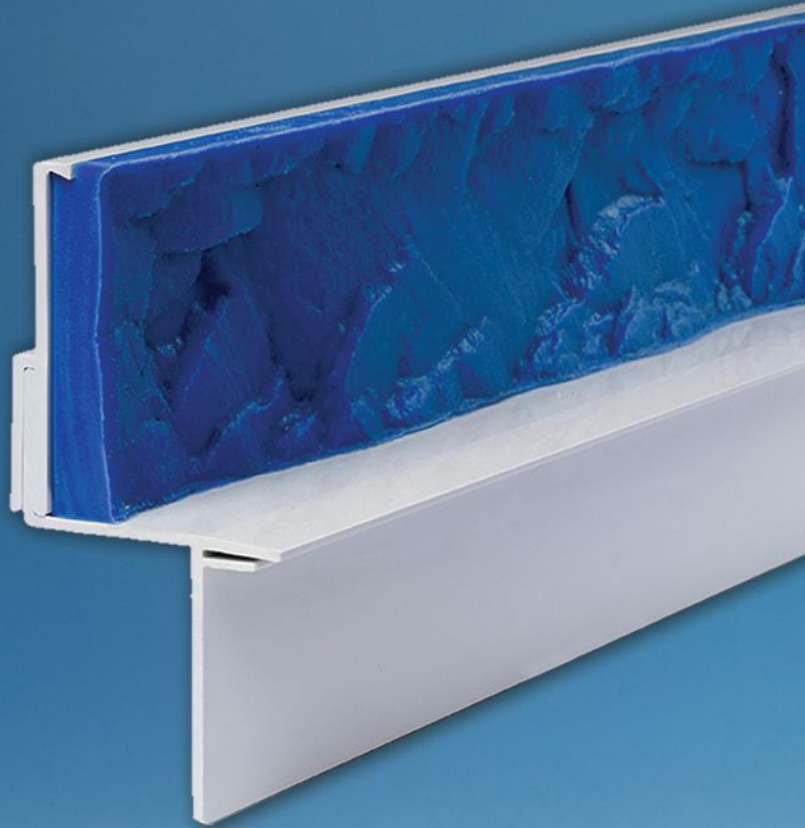


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The more you structure your content this way, the more frequently you will appear in the AI-generated results, and your organic SEO will continue to rise.

→ **Run paid ads to protect visibility.**

It has become very obvious that SEO will perform better for those who run Google ads. So branded search terms and high-intent keywords should be supported with paid ads on Google.

The evergreen campaigns are meant to support your brands and products. Load the ad campaign with high-intent keywords — those typically used by consumers who are more ready to make a decision and a purchase, as opposed to key words and search terms used by those at the beginning of the sales funnel. The highest-intent would be something like “pool store near me,” or “hot tub store near me.” High-intent search terms also would include “hot tub pricing,” “swimming pool price near me,” or questions like, “How much is a hot tub?” These will generate more leads.

Low-intent terms would include questions like, “What colors or shapes do pools come in.” A search term like this indicates that the person doesn’t know enough yet to have a buying intention.

It’s become a necessary evil to have Google ads running at some level for branding and SEO.

→ **Keep up with algorithm updates.**

Track performance during Google’s core updates, and adjust based on volatility. We use a tool called Looker Studio that is based on the Google platform. It allows you to plug all your systems into one metrics report. So you can plug in metrics from your CRM, Google ad performance, SEO tracking, and Meta ad tracking to see how they are performing.

Google sends notifications to its ad partners two to three times a month, explaining updates they’re making to their systems, algorithms and platforms. These changes help make

sure nobody can beat the algorithm. Everybody who runs ads should receive these notifications and pay attention. Sometimes they notify about these changes as little as one week in advance.

So, at times, you have adjust to make sure your ads are configured based on how they optimize. We have no control over what Google does — we have to play by the rules and within the confines of what they share about the changes. If your budget meets a particular minimum, a dedicated Google specialist can help.

When major changes take place, you can expect a period of adjustment, especially if we haven’t been given much notice. The number of quality of leads can suffer: After a major change last fall, our customers were telling us, “We’re getting all these spam leads.” We knew but we had to figure things out to get back on track. As it turns out, AI bots had been introduced into the ecosystem through bad actors taking advantage of new algorithm changes. So we collaborated with several other marketing agency owners to research and find ways to prevent this from happening.

→ **Balance short-term visibility with long-term brand authority.**

To enjoy the best of both worlds, use SEO to build brand trust and establish your company as an authority, then paid media to keep your brand top-of-mind for the public.

Reaping the benefits of SEO takes a while — it’s a long-term strategy built around consistency and original, quality content that incorporates the right keywords and search terms. It’s like building an airport landing strip over time. An industry partner of ours recently described it this way in a webinar we collaborated on: “Every month that you add content, you expand the runway with another section of SEO, so eventually you’ll be able to land whatever size plane you want.”

Since we started offering SEO ser-

vices for our clients, we would write about a blog a week and create new website pages, all containing keywords that our research determined to be the most effective. With this method, you’re adding to the volume of relevant content and SEO on your website every month.

Now we also use more sophisticated and comprehensive tools that have been developed to identify which search terms to target, with the goal of putting our client at the top of that results list for those specific terms. We do this for each quarter with new search term goals.

SEO can’t be ignored. If it’s strong, it will add more valuation to your business than paid advertising will if you sell your company. SEO ranking is worth more than how many leads you generate per month.

