

# The Ins and Outs of Paint Primers

**W**hen painting contractors walk into a paint store, they most likely will know exactly what products and materials they need to purchase for a job. When DIYers walk into the store, it's a different story. They're on the hunt for the right color for their project and they'll probably need help selecting a primer—if they recognize they need one at all.

It is understandable how they might be confused as they look at a shelf full of primer options. Which primer should they use for which surface? Should they choose a water-base, oil-base, shellac-base or next generation water-base primer? And, what about difficult surfaces like torn drywall, peeling paint or painting with dark colors?

Today, there are a myriad of choices for both contractors and DIYers. Understanding the differences between these primers—and keeping abreast of new technologies—will help you help your customers to choose the right primer and help you sell more.

## The Difference Between Paint and Primers

Primers are not thinned-down paints. They are fundamentally different in composition in order to perform different functions. They are the workhorses behind the scenes filling, leveling, binding and providing the ideal base for the finish coat. As a result, there are unique formulation challenges when developing new primer technologies.

Both paints and primers contain four primary ingredients—pigment, resin, solvent and additives. Paints (shown at right in the above illustration) contain higher levels of pigment to protect the surface and provide color. Conversely, primers (shown at left) contain higher



levels of resin to effectively deliver their promise: hiding, stain blocking, adhesion and solving surface challenges.

There are four major types of primers: water-base, oil-base, shellac-base and next generation water-base.

Water-base primers are used by both DIYers and contractors, and preferred 4-to-1 by DIYers for their ease of use. They hide dark colors, block stains and seal the surface for more even color and sheen. They offer great adhesion to glossy surfaces like paneling, cabinets, glossy paints and vinyl siding. These quick-drying formulas seal interior and exterior surfaces and are easy to clean up with soap and water. They block oil-soluble stains like stains from grease,

handprints and graffiti from bleeding through and ruining the paint job.

Many professionals automatically reach for oil-base primers, which are formulated to seal water-soluble stains like stains from markers, ink, food, nicotine, rust and common water stains. They work great for trapping tannins and preventing bleed through from high tannin content wood like cedar and redwood. For both interior and exterior use, they clean up with acetone or mineral spirits.

Shellac-base primers are designed for the most severe stains. Great for interior and spot exterior use, natural shellac resins permanently block stale, musty odors, as well as severe water stains and stains from fire and smoke, better than any oil-base or water-base primer. Because of this, they are the preferred primer of disaster restoration contractors. Using a shellac-base primer is also the only reliable way to seal wood knots and sap streaks and they make great enamel undercoaters.

Due to air quality regulations, many areas of the country have been forced to move to low-VOC primer formulas. This has been a technical challenge mostly with oil-base products, especially when it comes to delivering the performance characteristics contractors have come to expect. Unfortunately, many of “first-generation” low-VOC formulations lacked the performance characteristics of their higher VOC predecessors. And “low VOC” became equated with ‘infe-



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● Smart-Prime from Zinsser Brands.

rior’ in the minds of professionals. But that is no longer the case.

## “Next-Generation” Water-Base Primers

“Next-generation” water-base primers offer the performance characteristics of oil-base primers with the convenience of low or zero-VOC water-base formulas. These products meet or exceed VOC requirements (even those in the South Coast Air Quality Management District, still the most stringent in the country) without sacrificing the performance characteristics of “traditional” primers—hide, stain blocking, adhesion, sealing and the ability to solve other surface challenges.

These advanced formulas have changed the paradigm and after years of research, chemists have “broken the code” on stain blocking. New “next-generation,” low-VOC, water-base primers, like Zinsser Smart Prime, have the ability to effectively block water stains—a huge win for water-base primer technology.

The goal when formulating these products was to develop water-base primers that not only block water stains, but are LEED-compliant and meet or exceed Green Seal GS11 standards, which has raised the bar on product performance.

Since resins are the cornerstone of primer technology and are responsible for performance characteristics like stain blocking and adhesion, primer chemists

have been increasingly challenged to work with new suppliers—or formulate new resins themselves including high performance polymers and modified acrylics—that can be combined with solvents, pigments and additives to create “next-generation” formulas. These new resin systems don’t require the use of VOCs, yet perform as well as, if not better than their predecessors.

Fortunately the solvent used in creating water-base primers is water, which unlike oil has no VOCs. Both additives and pigments have become significantly “greener” over the last decade, as raw material suppliers strive to help coatings chemists meet increasingly stringent regulatory requirements while meeting performance demands of end-users.

## Simplifying the Primer Selection Process

“Next-generation” primer technology gives you, the retailer, another money-making opportunity. Primers are a growing category that can help your bottom line. On average, national paint sales grow at about 2 percent annually, and primer sales have been growing closer 5 percent.

One way to simplify the primer selection process in your store is to deliver a sensible and differentiated assortment of primers that offer upsell opportunities and help the consumer select products on their own—without the assistance of a store associate. This assortment should include ultimate, premium, workhorse and value primer brands, as well as a selection of specialty products.



● Blocking water stains.

Ultimate primers—also known as “next-generation” water-base primers—offer the benefits of water with the performance of oil. They have superior flow and leveling, and penetrate deeply for better sealed surfaces. Fast-drying and low-odor, they offer tenacious adhesion to glossy surfaces. Truly and for the first time these are “all your primer needs in one can” products and should be an easy sell.

Premium primers are built on performance. High-quality and multi-purpose, these national brand primers are available in water-base, oil-base and shellac-base formulas for every painting challenge.

Workhorse brands for interior applications (approximately 70 percent of priming projects) appeal to contractors for their broad use and affordable cost. Entry price point, or value primers, like PVA drywall primers offer basic sealing functions and an opportunity to upsell to a workhorse brand for improved performance over a broad range of surfaces at a mid-price-point.

Specialty primers offer targeted performance for specific needs, such as odorless formulas for occupied areas, priming under deep colors, sealing torn drywall and textured surfaces, as well as binding peeling paint or chalky surfaces.

The more you can clarify primers for customers, the more sales potential you have. By priming correctly with the right primer, consumers will solve paint problems before they start—and be more likely to complete additional painting projects, buying more paint and primer from your store. Carrying a single brand of primers could also lessen customer confusion at the shelf—a single voice of primer education can eliminate the need to compare primer types across several different lines. ■

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