

STORMS

SPAWN ANOTHER PROBLEM FOR ROOFERS



Braun's Roofing crew inspecting the roof deck at the tear-off stage.

Hurricane season is upon us and coastlines will once again become besieged by tropical storms and hurricanes.

Although tragic in nature, those storms—the curse of a roofer's existence—can also be a blessing to the business. But the roof destruction the storms wreak gives birth to another curse of the professional roofer: the fly-by-night operator out to make a fast fortune at the expense of unwitting homeowners.

There are a multitude of stories: "We hired a company to repair our roof,

and gave him half the money for materials. When he didn't show up the next day, we called the number on his card and the phone was disconnected." Or: "The roofing company did part of the work, and we paid them for the rest of it. We haven't seen them since." Or: "The roofer did a sloppy job and we wanted him to come back and clean it up. But the company is out of business. On top of that, he didn't pay for the materials, and the supplier just sent us an invoice."

It's just like that old adage—one bad apple spoils the bunch—and the result is that all the roofers in the area get a bad reputation. The operators pocket

the money and leave the homeowners with little more than sky above their heads, thinner bank accounts and anger and frustration.

Licensing the roofing industry would put an end to those who swarm a town after a bad storm. Requiring state or county licenses for roofers—just as they do for plumbers and air conditioning providers, for instance—would mean that some up-front costs would be involved in starting up a business, that the state would have a record of who's doing business where and that a mechanism would be in place to penalize fraudulent practices (yanking the

TIPS TO LEGITIMIZE THE ROOFING INDUSTRY

1. Always furnish references to prospective clients. References can include previous customers, as well as manufacturers and distributors.
2. Join your local chamber of commerce or Better Business Bureau to establish a local presence and good reputation. Often, consumers call these groups to check your

credibility. Ensure you are an active member in good standing.

3. All roofing businesses should have workers compensation and general liability insurance. When presenting a bid, inform the homeowner of your coverage. More likely, homeowners will trust those who afford consumer protection.

4. List your roofing business in the local yellow pages. Fly-by-night roofers usually aren't listed in the phone book.

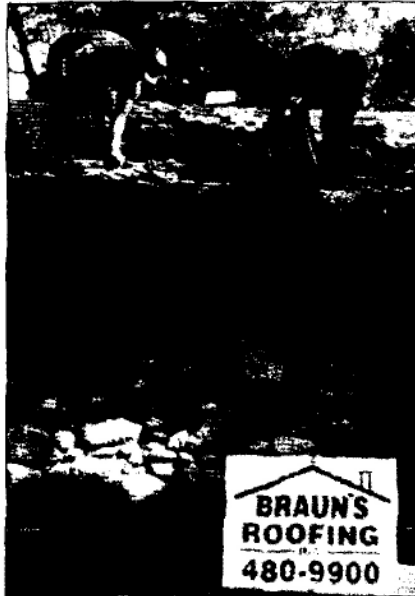
5. Offer a detailed contract of the job to be completed to the consumer. It should cover the scope of the work required, payment terms, when the work will be started and expected completion date.

license). And consumers have assurance they won't get ripped off.

At the same time, tests would make sure the roofer knows the business (what materials are right for the climate, when to use flashing, how to repair leaks and so on). The up-front costs should include proof of worker's compensation and general liability insurance, to protect the workers and the homeowner.

Currently in Texas, the roofing industry is abuzz about a licensing bill that will be presented during the state legislature's next session. While many roofers initially rejected the idea and didn't want additional regulation, many now consider it a mixed blessing and embrace it strictly because they believe it is needed. The intent of the movement is to afford consumer protection, while increasing the roofer's knowledge through continuing education. Ultimately, the industry hopes licensing

will force the fly-by-nights to disappear, while gaining credibility and becoming more legitimized as a direct end result.



A company sign is always present at jobsites, to ensure the homeowner that the company is legitimate.

All too often, a poorly installed roof leaks and causes damage to a home's interior. Usually, the homeowner's insurance pays the claim and then goes after the roofer. Liability insurance should cover those instances.

The roofing manufacturers have a stake in this, too. They provide another protection for the consumer through guarantees on their products. The reputable roofing contractor also stands behind the labor. But if a customer has the work done by a less-than-reputable outfit, the roofer is gone when the customer needs to make a claim.

The customer is left with a bad feeling for the manufacturer, as well. On the other hand, poorly installed materials may cause premature deterioration of the shingles, for example, which also costs the manufacturer in the end.

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CONTRACTOR PROFILE

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Licensing also puts the roofers on a level playing field. Most people in the industry have reputable businesses, offices and/or warehouses, administrative and sales staff, as well as crews who do the work. They have insurance, professional association memberships and other expenses that are part of the cost of doing business. By requiring at least minimum insurance coverage and training levels, licenses assure that the basic costs, at least, are the same for each entrepreneur.

A second advantage to licensing is that the state or county has a record of the license-holders. If a consumer needs to reach a roofer, the agency can provide a complete address (home and business), rather than a post office box, for instance, and phone number. In the case of the short-timers, a home address might be essential.

On the proactive side, the licensing agency also could institute a referral ser-

vice. For example, a homeowner who seeks a new roof could call the agency and obtain a list of local roofing companies. The agency also could tell the caller if anyone on the list has complaints or recommendations on record. In some cases, it might even be possible to identify people for whom a roofer has worked, for references.

Third, licensing would provide a mechanism for protecting the consumer, by pulling the license from those who have a certain number of complaints against them, for example. Thus, suspended roofers would not be able to bid on new work. With licenses, consumers become more aware of those deemed suitable to handle their business. Through education and awareness, consumers will recognize those without licenses are not to be trusted.

When big storms hit an area, attracting roofing companies from other states, for example, the local firms would have an advantage, while the outside roofers

would have to wait for their licenses. That would assure the consumers, too, of having addresses for out-of-state roofers who leave the area after the work is done. This not only helps the pocket-book of the local roofing industry, but also profits the community by supporting the local economy.

It is up to existing roofing companies, whose reputations are built on years of quality service, to take some action. Licensing may not be the answer, but it's up to members of the industry to maintain high standards and to rebuild a reputation tarnished by inexperienced people with misplaced motives. RM

L. Skeeter Braun is owner of Braun's Roofing, a Houston-based residential and commercial roofing company.

