



Repaired-panel blend: You can reduce labor and material dollars

Today's paint colors and multi-stage paint systems make performing a repaired-panel blend more complicated than with yesterday's lacquer paints.

Feb 1, 2007

By: Bruce Burrow

Automotive Body Repair News

"Don't cut yourself short. Do the right thing, or your customer will not be happy with anyone connected to the repair!"

Mike Gunder — Technical Manager, Akzo Nobel Coatings, Inc.

I have repaired some minor damage on a panel and now should be able to blend the color within that panel and clearcoat all of it — repaired-panel blend.

To an outsider, it would appear that I would be doing less work and using fewer materials than full panel refinish. Common sense would seem to indicate that doing less would cost less.

Thirty years ago, this may have been true. With lacquer paints, we were blending topcoats with easy colors. It was relatively simple and forgiving. Less paint on the panel and ease of blending were good arguments for reduced costs.

With today's paint colors and multi-stage paint systems, this is no longer the case, but reducing labor and material dollars seems to still be here for repaired-panel blends. It is a tempting place to cut costs, even though it goes against all rules of engagement — except one. By regularly accepting this reduced compensation, it could become a prevailing practice. Is this the right way to go?

First of all, is blending anything really all that critical? To quote one paint company representative (who, along with others interviewed for this article, prefers to remain anonymous), it sure is.

"Painting of a blend panel can be the most important step of the repair. It is the blend that will make the color and the repair invisible. For this reason, painting the blend panel must be done with great care."

We can agree that blending is absolutely critical for quality work and customer satisfaction. We can also agree that repaired-panel blending can be an important procedure to minimize the number of panels involved in the repair, but it must be blended well. Can we agree on fair and

reasonable costs for repaired-panel blending? Let's look at three main factors surrounding repaired-panel blending — technical aspects, estimating guides and financial pressures.

Technical aspects

Using the above panel example, we must assume that payment for repair labor includes everything needed to bring the repaired panel surface to a new panel state, somewhere above 400 grit with no imperfections and featheredged into existing paint, including initial masking, priming the repaired area and block sanding. Some of that preparation may be defined and paid as refinish labor. Now we are ready for the actual painting. Let's compare a few relevant steps between a repaired-panel blend and a new panel full refinish.

Like a new panel, the entire surface needs to be cleaned.

Unlike a new panel, wax, tar or other road debris needs to be cleaned off.

Unlike a new panel, chips and other surface imperfections in original paint need to be repaired.

Like a new panel, the entire surface needs to be abraded, sanded or scuffed for adhesion.

Like a new panel, unaffected panels need clean masking or bagging to avoid contamination or overspray.

Like a new panel, a sealer and/or adhesion promoter may be applied.

Unlike a new panel, the first basecoat is applied over the repaired area only.

Unlike a new panel, the first basecoat must be finessed into the featheredged area.

Unlike a new panel, the second basecoat is applied over the repaired area plus a little farther.

Unlike a new panel, the second basecoat needs to hide the repaired area completely.

Unlike a new panel, the second basecoat must be finessed into the existing paint.

Unlike a new panel, a third basecoat is applied.

Unlike a new panel, the third basecoat is applied over the previous coat plus a little farther.

Unlike a new panel, the third basecoat must be finessed into the existing paint.

Unlike a new panel, blending agents may be added and applied.

Unlike a new panel, additional skill is needed to step out each coat to achieve a blending effect.

Like a new panel, two coats of clearcoat are applied to the full panel surface.

Like a new panel, baking/curing, unmasking and final cleanup need to be done.

This is a generalized comparison just to help illustrate the additional skills, time and attention required. Notice that repaired-panel blending must first color the repair work and then blend into the existing color, while regular panel blending begins with a known good panel surface and

color.

"Many of the new colors require the application of three to four fade-out coats. Between each of these coats the finish must be allowed to flash off and the overspray removed by tacking. For these reasons the painting of a blend panel is much more time-consuming and critical," says a paint company technical consultant.

In addition, blending is not even recommended on all panels.

"With these difficult color combinations today's technician faces, blending basecoats on horizontal surfaces is not advised. Even with the controlled factory environment, this is not done. If blending of the horizontal is required, it is always best to take the next vertical panel for first repair success, because of the difficulties of performing a horizontal blend successfully."

— *paint company technical trainer*

What about materials? Would using less color on a portion of the panel imply less material than a full panel refinish? Let's answer those questions with two more questions: How close can one reasonably be expected to mix a perfect volume of materials? Can a painter afford to have the last wisps of mixed basecoat start spitting out of the gun when finessing the last coat of color? Blending agent materials also need to be considered as an additional cost. Practically speaking, material cost savings may be more theory than reality.

From a technical aspect, full panel refinish would be easier and would require little, if any, additional volume of mixed paint materials. Full panel refinish doesn't require the additional time and skills of finessing each coat to achieve the blending goal of a perception of color match. Most painters would prefer to do full panel refinishes, except for that pesky color match requirement.

"I have maintained for quite some time that a blend panel is far more complicated and time-consuming than painting a full panel. Not to mention that most re-dos are done on blend panels that did not pass QC," says a regional paint company representative

Estimating guides

Mike Anderson, AAM and Virginia shop owner, presented a concise summary of some research about this topic at the Collision Industry Conference (CIC) in November right before NACE. He reported results from each information provider for the following questions:

- Does a partial panel refinish warrant a time deduction? If so, when is it appropriate to deviate from the labor time you have published in your database?

Each information provider answered along the lines of leaving judgment calls to professional opinions of the estimator. Each system allows for flexibility to accommodate the wide variety of repair needs found in the wide variety of collision damages possible today.

