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The Business Magazine for Spa & Pool Professionals

LEDs: **SEEING THE LIGHT**

Salt Pools: **A DEEPER LOOK**

Troubleshooting Spa Packs

Vinyl Renovation

BY SCOTT WEBB



"The client bought the house and immediately put in a new liner. But three years after that, after using the pool, he decided he needed a bigger shallow end.

"So we changed it to a lagoon, and added a spa, and added all new decking all the way around and stamped concrete and fiberoptic lights, and laminar jets that come out of the planter."

— Dan Lenz, All Seasons Pools



What's up in a down economy? Vinyl liner renovations

Right now, somewhere in your town, a homeowner is considering what can be done about his shabby, faded pool liner. In another neighborhood, a home has been purchased, and the owners are wondering what to do with that vinyl-lined hole in the backyard that came with their new house.

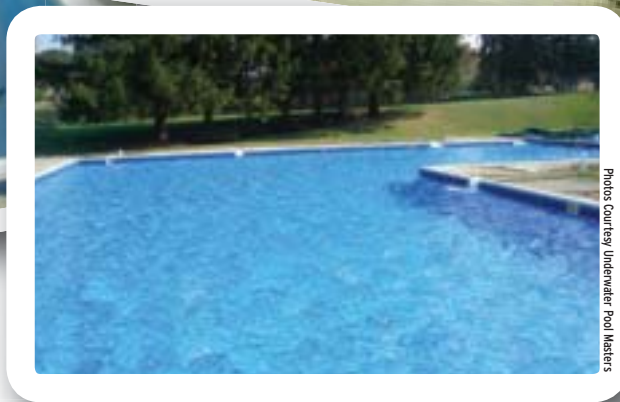
These people and many others just like them share an important characteristic. They are prime targets for vinyl-liner renovation and as such, golden

opportunities for builders.

It's no secret that new pool starts are down. But spending patterns in the downturn indicate that while consumers are reluctant to buy new, they are still interested in shoring up what they have.

At the same time, the population of existing vinyl-liner pools is higher than ever. And the primary door-opener for broader renovation — liner replacement — is currently a strong market as the pool liners installed back in the roaring

VINYL-LINER POOLS



This concrete commercial pool, suffering from cracks, leaks and deteriorating paint was restored beautifully with a blue vinyl liner from Underwater Pool Masters, West Boylston, Mass.

'90s reach retirement age.

All this adds up to an opportunity for builders with the skills and patience and inclination for upgrading older pools.

Why Now?

The renovation market is nothing new, but for builders such as Dan Lenz, service manager, All Seasons Pools, Orland Park, Ill., these days it makes a more compelling argument.

Lenz has been renovating pools for more than 20 years and has seen that revenue stream hold up in good times and bad. "I've always thought that the renovation market was untapped," he says, "but in the last 18 months we've started to focus more on it, developing more of our advertising and everything else around renovation."

The logic boils down to this: It's far easier to sell a renovation to someone who already owns a pool than it is to sell a new pool.

That's especially true in the current climate, in which many consumers are hunkering down and reinforcing their current holdings instead of buying

new, says Ginny Mulvaney, president of Custom Pools, Hopkins, Minn.

"If you don't own a home right now," she says, "you probably aren't going to go out and buy one. But if you do have one, and you need a roof, you'll find a way to pay for a new roof. If somebody already has a pool — they already have that cost built into their living expenses."

For well-established builders such as these, renovations also make sense due to their well-defined, easily accessed target market. "We've got around 20,000 clients in our database," says Lenz, "and that's a huge number to work from when you know that most of those pools are at least 10 years old."

Selling these former clients, Mulvaney adds, using their contact and potential marketing information and personal familiarity as assets, is easier than chasing a limited number of new pool leads, of which many pool builders are currently in hot pursuit.

From Notion To Motion

There are literally hundreds of situations that start homeowners thinking

about an upgrade. Kids grow up and leave so parents need to change the functionality of the pool. Then the kids marry and suddenly the grandkids need a place to play. Or the baby boomers who originally bought the pool for kids now need an exercise section or lounge area to sit and read a book.

These thoughts may settle like seeds in the back of a pool owner's mind before being germinated by some event — a promotional flyer arrives in the mail, a casual conversation at a pool store, or, most likely, the need for a new liner.

"That's usually the big kickoff," says Lenz, "when it's time to replace the old, worn out liner."

The need for a replacement liner leads to notions of further enhancements as naturally as pie leads to a scoop of ice cream. It can be just a matter of suggestion.

"Some homeowners can think beyond the liner replacement themselves, and sometimes they need a bit of prodding to see that their 20-year-old pool could look a lot different and be a lot easier to take care of with a few

changes.

"How you present it depends on how you are talking to them. Through conversation and questions you lead them to consider renovation. How old is the pool? How often do you use it? You use questions to direct their thinking. That allows them to come to their own conclusions."

Mulvaney has these questions written down in an actual menu of options she lays before the client:

- Do you want to take out the old steps and put in interior stairs?
- Do you want to add an auto cover?
- Do you want to do the deck?
- How about added lighting?
- What about an equipment upgrade?

"My job is to show them what is possible," she says, "explain the benefits and the costs, and let them choose. And not leave out any of the options. Who am I to say what they can afford or what their dreams are? I just tell them what I can do for them and why I'd be the best one for the job."

This chance to consult with homeowners is crucial because most have

Surprise, Surprise

A UNIQUE AND PERHAPS SUSPENSEFUL aspect of the renovation business is the frequent encounters with the unknown. There's no telling what you'll find under an old liner, says Ginny Mulvaney, president of Custom Pools, Hopkins, Minn.