Because of this SEO also should be considered on the advertising side. AI will list an advertisement as a search result if its content is relevant to the search. Think about SEO when placing your Google ads. Add specific SEO-style queries into the ad sets — for instance “salt water pool vs chlorine” or “salt water pools and skin sensitivity.” This should help ensure that your ads and website are shown in or just under the AI results when those terms or questions are used. Making your ad sets informational and not just promotional is becoming more important.

→ **Always track your leads**

This should go without saying, but companies need a CRM and other means of tracking leads if they want any hope of detecting when changes to Google’s algorithm have an impact on your company. More to come on CRM benefits and value in an upcoming article!

Ali Reynolds is co-CEO, and Jena Colvil is director of client success of The Get Smart Group, (Thegetsmartgroup.com) an Angels Camp, Calif.-based marketing agency specializing in the pool/spa industry.

Dolphins are Back!

Introducing Kayden's Exclusive New Patterns

Back by popular demand, Kayden Mfg has **Dolphins** once again. With a mix of vivid and light blue hues, this pattern gives pools a classic vibrant blue water color.

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Dolphins



Florence



Blue Drift



CLOSE UP: COVERS





PHOTOS COURTESY AUTOMATIC POOL COVERS

COVERS: SELLING BEYOND THE BASICS

Follow these tips to boost your closing percentages on pool and spa covers.

BY RENA GOLDMAN

MOST BUILDERS KNOW THE USUAL TALKING points when it comes to selling pool covers: They work great for retaining heat, saving energy, and preventing accidents.

But sometimes it takes more than touting the benefits to close a sale. Builders who enjoy higher sales in this product category don't do so by positioning them as an afterthought or add-on, but rather as an integral part of the package. And they learn how customers in their markets think.

If you're looking for fresh ways to sell and market covers, try these tips.

START SELLING EARLY

Don't wait until the end of your sales presentation to mention pool covers. Discussing them earlier sends a message that a cover is a crucial component, says Mike Shadoan, vice president of sales at Automatic Pool Covers in Westfield, Ind.

"The most successful pool builders have embraced automatic pool covers as a standard feature," he explains. "By including them in every inground pool package, not just the top-tier options, they're setting a clear expectation for safety and convenience as essential parts of pool ownership."

When you treat a safety or automatic cover as standard — not optional — it reframes how the customer thinks about it, says Andres Rojas, territory sales manager for Loop-Loc Safety Covers and Luxury Liners, in Hauppauge, N.Y.

"Safety covers should be presented right alongside heaters, automation systems, and

other essentials," he says. "When treated as part of the build, not an optional add-on, it becomes a much easier conversation."

LEVERAGE PUBLIC AWARENESS AND REAL-LIFE USER TESTIMONIALS

Consumers have become much more aware than before of automatic covers and what they do. Buyers also respond to authenticity — and a good story.

Use of the internet and social media can help leverage both these realities to increase sales, says Jeff Garrett, sales manager at Aquamatic Cover Systems in Gilroy, Calif. A simple search for automatic pool covers or automatic pool cover owners on social media will turn up real people talking about what types they bought and what they loved or didn't love about them.

Rojas believes in the selling power of a story. "Homeowners respond to real-life situations, like how a safety cover prevented an accident or how a tarp cover created a near-miss," he says.

By showing customers what other homeowners are saying on social media, it invites them into a conversation that feels more authentic than crafted reviews.

"These are actual conversations from multiple owners, not just one person reviewing a product," Garrett says.

VISUALS AND DEMOS REMAIN POWERFUL

Showing people the product isn't a new technique, but it could be a forgotten one in the digital age. When a customer can walk on a cover, watch it open and close, and feel

CLOSE UP: COVERS



how the water underneath has retained its warmth, curiosity can transform into commitment.

To do this, be sure to use demo pools to their greatest advantage by installing an automatic cover on them, Garrett says. He even recommends showing your own pool if you have one with an auto cover.

“I personally had a demo in my last house for 14 years,” he says. “I invited and allowed my builders to bring their clients to my own pool to take a look at the auto cover.”

SELL YEAR-ROUND

Spring openings and fall closings are the perfect time to point out sagging tarps, frayed covers, or outdated materials.

If you’re only talking about cover options in the fall during closings, you could be missing out. Rojas recommends having the cover conversation whenever it’s relevant, not just during the initial build or preparing for pool closings.

Builders who assume customers care most about covers in the fall are losing the opportunity to make sales in the spring, when most pool stores experience their busiest traffic, Rojas says. “If you’re opening pools in the spring and notice an old, sagging tarp cover, that’s a perfect time to talk about upgrading to a safety cover,” he says.

OFFER FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

When it comes to selling covers, there is no one-size-all approach, says Ray Garvey, Jr., territory manager for Meyco Pool Covers, in Melville, N.Y.

How you address the subject should cater to the specific client. The family stretching its budget to get an in-ground vinyl-liner pool might need more convincing than the client with a \$20,000 interior finish who isn’t concerned about money.

For the budget-conscious client, covers can become more attractive as part of a bundle, since it represents a

greater value rather than just another big-ticket add-on. Jim Dorsey, director of sales and marketing at Kayden Manufacturing, in Hackensack, N.J., recommends that builders take advantage of bundle discounts and incentives from dealers and pass some of the savings to the homeowner.

“Offer a bundle discount with the sale of the pool job and make it clear that they are getting [a certain amount] off their cover by adding it to the deal,” he says.

For instance, builders can package them with other safety features, such as fencing or alarms, marketing it as a “safety upgrade bundle.”

Promotions and sales also can serve as motivators. “Some of our auto-cover dealers create excitement by offering drawings for up to \$30,000 off a new inground pool when customers commit to a 2025 new pool. These packages often include an automatic pool cover,” Shadoan says.

