

## GROWING A DETAILER

BY STEVEN LANG

Detailing isn't a profession you just throw someone into. It takes time and guidance to get them to where they need to be.

**LET'S FACE IT.** Educational programs geared toward steel detailing are hard to come by in the good ol' U.S. of A. I honestly feel that if I had the chance to do it all over again but still wanted to become a detailer, I would have gone to Canada for my education.

Here in the U.S., the only real schooling a potential detailer can get comes in the form of junior college or vocational training, and even those are in short supply. (This results in a lack of qualified detailers in the U.S. and, consequently, a lot of detailing work moving overseas. But that's a whole other "Topping Out" column.)

So with limited options for detailing education, just how do most detailers cut their teeth? Through good old-fashioned on-the-job training.

But in order to train a detailer, you have to take things a step further. Unlike with some job types, the old "sink or swim" mentality doesn't work with detailers. You just can't throw a new detailer into the job and expect him to eventually figure it out on his own. Detailing can be one of the most difficult trades to pick up as a new player in the game. Not only that, but rookie errors in the detailing world can be costly and downright dangerous.

Busy or not, you're going to have to commit time and effort to training your new detailer. To those of you that have trained someone how to detail, you've probably said these famous words at one time or another: "Yeah, this is what he shows, but this is really what he wants." It's one of those funny little statements that only a detailer can laugh at, and it's all part of the learning process—the newbie figuring out his job and you figuring out how soon he'll be able to do it under minimal supervision.

We recently took on our own new hire. This young man came right out of a community college and had just enough training to be dangerous. After getting his feet wet learning the duties of a detailer, he started his detailing career. Getting him familiar with the way a building is put together was and still is the hardest part.

It might seem a strange practice, but we run two programs for detailing: AutoCAD and Tekla Structures. I want our newbie to work with as many models as possible so that he can see the same thing many different ways. Sometimes, I'll have him draw beams or columns until I get tired of watching him knock them out. Why? Because a new detailer can only swallow so much information at one time.

A lot of the time, rookie mistakes are a result of simply not knowing any better. This morning was a perfect example. My new detailer's welds were incorrect on one of his drawings. Now this is something he's done correctly a couple of hundred times, so I was curious why he made the mistake this time. "What's the story with these welds?" I asked, to which he replied, "I drew them just as the architect's drawings indicate." (Again, a response only a detailer can relate to.) But, he was technically right. It seems that today more than ever, architectural and engineering drawings arrive at our shop only half-done, or are just plain poor in quality—from smaller issues such as incorrect welds to majors ones such as missing information and dimensions.

This is a good, real-world lesson of how, again, you just can't throw a new detailer into the job and expect him to thrive. It takes guidance. While I didn't appreciate it early in my own detailing career, nowadays I'm grateful that I had a team of old-school detailers grinding on me until I got it right. I'm sure my new detailer will eventually appreciate my guidance someday (I hope so, anyway).

At any rate, I've got this greenhorn started, and he can do some modeling. Of course, if I were to ask him to knock out some basic beams with a pencil and paper or AutoCAD, it might still be challenging for him. But he's starting to get a feel for this game that he's gotten himself into. After I told him that I would take him on to learn about detailing, I had to make it clear to him that I would train him as long as he put in 100%. Detailing is a difficult trade to learn and master, and anything less than 100% will result in bad drawings. And we all know what bad drawings result in.

MSC



Steven Lang is a detailer with Bay Cities Fabricators in White City, Ore.

Have an opinion you'd like to share in "Topping Out"? Send your feedback to Geoff Weisenberger, senior editor, at [weisenberger@modernsteel.com](mailto:weisenberger@modernsteel.com).