Summary of responses: User judgment on individual repair job.

- Is the database blend calculation time reduction appropriate? Was the blend option intended to be used on the partial refinish of damaged/repainted panels?

Each information provider responded with a simple, "No." They each define their blend formula as appropriate only for an existing, undamaged panel and for the sole purpose of color match.

Their blend calculations assume a known good panel surface, other panels will also be painted and many operations are already considered in those other panels' full refinish labor amounts, including mixing paint, final masking and gun cleaning. Their blend calculations include only those incremental steps needed when already refinishing adjacent panels.

Trying to blend a repaired panel on the Audatex system results in a message, "A repair operation cannot be applied to a panel with Blend Refinish" and is not allowed. On Pathways, repairing and blending are two separate operations that cannot be done on the same panel. With Mitchell's UltraMate the blend calculation can be applied to a repaired panel, although it is awkward to do so and results in an asterisk by the reduced refinish labor amount.

Summary of responses: No.

- What are the labor operation time savings from base refinish time when partial panel refinish is performed?

Procedures from all three information providers show that all refinish steps are still necessary — the only time savings is in shorter spray gun movement during the sealer and basecoat processes. Clearcoat still needs to be applied to the entire panel. MOTOR's shows that basecoat and sealer application is only 26 percent of the coating process on a new panel, not even including all of the procedure page operations.

Doing a little math would show that color blended into half of the entire panel might save, at most, half of the application time, or 13 percent of full pre-stored labor. That would be a reduction of 0.3 on a panel with a full refinish of 2.5. This would not include any consideration for additional blending coats needed, additional tacking between coats, or the skills involved in finessing the color into existing paint. Full clearcoat would apply to the entire 2.5 either way, full or blend refinish.

Summary of responses: Only basecoat and sealer application time could be reduced. There may be additional, not-included refinish operations that may be required. When all of the operations are considered, an estimator may justify more or less labor time.

"Any savings in basecoat application is spent on multiple cleanings and blending agents."

— *Chicago shop owner*

- If overwritten adjustments are made, how does a shop audit the adjustment?

Each information provider shows when an amount has been changed from pre-stored information. None of them show how much or in what direction the change was made.

Summary: The CIC Estimating Subcommittee recommended that each information provider consider showing the adjustment or having a separate report to see the original labor amount.

Overall summary: Their blend calculations are not appropriate for repaired panels according to all three information providers. Any refinish labor reduction is a judgment call by the estimator and should be calculated only on the basecoat/sealer application steps.

Financial pressures

In a free market economy, prices are determined by supply and demand. Healthy competition helps determine fair market values for reasonable movement of goods and services.

Why do the Rolling Stones charge well over \$100 for a concert ticket? Because they can. They have very little competition. Why doesn't McDonalds charge more for their hamburgers? Because they can't. They have too much competition.

These factors have played into buying and selling throughout history, from the early bartering days to today's online auctions. Price is the balance point between supply and demand when negotiated in good faith between buyer and seller.

Price for the seller and cost for the buyer help determine their respective profits or losses. Increased revenue to collision repair businesses adds to their profit picture. Decreased costs for insurance companies adds to their profit picture. And there is the rub. Somewhere a balance must be achieved.

"We can't maintain the level of service, quality and training expected while trying to afford a state-of-the-art facility and being paid at the lowest price."

— Illinois shop owner

Fortunately, in the collision repair industry, guidelines have evolved (through independent and competing information providers) for estimating fair labor amounts. These have been well-researched, well-documented and are based on specific procedures. Common sense would indicate that price negotiations on a single repair job should follow one information provider's system throughout, including all procedures.

Unfortunately, under the banner of "cost control" these rules are being bent.

"(My employer) tells us to use one hour as the paint time for the blend panel and let the computer add the clearcoat, which works out to cheat everyone about .2-.4 on every blend panel. (My employer) sets their own rules. (My employer) also tells us to figure blend time on the panel, (door for instance) even if it has damage to the edge up to two or three hours. That is ridiculous and no one will agree to it, but we write it at tow yards and drive ins."

— staff estimator for a major insurance company

With no technical basis and no Procedure Page justification, shops are being asked to reduce refinish time on repaired-panel blends, even when doing so saves blending into an additional panel.

"_____ Insurance Company asks me to reduce the book refinish time when I can blend a repaired panel. It doesn't seem to matter how much, sometimes just a few tenths. They just want to see something cut."

— Illinois shop manager

Paying for a repaired-panel blend by using an automated, or self-created, blend formula goes against all rules of engagement — except one. It is technically wrong because it is not blending on a new undamaged panel. It is wrong according to our estimating guides because this refinishing is not for the sole purpose of color match. The only rule not violated is that of negotiation. Either side is free to accept any settlement. If allowed, power and intimidation can overrule supply and demand, even in a free market economy.

"The attack by insurance companies on repair times is out of control and is not based in reality. Their refusal to pay for standard practices such as full paint time on blend panels has no basis

in fact; simply what they believe they can get away with. (My personal opinion)," says a regional paint company representative

According to the estimating guides, blending formulas apply only to undamaged panels for the sole purpose of color match. Repaired-panel blending takes more steps than regular blending, including color coverage of primed areas. Procedurally, repaired-panel blending takes more time and more skill than full panel refinish. A good argument can be made to apply full panel refinish labor to repaired-panel blend refinishing.

Paint systems, materials and procedures have improved over the last 30 years. Our compensation should also improve, reflecting current technologies, skill levels and estimating guidelines to do the right thing the right way.

"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

— *Edmund Burke, Irish orator, philosopher, & politician (1729 - 1797)*