Further, dealers can educate clients about how a cover can protect their investment. Explain how a cover can protect the pool from damage, Garvey says. He recommends emphasizing the damage debris can do when it gets into the pool, not only to water chemistry but also to the plumbing.

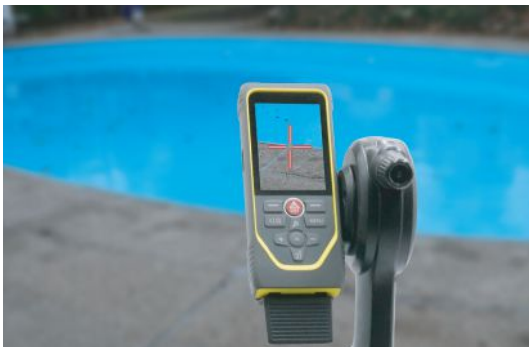
TAP INTO FORMER CUSTOMERS AND REFERRAL NETWORKS

Even if you’re not selling covers as part of a new build, there are still paths to growing sales.

Builders who have a service division can re-engage clients with follow-up marketing about covers. Rojas recommends sending an automated email or printed mailer six to 12 months after a pool build if the homeowner didn’t buy a cover as part of the package. The message could, say something like, “Now that you’ve enjoyed your first season with your pool, let’s talk about protecting your investment.”

Builders who don’t have a service department can find a local service company and set up a mutual referral program, Garrett says.

CLOSE UP PRODUCTS: COVERS



Anchor Industries

This innovative device uses a laser and camera combination to capture precise measurements quickly and efficiently, eliminating the need for manual tape measuring, chalking, or stepping into the pool.

Contact: anchorinc.com/onemeasure



Aquamatic Cover Systems

The motors of Aquamatic's Hydramatic covers run on hydraulic pressure rather than electricity. Its patented cable compensator automatically aligns both sides of the cover as it extends and retracts. Choose from 11 standard colors and six designer colors.

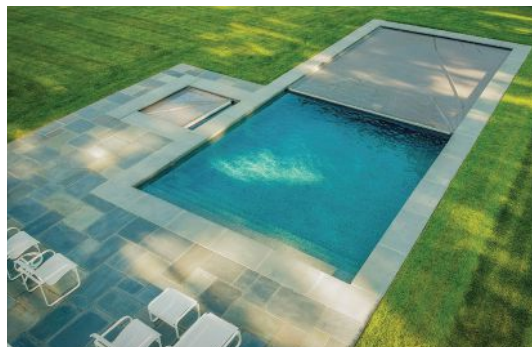
Contact: aquamatic.com



The Cover Co.

The Coverlon Safety Cover is offered in mesh or solid materials, and in a variety of colors. The solid covers come in natural, gray, tan, blue and green. Super-mesh comes in green, blue and tan; regular mesh is available in those colors, plus black.

Contact: coverlon.com

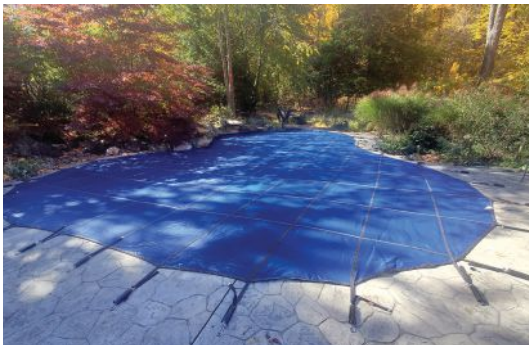


Cover-Pools

Cover-Pools T4 Versa Automatic Pool Cover System is engineered with a small footprint with mechanism design that fits inside a 9- to 14-inch-wide housing, requiring less deck space and just a 12.25-inch offset, so builders need only need 14-inch coping.

Contact: coverpools.com

CLOSE UP PRODUCTS: COVERS



Kayden Mfg.

Kayden Premium Safety Covers are offered in three types of materials: a standard mesh that blocks 90% of UV light, a SunBlocker mesh that blocks 99% of UV light and a solid material that blocks 100% of UV light.

Contact: KaydenMFG.com



Latham Pools

A Coverstar automatic pool cover is designed to prevent children and pets from getting into an unsupervised pool. An automatic pool cover slides on and off the pool with push-button convenience, to protect the pool, and most importantly, loved ones.

Contact: lathampool.com/automatic-safety-covers



LOOP-LOC

The IMAGE-LOC with GoPro Kit uses a GoPro camera to capture highly accurate measurements for pool safety covers in just minutes. The kit is designed for ease of use, requiring only one person to complete the measuring process with minimal effort.

Contact: looploc.com



Merlin Industries

The SmartMesh safety cover is made with a patented high-tech weave, designed to offer 100% shade and debris filtration. With this high level of shade protection, algae growth will be significantly reduced. The covers are available in black, blue, green, tan and grey.

Contact: merlinindustries.com



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CLOSE UP PRODUCTS: COVERS



Meyco Pool Covers

MeycoLite's weave eliminates the need for draining dangerous surface water, allowing rain and debris to naturally pass through while leaves dry up and blow away. Meycolite is treated for color fastness to minimize fading and requires minimal care over the winter.

Contact: meycocovers.com



Rayner Covering Systems

Rayner manufactures duplicate and custom pool covers. The company uses materials such as mighty mesh, which offers 98% UVA/UVB protection; standard mesh, which offers 93% UVA/UVB protection; or solid vinyl, which provide 100% UVA/UVB protection.

