Tricks of the Trade

by Aaron Zambrana

Have you ever tried to do magic tricks to impress your friends? Some tricks are definitely easier than others. The tricks that absolutely depend on a well executed set of sequential steps and a smooth “slide of hand” are a disaster unless you have practiced over and over again. A truly polished magician can make a very complicated trick look so effortless, that your own eyeballs don’t even realize they’re being bamboozled!

One of the magical things we do as chimney sweeps is bring our customers peace of mind. We do this by helping them and their families stay safer as they use their solid fuel burning appliances. As we perform our various services, just like the magician, we also must run a set of sequential steps. As polished professionals, we have invested heavily in the best education and equipment money can buy…and we know how to use them to their fullest. We are so practiced in our craft that we can often times make our performance look effortless…but we know better. We have paid a price to get where we are…a long road of trial and error, experimentation and frustration.

Once upon a time, a farmer driving a Ford model T broke down on an old country road miles from anyone. For hours, the poor old boy fiddled under the hood trying to get that “complicated” piece of machinery started, but to no avail. To his delight, a well dressed city slicker pulled up in a newer Ford and offered his assistance.

“I’d love a ride back into town” said the Farmer.

“How about help getting your car started first?” asked the stranger?

“It’s useless”, replied the farmer. “I’ve tried everything and it just won’t start. I’d be willing to bet $5 you can’t get this thing running again.”

With that, the city slicker reached under the hood, fiddled with some wiring, and started the car. With his hand outstretched for $5, the farmer shook his head. “I’m mighty grateful, but that took less than a minute. I’ll not pay you $5 for so little work”, said the ignorant farmer.

In reply, Henry Ford said, “You will pay me $5. I didn’t labor for less than a minute as it seems. It took me a lifetime to learn what I know, so that I can do what I just did.

And so it is with us. As professional tradesmen and women, we are paid for what we know, in addition to what we do. Every area where we can cut down on time and effort is, in effect, a pay raise. So with that long winded introduction, I’d like to propose a new ongoing section to appear in our Chim News called “Tricks of the Trade”

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As a relatively new member (and chimney sweep for that matter) one of the best Guild benefits I have been able to take advantage of are all the tips from the other members. If we could share these litle morsels of wisdom and technical know how, we will all come out ahead, and perhaps add more incentive to potential members to join our ranks.

The “Tricks of the Trade” submissions don’t have to be longer than a paragraph or include more than one picture...or any pictures for that matter! They could be about anything from chimney repairs to new tools to dealing with employees, to running a door to door flier campaign etc. etc. etc. So c’mon you folks...let’s hear some of your most cherished tricks of the trade! I’ll show you mine if you show me yours (ha ha).

So with that rather long winded introduction, here are two little sweeties for you. Perhaps you’ll find them helpful.

The Shoe Horn

I wish I could take credit for this first trick, but I can’t. This little nugget was handed down to me from Mr. Scott Swanson of Chim Chimney in Sacramento CA...a worthy competitor of mine, and a great friend. Ever since he’s shared this tip with me, I’ve put it to good use. In fact, I refuse to reline a chimney without this step because it makes the job go so much easier. I call it “The Shoe Horn”.

When relining a masonry chimney using a flexible liner with ceramic blanket insulation and armor mesh, one of the biggest frustrations can be getting the #@%!$^^& liner down the chimney! Been there? Done that? Mortar snots inside the chimney’s chase, offsets, or simply a tight fit are all enough to give a poor slob who just wants to go home “fits”.

So here is the ticket; after removing the flue tiles, and before dropping the liner down the chimney, drop tin sheet metal down the inner sides of the chimney’s chase and secure them in position with duct tape on the outside of the chase around the top. With the two strips of aluminum sheet metal down the insides of the chimney (lining the inner-sides of the chase that will give the liner the most trouble during it’s descent— i.e. the narrowest sides if the chase is rectangular) and secured at the top with duct tape, you are now ready to slide the flexible liner down the chimney. One word of caution: HOLD ON!! Sometimes the liner slips down so easily, it will fall down if you don’t keep a firm grip...yes it works that well. Once your liner is where you want it to be, remove the tin strips.

So, if you’ve ever had trouble getting a liner down a chimney, run down to your local Home Depot and buy a couple rolls of Aluminum sheet metal to help your plight. You can find the stuff in the roofing section and they come in various lengths and widths. I don’t reline chimneys without the “Shoe Horn” trick. Regardless of how easy

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I might think the liner may drop, I have the metal down the chimney to avoid any potential “snags” in my plans to get home on time for dinner.

The “Pinkie Finger Refractory Pick”

Here’s another “Trick of the Trade” for you. Who here does “cut to fit” refractory panels for the Pre-Fab Fireplaces in their area? Ever have a hard time getting the %^$@!#$% bottom panel out? Sometimes it can be a real “booger”. More often than not, by the time you remove the side and back panels, you discover that ash and debris have wedged itself into the cracks around the edges of the bottom panel...cracks that are usually too small to get even your little pinkie finger into. If only you could slip your pinkie finger into that crack as easily as you do your nostril at the end of a long day without your respirator....errr, you know what I mean. Anyways, here’s a hot tip to help you get that bottom panel out (hopefully in once piece) with minimal effort.

Once the side and back panels are removed, vacuum as much debris as possible out of the cracks around the edges of the bottom panel. Using a screwdriver to scrape/dig the debris out while your vacuum does the talking works nicely. Then, with a pair of vice grips and a smaller size allen wrench, you can “pick” that little baby out of there. Take the allen wrench and insert the “L” section down the crack (the allen wrench should be up-si-down with the straight shaft pointing straight up in the air, and the “L” in the crack). With the Vice Grips, Lock them onto the shaft of the allen wrench. Now turn the allen wrench so the L slips under the bottom of the refractory panel. With one hand lift up on the allen wrench (and panel), and with the other, grab the edge of the refractory panel. TA DA!! You’re well on your way to a fistful of dollars and another satisfied customer!

CHANGEOUT EXPECTED IN THE BAY AREA

A program of over $600,000 in incentives is expected to help change out old stoves. The details have not yet been finalized. The full details will be announced in the next issue of ChimNews. The Hearth Patio & BBQ Association is working together with the California Bay Area Air Quality Management District. It looks like consumers in that air district will receive $500.00 when they change out an old stove or fireplace insert to a gas fueled appliance, or $300.00 if they put a gas heating logs into an existing wood burning fireplace. If your customer does not have a gas line in the fireplace a $300.00 incentive for installing that line and a gas log set or insert installed may be given.

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