



Refinish Your Cabinets

Save thousands by painting cabinets instead of replacing them

BY PHILIP HANSELL

Refinishing kitchen cabinets is a difficult and labor-intensive painting project, but the payoff can be huge. For a fraction of the cost of new cabinets, refinishing can transform a well-worn kitchen into one that looks and feels new.

As with most painting projects, the secret to a high-quality finish on kitchen cabinets is proper preparation and the right tools and materials for the job. Here, I describe how my painting company goes about refinishing cabinets in a typical kitchen. The project shown is a high-end kitchen remodel in

a handsome brick house in one of the nicest neighborhoods of Durham, N.C.

The kitchen design called for new tile-work, lighting, and appliances. While the built-in appliances required new cabinets, the existing cabinets were in good shape, so the homeowners decided to save thousands of dollars by refinishing their existing kitchen cabinets.

Spraying works best

Unless the client's budget is supertight, we generally paint kitchen cabinets with an airless sprayer. Spraying costs more than

brushing because of the additional masking and setup, but a high-quality sprayer in the hands of an experienced painter produces a flawless, glass-smooth finish that's as good as or better than the factory finish on most mass-produced cabinets.

My company paints so many cabinets every year that we installed a spray booth in our shop. It's the same type of enclosure you'd find in an auto-body shop. Before we bought the booth, we made spray enclosures by hanging drop cloths or tarps from our shop ceiling. Tarp enclosures work fine, particularly if you'll be doing this only once, but



LABEL EVERYTHING

To make reinstalling the doors and drawers easier with a minimum of hinge adjustments, the crew carefully labels and bundles the hinges and marks their locations. A piece of tape covers each mark so that it won't be painted over. The marks are located so that they'll be hidden when the kitchen is put back together.



Doors. Cabinet doors are marked behind a cup hinge. The mark indicates which cabinet box the door came from.



Boxes. Cabinet boxes are marked behind a hinge mount. The void in the finish will be hidden by the hinge.



Hinges. Individually labeled hinges are grouped by cabinet door and taped together. Bundles are labeled, too.



Drawers. Pullout shelves and drawers are labeled on the back side of the back panel to keep the marks hidden.

the booth—with its bright lights and filtered air—provides a better finish in less time.

You can spray cabinets on site, too. In fact, we almost always spray cabinet boxes on the job because it's too time-consuming and expensive to remove them. Unfortunately, on most job sites it's tough to find a space large and clean enough to spray the many doors and drawers found in a typical high-end kitchen, which is why we do those in our shop.

Getting started

The first step is protecting the countertops and floor with heavy kraft paper. If the

SAND AND CLEAN

Once the floor is covered with kraft paper and adjacent surfaces and hardware are masked, any damage is filled with auto-body filler, sanded with 150-grit paper, and then spot-primed with sprayed oil primer. Finally, all previously painted surfaces are sanded with 320-grit paper.



Sand all surfaces. Using 320-grit paper at the end creates a smooth surface for priming and painting. Changing sandpaper frequently yields quicker results.



Clean up. Once everything is sanded, the kitchen is given a thorough cleaning, first with a shop vacuum and then with a damp rag. Just before spraying, cabinet surfaces are wiped with a tack cloth. All masking materials must be secured fully to prevent them from lifting during spraying.



PRIME AND PAINT

Both old and new cabinet boxes are coated first with an oil-based primer. The author and his crew start with a bank of upper cabinets, then spray the lower cabinets below. They work in the same direction for both upper and lower cabinets. Painting and priming in this order ensures that any overspray is covered with wet finish before the overspray dries. Dried overspray leaves a rough surface.



A coat of primer. Both old and new cabinet boxes are sprayed with oil-based primer. The author prefers a Graco 395 or 695 sprayer with a 310 fine-finish tip, which has a 6-in. spray pattern. Insides are sprayed first, starting with the top, then the sides, bottom, and back. On the cabinet exterior, the crew starts with the sides and then sprays the front. When cabinet backs are exposed (on islands and peninsulas), all backs are sprayed at the same time by working from one end to the other, like a typewriter.

TAKE DOORS TO THE SPRAY BOOTH

Few residential construction sites have a space large and clean enough to prep and spray dozens of drawers and cabinet doors. The author takes these items to his spacious shop, where they can be prepped and then sprayed in his automotive-style spray booth.



Patch, sand, prime. Gouges are filled with body filler, sanded with 150-grit paper, and spot-primed. The whole surface is sanded with 320-grit paper before painting and priming.