Contact: raynercovering.com



Tara Pool & Outdoor Products

Tara HD Mesh Safety Covers provide durability, safety and water clarity while keeping pools protected year-round. Engineered with a densely woven mesh fabric, these covers block 99% of sunlight, preventing algae growth and making spring openings easier.

Contact: tarapools.com



Trigonon

The new patented Trigonon Pool Measuring Device is designed to be operated by a single technician to measure for pool covers and liners. The device captures precise pool dimensions without the need for bending or manual data entry.

Contact: thetrigonon.com

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Selecting Hardware for

Code-compliant pairings prevent corrosion and costly repairs.

BY JIM MAILEY



Use With Treated Wood



ADOBESTOCK

Selecting the code-required options for pressure-preservative-treated (PPT) wood and hardware will extend the life of a properly built deck, porch, or outdoor structure. In this article, I'll first review the proper treated wood for above-ground vs. ground-contact applications. Then, drawing on the knowledge I gained over three decades with Simpson Strong-Tie, I will cover in detail the considerations that must be made for selecting hardware for various environmental conditions.

PRESSURE-PRESERVATIVE-TREATED WOOD (PPT)

In the United States, the American Wood Protection Association (AWPA) sets the consensus standard for the appropriate level of preservative treatment for wood for outdoor decks and other uses. This standard, AWPA U1 - Use Category (UC) System: User Specification for Treated Wood, classifies wood treatment for decks and porches into three levels: "Above Ground," labeled AWPA UC3B; "Ground Contact," labeled UC4A; and "Heavy Duty Ground Contact," labeled UC4B (awpa.com/standards/ucs). The following descriptions of the use categories are from AWPA:

- **"Above Ground":** Wood and wood-based materials used in exterior construction that do not come into contact with the ground. These materials do not require an additional exterior coating; however, these materials may be finished to achieve the desired aesthetic appearance. UC3B materials are used for a variety of applications in either horizontal or vertical positions such as decking, sills, walkways, railings, and fence pickets.

- **"Ground Contact":** Wood and wood-based materials used in contact with the ground, fresh water, or other

situations favorable to deterioration. ... Examples are sawn fence posts, sawn deck posts, sawn guardrail posts, structural lumber, joists and beams for decks ...

- **“Heavy Duty Ground Contact”:** Wood and wood-based materials used in contact with the ground either in severe environments ... in climates with a high potential for deterioration ... permanent wood foundations, and wood used in salt water splash zones.

This last category is of particular note, as IBC Section 1807.3 states: Embedded (sawn timber and round timber) posts & poles shall be treated in accordance with AWWA UC4B. While this is commercial code, it helps guide what is best practice for embedded wood.

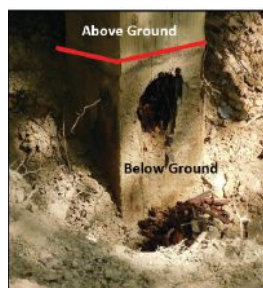
Once contractors have chosen the correct level of wood treatment for each part of a deck, they need to be aware of the consequences of those choices. A higher level of treatment will increase the durability of the structure but will also increase the cost. In addition, the level of treatment, in particular UC4B, dictates the type of hardware that can be used. In the following sections, we’ll look at how the level of preservative in the lumber guides the types of hardware used. In addition, we will detail how environmental conditions can also influence what hardware is deemed best for the job.

CORROSION CRISIS

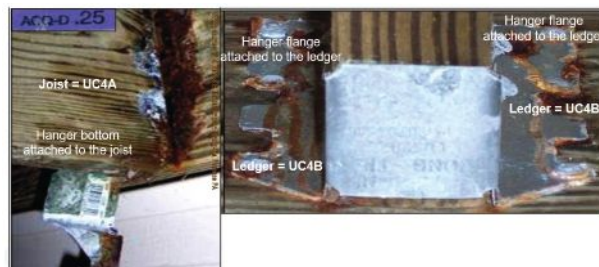
Prior to 2004, selecting the wood and hardware for building a deck was fairly simple. There was not much focus on choosing the right materials, because outdoor structures seemed to last, and there were few code requirements.

But when manufacturers voluntarily discontinued producing chromated copper arsenate (CCA) for residential use in December 2003 and started treating lumber with alternative preservatives, problems started occurring with hardware corrosion. The North American Deck and Railing Association (nadra.org) was founded at this time to address these issues. The primary problems occurred during 2004 and early 2005, as treaters and builders transitioned from CCA to the alternatives. During this time, about 2.5 million decks were built, according to NADRA.

The deck pictured above was one of those decks that had corrosion problems. Though the wood for the ledger and the joist came from the same batch of lumber from the same lumberyard at the same time, the part of the hanger flange attached to the ledger was corroding after six months, whereas the hanger bottom in contact with the joist wasn’t. A chemical analysis of the wood by Simpson Strong-Tie showed that the copper oxide content for the ledger was 0.579 pcf, or UC4B, and the copper oxide content for the joist was 0.335 pcf, or UC4A. Researchers found higher levels of copper oxide in the wood than what was listed on the tag, which stated 0.25 pcf,



Left: A 10-year-old embedded post treated to the level of UC4A has prematurely decayed where the wood is below ground. Bottom: On a deck built after CCA was discontinued for residential use, a joist treated to the level of UC4A did not corrode the joist hanger; however, the ledger, treated to UC4B, caused significant corrosion in less than six months.



or UC4A, for this ACQ-D-0.25 treatment. Inconsistent levels of the chemical treatment during the transition year resulted in premature hardware corrosion only where the retention levels were greater than UC4A.

