

Re-Skins: New Life to Wood Self Storage Doors

By Ramey Jackson

As a society, we seem to be drawn to remodeling... to make what was once old now new. Homeowners proudly display renovation signs in their yards, while DIY shops sell us new gimmicks that repurpose the old gadgets we already have. The overhead signage on Atlanta's downtown connector warns you that repaving efforts (and 30 minute waits) lie ahead. Restaurants shoulder "Pardon Our Renovation" banners across their entrances, while publications tout their "Biggest Remodeling Issue Ever". Even the prefix "re" connotes that something old is becoming new, as in to renovate, rejuvenate, rehabilitate. Certainly remodeling can have its cost advantages, but it's the process that seems to keep us coming back for more.

With this issue focusing on self storage remodeling trends, my mind was wandering with topics, many of which you've already heard and tried. After a little research and several interesting conversations, the subject of re-skins edged its way to the top of my list. I found very little had been written on the subject... and of course it had the right prefix.

Re-Skinning: a fresh concept

Re-skinning, within the self storage environment, is the concept of giving a facelift to older First Generation wood doors and hallway systems in a low construction, virtually invasive-free manner.

Patrick Reilly, president of the Washington Self Storage Association proudly proclaimed that not only was re-skinning a new idea, it was perhaps *his* idea. "I've re-skinned several of my older facilities, and in fact I believe I came up with the concept," said Reilly. Like many owners of older facilities, Reilly was looking for a way to change out the wood hallway components and hollow-core doors in one of his Urban Storage facilities in Washington. To stay competitive with new construction, Reilly knew he needed a physical face lift that required more than just a new coat of paint. The challenge was doing this in a cost-effective manner without having to inconvenience tenants or risk liability by exposing their belongings while switching out the doors.

Reilly consulted a team of door and hallway professionals, now part of Janus International, with a unique idea. Why not install the steel hallway panels, headers and doors *over* the existing wooden structures? The benefits were many: less construction time to interrupt his daily business, a cost-effective installation process and a method to replace all the doors without having to round up each tenant to stand by for security purposes while their door was being updated. With a little more research and calculations, the concept of re-skinning became a viable remodeling option.

The value of re-skinning

Re-skinning is appealing on many levels. As most owners are keenly aware, aesthetics are vital in attracting new renters, and the competition with new facilities is fierce. Units with old, worn doors not only look less inviting, they can be perceived as being less secure than professionally installed steel doors. Many re-skins utilize swing doors rather than roll ups, which typically cost less to purchase and install. Less inconvenience to the tenants is a large factor for re-skins. Typically an entire hall of steel doors can be installed in a day without ever having to disturb the contents of a unit. Because the new doors are installed over the previous ones, the tenant can come at their

convenience to switch out the locks on the doors. Tenants appreciate this time saver, and owners sidestep the myriad potential liability issues of switching out doors and exposing a tenant's belongings. Finally, many of the surprises one encounters with a remodeling job are eliminated because you are installing a façade rather than embarking on major structural changes.



before re-skin



after re-skin

Opening doors

Again, the majority of the doors in a re-skin are replaced with steel swing doors rather than roll ups. Swing doors are more cost-effective, and roll up doors rarely can be effectively installed over existing doors. Installation crews can install the hallway panels and headers along with the swing doors fairly quickly, lessening the impact of renovation on a facility's daily business. Typically the swing doors are zip tied closed, and when the renter comes onsite to access his unit, the manager opens the steel door, allowing the tenant to transfer his lock. Waiting on a tenant to be available to oversee their units during door switch outs can eat up huge amounts of installer time. The re-skinning process reduces this aspect of renovation, which adds to the owner's bottom line.

Not only the doors are changed in the re-skin process. The wooden hallways are given a new facelift with steel panels, which can be easily installed around existing lights, fire extinguishers, cameras, etc. Unless the old wooden panels are in gross disrepair, little to no demolition has to take place, and in a short amount of time the facility has a shiny new appearance.

Other factors to consider

Whether the old wood doors are removed or not varies from facility to facility. For those with mold, mildew or decay problems, the wood doors and panels are usually discarded, which can add more labor time onto your job. Also, not all owners prefer swing doors for their facilities. Roll up doors offer larger openings – a definite service to tenants – and some find swing doors to be cumbersome in the aisles when several are open at once. Roll up doors are certainly an option, but will require the removal of the old wood doors.

Door selection should be handled in the same manner you would for a new construction job. You'll want to consider a high quality door product that will last, not just the lowest bid you receive. Most manufacturers will offer a three year warranty on workmanship, but also look for extended paint warranties, more durable paint finishes, and customer support programs. If you opt for roll up doors, make sure you select a door with pre-lubricated springs and a ratchet tensioning

device. You'll find that quality workmanship and easy tension adjustment will keep your maintenance and replacement costs to a minimum.

Door color is a point of consideration for re-skins just as one would find with new construction or other remodeling tactics. There's a certain amount of psychology that goes into selecting a door color. Some owners may select colors to match their logo or corporate colors, while others take tenant mindsets into consideration. For instance, blue (as in a blue ribbon) is considered a winning color; light greens are found to be soothing; yellow connotes caution; and white is known to be more reflective, which caters to the tenants' need to feel safe within the facility. Something as subtle as your door color can affect whether a prospect rents from you or your competitor.

Hiring a professional to install the job is paramount to success. Most major door manufacturers offer re-skin services, and some general contractors will bid for these projects, too. Whoever you choose, it's important to compare the bids in full, as some firms may omit steps to keep costs down. Experience has shown that skimping at the onset means more maintenance, and money, down the road.

Rejuvenating your public areas

With all the effort an owner puts into the re-skinning of the hallways, let's not forget about updating the rest of the facility. Chances are when the facility was built, there were more relaxed building codes. Today's guidelines require an owner of an older facility to address ADA requirements, fire codes, asbestos removal, old circuit breakers and more. In addition, tougher zoning guidelines may mandate your color choices, façade changes and even signage selection. You may also find you need to forego some rental units in order to increase your public function area. Installing lockers above existing units or in normally unrentable areas can help you recoup lost rental income.

Reaping the rewards

Re-skinning a facility is a cost-effective way to reinvent a tired facility. The newer surroundings can justify higher rental rates to help offset your investment. However, once your facility is up to par with surrounding properties, make sure you price your rates competitively.

Thanks to the ingenious mind of an owner in need as well as our constant quest to remodel, re-skinning is an attractive and affordable renovation option for First Generation wooden facility components. The perceived reinvention can drastically increase your occupancy rate and approval rating. And while you can't put a price tag on perception, you can bank on the results. Now *there's* an idea.

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