Front, back, back, front. Fronts are sprayed first, followed by two coats on the back. Finally, a second coat goes on the front, minimizing handling damage to the most visible side.

kitchen has hardwood flooring that won't be refinished at the end of the project, we put down a thicker product called FloorShell (trimaco.com). We tape the paper or FloorShell around the perimeter and at seams to prevent the high-pressure sprayer from lifting it during spraying. We also cover appliances, light fixtures, backsplashes, and adjacent walls with ClingCover plastic drop cloths (trimaco.com) taped in place.

Refrigerators need fresh air for operation, so we leave the plastic sheeting off the intake grilles until we're ready to spray. When it's time to spray, we turn off the refrigerator and cover the grille until we're done for the day. We always tell the homeowners about this ahead of time so that they can consume or move anything that's particularly perishable.

Remove drawers and doors

Once the space is protected, we remove the cabinet drawers and doors. Because cabinet doors have hinges adjusted for the individual cabinet box, we carefully label the doors, hinges, and cabinets so that everything can

be returned to its original location when the job is done. This saves us from having to readjust the hinges. We do the labeling in an inconspicuous spot and cover the identifying marks with tape so that they won't be obscured with paint when the part or cabinet is sprayed.

We remove pulls and knobs before stacking the doors and drawers in our trucks. With the drawers and doors removed, we mask the drawer slides and accessory hardware, but we don't mask shelf standards because they look better when they're painted to match the cabinet color.

Surface prep

After everything in the kitchen is masked, we fix any dents or scratches and sand the cabinet boxes with 320-grit paper. Afterward, we dust off the boxes with an old paintbrush and a shop vacuum equipped with a bristle-type nozzle. After vacuuming, we wipe everything down with a damp rag and then a tack cloth.

Previously stained cabinets are fully sanded with 150-grit paper and then wiped down

FINISHING TOUCHES

The last part of the job is to reinstall the door and drawer pulls. When the job calls for new hardware, the author fills the old holes, but it's the general contractor's job to drill new holes and install the new hardware. New drawer and door bumpers also are installed at this time: plastic bumpers for oil paint, felt bumpers for latex paint.



with lacquer thinner before we spray on an oil-based primer such as Easy Sand from Sherwin-Williams.

Oil works best

We use oil products on most of our kitchen-cabinet jobs. Oil-based paint bonds and covers better than water-based products, and it sands more easily. In addition, oil paint and primer dry more slowly than latex, so any overspray has a chance to blend in with the coating that has been sprayed on top of it. Waiting too long to cover the overspray, though, will make the surface appear rough. To minimize the rough surface caused by overspray, we spray upper cabinets first and then the lower cabinets below, and we consistently work from one end of a cabinet run to the other.

The right gear

For finishing the cabinets, we use a Graco 395 or 695 sprayer with a 310 fine-finish tip, which has a 6-in. spray pattern. Thinning the paint or primer is not required unless the product is especially cold, which makes the solvents more viscous. It's better to let the paint or primer warm to room temperature,

however, because thinned coatings don't cover surfaces as well.

We spray primer on the inside of the cabinet box first, and then we prime the exterior. When the cabinet backs are exposed, such as on an island or a peninsula, we spray all the individual cabinet backs at the same time. Once the cabinets are fully primed and dry, we sand everything again with 320-grit paper before spraying on the topcoat.

The right paint

Our favorite paint for cabinets is ProClassic oil-based paint from Sherwin-Williams. We apply it in the same order as the primer. The secret for spraying is to apply the paint in multiple thin layers to prevent drips and sags, which have to be sanded out.

It's also important that the paint be fully atomized for even coverage. If you see that the spray pattern is formed by dots larger than $\frac{1}{32}$ in., or if there are discernible lines at the top and bottom of the spray pattern (called fingering), the paint is too thick, or you need more pressure.

Don't use a spray tip that is overly worn, and don't spray at too high a pressure. Both of these situations result in excess overspray,

which wastes paint and results in a smaller spray pattern prone to drips. It's also important to hold the spray nozzle parallel to the cabinet and to start moving before pulling the trigger.

When we're done spraying, we check our work with a bright light. We make any needed touch-ups and then let the paint dry for at least 48 hours.

Reassembly

Leaving the floor and countertop protection in place, we remove the masking inside the cabinet boxes and reinstall the doors and drawers. Then we remove the rest of the masking by working from the top down so that any falling paint flakes won't stick to the freshly painted surface.

The final step is to reinstall the pulls. We also install new bumpers on the drawers and doors at this time. I like clear plastic bumpers, which are durable and soften the impact of a slamming cabinet door. Because fresh latex paint sticks to plastic bumpers, we use felt bumpers with latex paint. □

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