Stainless steel is recommended when the chemical retention level is greater than 0.40 pcf for ACQ-Type D or the treated wood is rated at greater than or equal to UC4B. Therefore, if you would like to embed a post in soil, the wood should be treated to UC4B and the hardware used should be stainless steel.

HARDWARE SELECTION FOR TREATED WOOD

Building codes include guidelines to assist in selecting hardware for use with PPT wood. The IRC frequently states that any metal or flashings should be corrosion resistant. For example, Section R317.3.1 states: Fasteners, including nuts and washers, for PPT wood shall be hot-dipped galvanized steel, stainless steel, silicon bronze or copper. The IRC references numerous

PHOTOS BY KEVIN KELLY; TABLE BY JIM MAILEY



Zinc from the hanger was sacrificed to protect the uncoated, bright common nail on a one-year-old deck. Where a hot-dip galvanized (HDG) nail was used, there was no transfer of zinc between the nail and the hanger.

ASTM International standards (formerly known as the American Society for Testing and Materials; astm.org) for the required coating weights for zinc-coated fasteners and connectors: Fasteners shall be in accordance with ASTM A153. ... timber rivets shall be permitted to be of ASTM B695, class 55, minimum. And, connectors with preservative-treated wood shall be in accordance with the connector manufacturer's recommendation. In the absence of manufacturer's recommendations, a minimum of ASTM A653, G185 or equivalent, shall be used.

Most metals will corrode under ordinary conditions, except noble metals such as gold, platinum, and palladium, which are obviously not called for by code. The most common solution for corrosion resistance is zinc.

Zinc, which is used in galvanization, has a lot of attributes that make it an ideal coating for many applications. It is the 23rd most abundant element in the earth's crust, with estimates of global supply at more than 750 years with current extraction levels, and it is less expensive to mine than many other metals. Zinc forms a zinc carbonate film about one to two years after being exposed to oxygen that greatly retards its corrosion rate. Zinc will also migrate to protect areas that have less zinc, so, in effect, zinc will sacrificially protect any small areas and will even allow "self-healing" (see photo, above).

Zinc Coating Standard (grade)	Thickness (microns)	Detail
ASTM A653 (G90)	~20/side	Connectors—referred to as G90 (0.90 oz./ft ² on both sides), continuous sheet galvanizing applied prior to fabrication
ASTM A641	6-25	Fasteners, anchors—electroplated (0.2-1.0 mil thickness coating = 0.15-0.53 oz./ft ²)
ASTM A653 (G185)	~42/side	Connectors—referred to as G185 (1.85 oz./ft ² on both sides), continuous sheet galvanizing applied prior to fabrication.
ASTM A123 (HDG ~grade 95)	~95	Connectors—HDG, "batch" or post hot-dip galvanizing applied after fabrication
ASTM A153 (class C)	~53	Fasteners, anchors= 3/8 in.—hot dip method (2.1 mils = 1.25 oz./ft ²)
ASTM A153 (class D)	~43	Fasteners, anchors= 3/8 in.—hot dip method (1.7 mils = 1.0 oz./ft ²)
ASTM B695 (class 55)	~53	Fasteners, anchors—mechanically deposited (2.1 mils)

The table above shows levels of zinc coating needed to resist corrosion on fasteners and hardware used with PPT wood.

Generally, the more zinc, the better resistance the material has to corrosion. Fasteners should have the same level of zinc or an equivalent corrosion resistance as the connector they're in contact with. As you can see from the table above, when you use a connector galvanized to the level of ASTM A653 (G185, which denotes a coating thickness of 42 microns) you should use a fastener or anchor galvanized to the level of ASTM A153 (class C or D) or ASTM B695 (class 55) as a minimum because these fasteners will have the same or thicker coating level.

MATERIAL SELECTION BASED ON ATMOSPHERIC CONDITIONS

According to the International Zinc Association (galvinfo.com), many factors influence hardware and fastener corrosion. Salt exposure, pollution, humidity, temperature, fog, and rainfall all play a role in the annual corrosion rate.

IRC Table R507.2.3 specifies fastener and connector material and coating for use with decks. The table recommends ASTM A153 (class C and class D), or equivalent coatings and finishes, for nails, bolts, and lag screws, and ASTM A653 (G185) or ASTM A123 (grade 85) minimum for connectors.

There are conditions for which an even higher level of corrosion resistance is recommended. IRC Table R507.2.3, footnote b, states: Fasteners and connectors exposed to saltwater or within 300 feet of a saltwater shoreline shall be stainless steel (SS).

The distance of 300 feet is derived from a corrosion study by the International Molybdenum Association and Specialty Steel Industry of North America. The study, “Stainless Steel for Coastal and Salt Corrosion,” states, “The distance airborne salt is carried can vary significantly with local wind patterns. Generally, locations within five to ten miles of saltwater are considered at risk for chloride-related corrosion. In some locations, marine salt accumulations are only a factor within the first 0.9 miles. In others, salt deposits have been measured 27 miles or more inland.”

The code states “stainless steel” but does not recommend a type of stainless steel in the section referenced above. To choose the correct type of stainless steel for a specific application, we need to look at the types available and their performance levels. The most common used in construction are Type 304 (typically nails, some connectors and anchors), Type 305 (typically screws), and Type 316 (fasteners, connectors, and anchors). Types 304 and 305 stainless steel are less resistant to applications that involve chloride-type corrosion. The addition of molybdenum to Type 316 gives it superior performance in environments containing chlorides (salts), and this type of stainless steel is considered to be adequate for hardware near the ocean or in applications that are exposed to chloride-type corrosion (see photo, above). The Cedar Bureau recommends 316 stainless steel within 15 miles of salt water.

