

Color-Up Your Sales

Colored bedliners are a great way to attract customers who like things bright.

By Sharla Sikes

Spray-on bedliners have been a staple of sales for many truck accessory retailers. The tough, durable material attracts owners who want to keep their pickup beds from being damaged, while still maintaining a nice appearance.

Most liners are sprayed in black; however, that may be a little too *blah* for some truck owners.

“As many customers spend money on a new pickup, they are very often looking at a personalized, customized appearance,” says Jan Zverina, public relations manager for LINE-X, Santa Ana, Calif. “Within that market it has to be a strong blend of form and function. When it comes to the cargo area, the work center of the vehicle, they want both—they want it to look great, but never want to have to think about maintaining or repairing it.”

Why Color?

There are quite a few reasons to like color as an addition to your liner offerings. From an increased profit potential to wider applications and more customers, colored bedliners make sense.

Manufacturers say that spraying color is a little more difficult or may require more equipment than standard liners, but that depends on the system. Colors can be premixed or mixed on-site, and a variety of mixing and spraying equipment is out there.

Manufacturers offer packages that often include training, if needed, for any additional techniques that spraying color may involve.

Once you're past the initial investment, however, manufacturers are confident that the ability to spray colored bedliners will prove to be a big draw for some customers.

“The consumer has not been educated to the benefits of the chemistry, and thinks all black bedliners are the same,” says John Becker, president of Creative Materials Technology, Palmer, Mass., maker of CrystaLiner clear bedliners. “The market is very price-driven; very saturated. One spray-in bedliner installer needs a population of about 100,000 people to stay in business. A consumer can call a number of places to get a price, with a low quote down to \$300. The average is \$350-375 for black. Clear and color [bedliners], however, command a premium.”

It's one way to set yourself apart from others who may be offering sprayed-in bedliners in plain black. It's also a way to diversify and bring in new customers.

“For someone looking to get into the spray-on bedliner industry, offering color is a great way to separate their business from the rest,” says Ben Gallagher, retail product marketing specialist for Rhino Linings, San Diego.

What's The Appeal?

When you add color, you add an irresistible lure to a “niche within a niche” when it comes to truck buyers. They're the ones who prefer a little more form to go along with their function.

With color options ranging from bold hues to transparent, the options for the customer are endless, and there's something to fit every taste.

"It's a niche of a niche; a specialty market," says Becker. "The future in high-performance coatings is high-function coatings that are tough and durable and look pretty."

Care must be applied, however, to choose a product and apply it properly so that it will not fade—the number-one customer complaint about colored liners.

"What the consumers thought they were getting and what they actually got are sometimes two different things," says Becker. "I hear a common statement: 'It's not worth it because it doesn't stay.' Colors that tend to stay better are drab colors like earth tones. Most people don't want earth tones; they want something that's vibrant."

There are several methods to ensure the colors *do* stay, however. Once you've assured potential customers that the product you offer UV-resistant, however, colored bedliners can open up a whole new direction for your restyling business.

"People are looking for the next thing with their trucks," says Gallagher. "They are always trying to customize and make their truck look better, but still serve a functional purpose. Before, bedliners were only available in black. Now you can really get a good quality liner, the same quality as black and they realize they don't have to sacrifice the quality of the liner for color."

With such a wide range of choices of systems, it's up to the restyler to choose the one that fits the needs of his or her shop and customers the best. After that, it's up to the restyler to explore the potential for profit with colored liners.

"With much wider application potential, it leads to increased sales," says Zverina.

"There's a pretty strong demand not only for bedliners, but beyond the bedliner to other truck accessories, like grille guards and fender flares. They use the color code to match or choose a contrasting shade. It really opens up the application potential."

Open For Profits

The possibilities go far beyond a truck's bed, say manufacturers. Wheel flares, wheel wells, running boards, nerf bars, grille guards, rocker panels, toolboxes and even the complete exterior of the vehicle can be sprayed, according to Frank Torres of Ultimate Linings, Houston.

"Depending on the customer, a lot of bolt-ons can be sprayed," he says.

The restyler who sprays the liner can also make sure that he or she is also the one who sells those bolt-ons.

Manufacturers say that a liner is usually one of the first products a truck owner looks into after purchasing a vehicle, which may mean that you have a chance to keep them returning to your shop.

"If people are investing in their truck to make it distinct and unique, they're not only looking at color but also looking at graphics," says Becker. "They are trying to identify their truck as a special and unique personification of who they are. If a guy comes in who thinks he's bold, he might want a black truck with yellow racing stripe. It's interesting how tied-in people get with their personalities and the customization of their vehicle."

Colored bedliners are worth a little more to the customer, with prices ranging from an additional \$80 to 200 over the cost of a standard black liner, according to Torres. Clear liners are commanding from \$225 to \$425 over the price of black, according to Becker.

These prices are market-dependent; it's up to the restyler to study the local region and its prices in order to build a pricing schedule for colored liners. However, regardless of the area you're in, colored liners command a premium over the basic black bedliners.

"With colored liners, you are adding a new dimension to your sales by giving customers options—and by giving them options, you appear to be the leader in the business," says Torres.

Keep in mind that color applications can also open up avenues beyond just automotive. There are plenty of areas on RVs, trailers and boats where the colored material could be sprayed for protection; there are agricultural and industrial uses for the liners; even patio furniture can do with a coating of durable, weather-resistant polyurethane.

"This helps any store have a lot more versatility for customers," says Zverina. "One thing we've seen is in hobbies and crafts like lawn furniture where you need durable, protective color on benches or patios, chairs and tables, or anything subjected to the elements. There are all sorts of applications that need durable protective coating that doesn't require repainting or maintaining every year."

Getting the word out if you begin offering colored liners is no different from any of your other specialty products. Torres recommends letting your dealership clients know you can spray color once you've become proficient, and adds that trailer sales and manufacturing businesses are also potentially valuable customers.

Working directly with dealerships gives you the ability to install a bedliner either immediately after, or even before, a truck is sold. Manufacturers say that when a truck is new, a customer is most interested in a liner of any type.

"The bedliner industry seems to follow truck sales," says Gallagher. "You want to get people when they are in the market for purchasing a new or used truck, or immediately after. If they are going to purchase a bedliner, it's usually in the first 60 days. Beyond that, the likelihood really drops off. A bedliner is one of the first accessories usually added to most trucks, and you want to get to them early."

Buyers, Buyers, Everywhere

Potential customers span the range of anyone who'd be interested in buying a truck.

Rather than being any specific type, bedliner customers are simply truck people.

"Those who want colors in a bedliner are your usual truck owners that are not contractors," Becker says. "They want to make their truck distinctive and unique.

Generally they're mid- to upper-income, and generally they use the truck moderately, but not for heavy duty."

"It's somebody more looking for show, who is customizing a truck, Jeep or trailer," adds Torres. "Contractors aren't going to look for color; they stick to black because of the uses they have for it."

Whether they are outdoor enthusiasts with a truck bed full of outdoor gear every weekend or urbanites with a show truck, many buyers may be interested in a colored bedliner.

Males make up the majority of buyers, despite growing numbers of female customers.

"The market is mostly male, but we're definitely seeing the female demographic start to grow," says Gallagher. "There are more female buyers than in the past, but they're still not the majority."

The market for colored truck beds spans the age range as well as gender lines. Customization is universal, from younger drivers wanting to make a statement, to older drivers wanting a color that matches or complements their new truck. What they all have in common is a desire to stay away from the *blah*, and make their pickup stand out.

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