"The structural foam may be cracked or the steel may be rusted. The plumbing may have issues or the coping replacement may not be available anymore. Or maybe the pool is out of level, and we need to figure out how to level this pool without digging the whole corner up. Or maybe they want an auto cover and the pool is way out of square."

Those are just a few examples of the surprises a builder can encounter, all of which are impossible to foretell or itemize on an initial estimate.

Preparing the customer is the key. The worst-case scenario must be discussed, and the homeowner has to understand that costs can change depending on what is uncovered. Custom Pools protects itself with a contract.

"When it's a pool we know nothing about," says Mulvaney, "we have to have a general contract that covers all of that. And we're right up front with it. If we run into a problem, we go to the homeowner and we tell them, 'This is what we can fix, this is how it will look, and this is what it will cost you — or we stop right now and you fill in the pool, and we keep the money for the liner.'"

—S.W.

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VINYL-LINER POOLS



Photos Courtesy All Seasons Pools

“He called and needed a new liner, and he wanted something for his kids, and his pool equipment was located at the far end of the pool on the right side, and he wanted to mask that.

“I worked up some concepts and sent them to him, but I had to start talking a little bit about budgets and costs, because one thing I’ve noticed over the years is that when someone is only comfortable spending \$30,000 or \$40,000, and you show them something that’s over \$100,000, then no matter what you design for them after that that’s within their budget, they’re not happy with it.

“So I asked him for a number, and we came up with the design. His number was \$150,000, and my design was \$138,000, and we ended up at \$175,000.”

– Dan Lenz, All Seasons Pools

no idea how the pool could be made more enjoyable — and less work — with a few well-considered changes. Especially if a pool was originally laid out without proper consideration for its surroundings, most homeowners believe they’re stuck with the situation until someone explains how to fix it.

For instance, Lenz notes, there are a number of pools in the Chicago area laid out with their skimmers in the south or west side of the pool. Unfortunately, in the Midwest, the summer wind blows mostly toward the North and East. If there’s not a strong wind-break, the two forces will fight with each other for every leaf.

Switching the skimmers to the other

side of the pool in these cases will make the pool much easier to clean, he says. “So sometimes you’re redesigning the pool from a functionality standpoint. Everything is just a matter of asking that next question and opening the customer’s mind to what can be done.”

Make Mine Easier

Renovations that make the pool easier to manage, it turns out, are a real turn-on for homeowners.

“For most pool owners,” Lenz says, “the big motivators are not saving energy and money — not yet anyway. That can work into it, but as we go through the process, most tend to focus on making the pool less work.

They tend to grasp that much better.

“I talked to a fellow last week — he was talking about putting in a new filter and a new heater, and I said, ‘While we’re traveling down that road, let’s talk about a new pump. We can put in the most efficient pump on the market.’ And he came back with, ‘I’m efficient to a point . . .’”

Among the changes that make a pool easier to manage are switching from sand or DE to cartridge filtration, adding an automatic pool cleaner and chlorine feeding systems. Many homeowners still have no knowledge of these technologies and their effect, Lenz says.

“They’ll say, ‘I’ve been going out and

dumping a scoop of chlorine in the pool every few days. You mean I can buy something so I don't have to do that?' Or, 'You mean for a few dollars more I don't have to vacuum my pool? Oh yeah.'

"That type of sale is an easy add-on to a 3 to 5,000 dollar liner replacement."

Of all the convenience-based renovations, perhaps the most popular is a new set of steps. It appeals to a customer's sense of value, says Steve White, president and owner, Underwater Pool Masters, West Boylston, Mass. White has 30 years in the pool business and is a CPO instructor for NSPF and a Certified Service Professional and educational director for the New England states for APSP.

Steps are a practical renovation, he says, because it can be done without too much expense on a vinyl-liner pool. The builder doesn't have to rip into the walls, just put in the steps and change the specs on the liner — which is already being ordered as part of the overall project — to fit over them.

"It gives you a big change in the pool for a reasonable amount of money. And it's a family-oriented renovation. It's especially good for people with small kids, because it gives them a way to sit with children and safely control their activity as they are getting used to being in water. And for older folks, the steps are a blessing, because for senior citizens, pool ladders are a challenge.

"On top of that, now you're saving 500 gallons of water."

That's one consideration that almost all homeowners overlook. Reducing the volume of a pool means reducing the amount of cost and care it takes to maintain the water. For this reason, for customers looking to lighten their burden, White also suggests filling in the deep end of a pool.

"You can save a tremendous amount of water and chemicals by shrinking the size of the pool," White says. "It gives them less water to take care of, it's easier to clean the bottom, and it discourages diving. The idea is to make a pool that's safer and easier to maintain by making it smaller."

Another upgrade that may not occur to a pool owner is covering an old concrete pool with a vibrant new liner. This is especially appropriate for pools with a large number of leaks and cracks.

"We use a liner to provide a smooth surface and alleviate the leakage, and

save them a lot of money," White says. "With a vinyl liner we can do it at a reasonable cost and provide all kinds of surface colors and designs and modernize the pool quickly. We have also put liners over painted cement pools where the cost of removing the paint was so much that it made more sense to cover it.

"You're saving the old shell, you're stopping leaks, and you're giving a

brand new look and feel to the pool with cushy eighth-inch foam between the liner and the shell."

Do Well Now

As for making the renovation business pay, Lenz says an accurate understanding of the true cost of the job and all its contingencies is absolutely crucial, especially this summer.



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