Type 410 stainless steel (used for some screws and concrete screw anchors) is optimized for hardness. It comes in two grades—one has a coating without a barrier that is recommended only for interior, noncorrosive applications, and the other has an additional coating or barrier that offers a moderate level of corrosion resistance.

Other possible exposure to salts should be considered by the builder. Deicing salts, salts used to melt snow, or atmospheric conditions that cause metal to corrode that are not addressed in IRC Table R507.2.3 should still be factored in to hardware selection. For example, the Illinois Department of Transportation reports (in “Atmospheric Dispersion



Study of Deicing Salt Applied to Roads” by Allen L. Williams and Gary J. Stensland, January 2006) that sites within about 300 feet to 3,000 feet of highways appear to have salt accumulations from the use of deicing salts comparable to moderate to severe coastal areas. The NADRA Decks Done Right Education program recommends using 316 stainless steel within 10 miles of a salt-water shoreline, within about 300 feet to 3,000 feet from highways that use deicing salts, and wherever the hardware will be exposed to chlorides.

HARDWARE AND FLOOD RISK

According to “The First National Flood Risk Assessment,” a 2020 study by First Street Foundation (a nonprofit organization that seeks to quantify climate risk in financial terms), more than 21 million properties in the U.S. are at risk of flooding, and more than 14 million of those properties are at substantial risk.

Homeowners insurance doesn’t cover flood losses; buildings (defined



The 304 stainless steel nails are corroding after one year of being near the coast and exposed to chlorides. The 316 stainless steel joist hanger shows no signs of corrosion.

LEFT PHOTO BY KEVIN KELLY; ABOVE PHOTO ADORSTOCK



by two or more outside rigid walls and a roof) and contents may be covered under a National Flood Insurance Policy. However, property and belongings outside the building envelope are generally not covered. Because the deck or porch is typically not covered by insurance, it should be built strong enough to withstand a flood event, or the homeowner or building owner will have to pay for the repairs out of their own pocket.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) standard Flood Resistant Design and Construction (ASCE 24) is recognized by the codes as the default document for all structures in floodways or for structures built based on the IBC. For exposed materials below the design flood elevation (DFE), ASCE 24 sections 5.2.2.1 (Corrosive Environments) and 5.2.2.2 (Noncorrosive Environments) state that exposed straps and anchoring devices shall be stainless steel or hot-dip galvanized after fabrication ...

The table on the previous page shows that ASTM A653 (G185) (typi-

cal trade names include Zmax for Simpson Strong-Tie and Triple-Zinc for Mitek) designates hot-dip galvanization under a continuous galvanizing process but prior to fabrication. Based on ASCE 24, connectors would have to be “batch” or post hot-dip galvanized to ASTM A123, for which designation the zinc is applied after fabrication. The one word “after” in the standard changes the requirement from ASTM A653 (G185) to ASTM A123. Or you can use stainless steel. In some cases, 316 stainless steel may be a less expensive option than using post hot-dip galvanized connectors.

SUMMARY

Being aware of the codes and standards for outdoor structures, along with the conditions that can shorten their service lives, will allow you to provide a better product to your clients. You will be able to explain issues that may result when incorrect materials are chosen, and you won't have to worry about your clients being dissatisfied or the building inspector identifying issues with your project.

Jim Mailey is retired after 32 years with Simpson Strong-Tie, where he developed programs on the structural code requirements and product solutions for decks and porches, wood-framed structures, and buildings in flood-hazard areas. He currently advises NADRA on technical issues and is the instructor for the Deck Evaluation class and the Decks Done Right Education program. This article previously appeared in sister publication JLC.

Product Profiles: Renovation & Repairs



Winter Duck Plugs

Winter Duck Plugs are an essential product for “no drain” pool closings — they allow plumbing lines to be blown out while the pool water level remains above returns, says Brad Madison, technical sales manager at Anderson Mfg Co.

The unique “duck bill” valve design of the Duck Plug allows for high amounts of water flow with minimal resistance so lines can be cleared fast and with less strain on the blower. The heavy-duty rubber seals tight when water back pressure is applied and will not allow water back into the plumbing. This design eliminates the need for “burping” lines and makes blowing out plumbing lines into a fast, one-man job.

“This method of winterizing pools supports automatic covers and walls and conserves water,” Madison says. “Winter Duck Plugs have been trusted to protect pools through the toughest winters for more than 10 years.”

Contact: Anderson Mfg Co. | leaktools.com



Kayden Deco-Trim Package

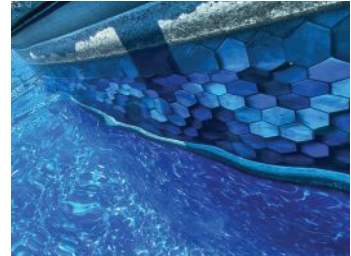
Kayden’s color matching renovation system includes its Deco-Trim Package, which color coordinates a pool’s skimmers, returns, and main drains to complement the pattern.

“This super easy, value added upsell helps Kayden dealers close more liner renovation jobs and even more new pool installs than their competitors,” says Jim Dorsey, Kayden’s director of sales/technical specialist.

Simply make a list of all the fittings in the pool when measuring for a new liner and Kayden will include the Deco-Trim Package that goes with the selected liner pattern along with all the gaskets for those fittings and the rest of the liner installation needs.

The Deco-Trim Package is featured in the Kayden Premium Liner Collection brochure. Samples chits of all five colors are available by request. A 1-year warranty covers any defects in materials or workmanship.

Contact: Kayden Mfg. | KaydenMFG.com



Pegasus Products

Pegasus’ inground and aboveground vinyl liners are made using virgin-grade vinyl that contains ultraviolet inhibitors as well as fungicide and biocide protectors. Using computer-aided design and cutting, Pegasus can customize its liners to fit its customers’ pools perfectly.

Contact: Pegasus Products | pegasus-products.com



Mini Grout Plant

The Mini Grout Plant is capable of pumping epoxy grouts, cementitious grout, heavily bodied materials, repair mortars, and also spraying fireproofing, waterproofing, EIFS, artificial rock work, stucco, and other commercial coatings.

This compact unit consists of a standard Carrousel Pump and 31-inch U-Blend Mixer mounted onto a skid frame. The Grout Plant sits on 16-inch pneumatic tires, which makes it easy to move on the jobsite. In addition, the skid frame has fork pockets installed to allow contractors to move the unit with a forklift.

The pumping system is easy to clean by running a sponge ball and water through the system, no disassembly needed. The U-Blend mixer also features easy clean up: The mixer uses Square-Drive Technology, which enables the operator to remove the mixing blades with no tools and wash the blades within seconds. This speeds up cleanup time and the longevity of the equipment.

Contact: Quikspray | quikspray.com



Pool Safety Cover

Rayner Covering Systems manufactures duplicate and custom pool covers.

The company uses materials such as mighty mesh, which offers 98% UVA/UVB protection; standard mesh, which offers 93% UVA/UVB protection; or solid vinyl, which provide 100% UVA/UVB protection.

All covers are webbed on top and bottom with 1-inch web that is double stitched with UVA/UVB-protected thread for durability.

Rayner offers free measuring and install (for fee) programs for pools as well as a repair program for existing covers.

"Customers are very pleased with Rayner's ability to successfully cover very difficult or elaborate pools that other companies have turned down," says Richard Rayner, president.

Rayner offers up to a 25 year warranty on covers depending on the material.

Contact: Rayner Covering Systems | raynercovering.com



Z Poolform

Z Poolform is a reusable PVC form used to create decorative concrete copings for pools.

Interchangeable Form Liners will allow for a variety of different edge profiles and textures not previously possible with pool coping forms.

Z Poolforms can be used with vinyl liner, fiberglass, or concrete pools. It attaches to the pool wall without the need for tie wires.

The forms are not stripped until the concrete has cured, meaning there is no need to finish or dress the edge while the concrete is still green, saving time and money.

"Any pool builder or concrete contractor who does at least one pool deck a year will love this product," says Dario Baldoni, the company's vice president of marketing and technology. "The high level of relief and detail created with the textured form liners can be matched to the stamp, resulting in a realistic stone look."

Contact: Z Poolform/Concrete Countertop Solutions | concretetopingsolutions.com

Product Profiles: Business Tools & Software



REMORA PRO Kit

The REMORA PRO Kit includes a portable 21-inch vacuum head with a carry handle, Smart Switch to monitor power going to/from the motor, dual-speed motor, 25-foot floating power cord, wearable battery pack, a 10 amp battery charger, two 18Ah LiFePO4 lithium-ion batteries, and one standard and superfine vacuum bag.

Contact: Hammerhead Patented Performance | hammerheadvac.com

Heritage Pool +

HeritagePool+ and the HeritagePool+ Mobile App gives users instant access to products, pricing, and tools.

The app makes repeat orders fast and frictionless — frequently purchased items are always front and center, making reordering simple.

Users can set up lists for full pool equipment pads, from pumps and filters to automation, fittings and valves. These lists also can be exported for fast and easy job quotes. Just add the items to the cart, enter a job site address for delivery or choose express pickup for grab-and-go convenience.

New for 2025: In-app push alerts keep users informed with real-time updates on order status, pickup readiness and deliveries. Also expect a new AI tool: a smart virtual assistant capable of providing product recommendations, tutorials, branch info and more. In addition, look for integrations with PoolBrain, Lou and more.

Contact: Heritage Pool Supply Group | heritagepoolplus.com

New POS Sales Order System

BufferZone water testing software integrates seamlessly with both the Wave Test Strip Scanner and the LaMotte Spin Lab.

Users can use these testing systems independently or together, allowing them to save time and money by choosing the system that best fits their needs for automatic test result input.

In addition, BufferZone's Service Scheduling software provides pool and spa companies with a comprehensive platform to manage all its operational needs efficiently.

Contact: Home Port Computer | h2o-testing.com



Latham Recovery Express Safety Cover Template Program

This easy, turnkey service allows customers to send in an old safety cover for Latham to measure, quote and remake.

Latham will process shipping arrangements for free to one of its regional cover measurement facilities. Once the old cover arrives, it's measured using Latham's proprietary technology and a new cover is recreated with the perfect fit.

If the old cover is a Latham cover, the process is even simpler. Send in the serial number and Latham will remake the cover from the original drawing. The serial number can be located on the back of the label sewn onto the safety cover.

Contact: Latham, The Pool Company | lathampool.com



IMAGE-LOC Kit with GoPro

The IMAGE-LOC with GoPro Kit revolutionizes the way pool professionals measure for safety covers, eliminating the time-consuming and complex manual measuring process, says LOOP-LOC CEO LeeAnn Donaton.

By utilizing a GoPro camera, IMAGE-LOC captures highly accurate measurements in just minutes, ensuring a guaranteed fit for every pool. The kit is designed for ease of use, requiring only one person to complete the measuring process with minimal effort. Unlike traditional methods, which can take hours and involve multiple people, IMAGE-LOC simplifies the process with cutting-edge technology that removes the guesswork.

Additionally, this system is drone-compatible, providing even greater flexibility and accessibility for pools with unique layouts or hard-to-reach areas.

Contact: LOOP-LOC | looploc.com



Lyon Financial

Lyon Financial is a leader in unsecured financing for pools and outdoor living projects, with over 46 years of experience and more than 800,000 customers.

"Since 1979, we've partnered with builders nationwide to offer fast, flexible financing designed to help close more deals," says Carla Barrera, Lyon Financial's director of business development, marketing and advertising. "With low fixed rates, terms up to 30 years, and no collateral required, we make it easy for homeowners to say yes. And we don't stop at pools — our financing options cover everything needed to create a complete backyard oasis, including spas, patios, outdoor kitchens, fencing, and more."

"Financing isn't just a perk — it's the builder's competitive edge," she adds. "With low monthly payments and long terms, builders close more deals, upsell bigger projects, and reach clients who might otherwise hesitate."

Contact: Lyon Financial | lyonfinancial.net



Mobile Live Retail & Service

RB's Mobile Live feature is specifically designed to help pool and spa businesses both on the retail floor and by helping service departments in the field.

RB Mobile Live Retail's Line Buster feature offers mobile inventory look-ups and instant access to customer history and profiles. Use a tablet, integrated magnetic strip reader, and pocket barcode scanner to complete sales transactions, process credit cards and email receipts from the retail floor or even in the parking lot.

Using Mobile Live Service, service techs can easily view Scheduled Jobs along with the customer's information including equipment profiles, job notes, directions and pictures on record. Mobile Live eliminates service forms, allows techs to record pool or spa water test results, take payments at the job site, look up inventory and do physical inventory on their truck, all on a phone or tablet.

Contact: RB Retail & Service Solutions Software | rbretailandservicesolutions.com



Envision AR Pool Visualizer

The Envision AR Visualizer allows users to preview how different pool liner patterns will look in the actual backyard environment using augmented reality.

It enables real-time customization by letting homeowners switch between various liner designs and pool shapes instantly.

The tool uses the camera on a mobile device to place a virtual pool in the physical space, helping users visualize scale, style and fit.

Users can walk around the AR pool from multiple angles to get a realistic perspective of how it integrates with their landscape.

Envision AR enhances confidence in design choices by providing an immersive, interactive experience before any installation begins.

Contact: Tara Pool & Outdoor Products | tarapools.com



UAG + Oracle NetSuite Associations

United Aqua Group has partnered with Oracle NetSuite to bring better business tools to its members specifically in the retail space.

NetSuite serves thousands of customers helping with a unified financial system covering inventory and order management, e-commerce, CRM and marketing, and more.

The Oracle NetSuite program extends UAG members preferred pricing on multiple SaaS licensing editions, plus ongoing educational opportunities.

"These tools and trainings provide the visibility and control needed to run successful businesses," says UAG President Craig Goodson. "In leveraging this SaaS product, UAG members are provided with new solutions that optimize and simplify their operations."

Contact: United Aqua Group | unitedaquagroup.com

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New Products

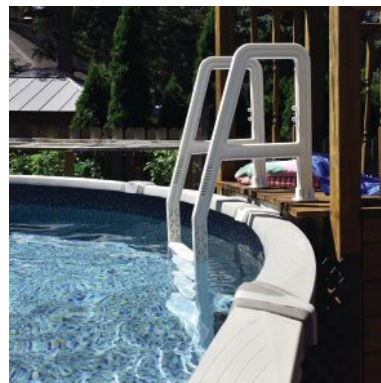
by PSN STAFF



Cleveland Controls

The new ANS2 Series Air Pressure Switch is a universal, field-adjustable switch designed for residential and commercial HVAC systems, commercial kitchen equipment (such as hoods and fryers), outdoor radiant heating products, pool and spa heating, and a variety of other applications.

Contact: clevelandcontrols.com



CPI Pool Products

This heavy duty aboveground pool deck ladder, ACM42, is 24 inches wide and fits aboveground pool with walls between 48- to 54-inches. Its features include a reinforced ladder frame, anti-slip steps and a swivel base. The ladder is available in grey and white colors. Easy assembly.

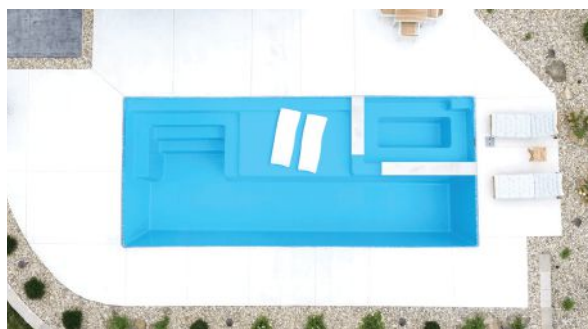
Contact: cpipoolproducts.com



Magic Plastics

The CR2 Check Valve is designed to protect against corrosion in high-value systems like heat exchangers. The unit's clear, serviceable lid makes inspection fast and easy. This valve also has a 100% silicone gasket that ensures a long-lasting, dependable seal across a wide temperature range.

Contact: magicplastics.com



Thursday Pools

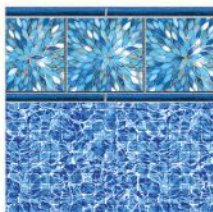
The all new 16-by-36-foot Mack Daddy pool has an integrated spa with a tranquil spillway, a built-in-tanning ledge, an inviting conversation area with wrap-around benches and a uniform, flat-bottom swim lane for fun or fitness. The swim lane is also ideal for games and entertaining.

Contact: thursdaypools.com



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