

## Tool Tracking

It's no secret that for some remodelers, jobsite theft is a very real concern. Now, thanks to a partnership between DeWalt and Ford Motor Co., there's a way for remodelers to fight back.

Coming this fall, Ford will offer DeWalt's Tool Link — a product with the capability to take inventory of all materials in a truck before and after you've visited a jobsite — as an upgrade in all of its F-Series trucks and E-Series vans.

"We noticed remodelers complaining that a lot of their assets go missing," says Chris Allen, vice president of security at DeWalt. "And it's not always a matter of theft. Tools are often misplaced as well."



Using RFID technology and an in-dash computer, DeWalt's Tool Link allows users to take inventory of their tools automatically, alerting them if any items are missing.

The partnership between the companies makes sense, he says, because "unsurprisingly, a lot of Ford customers are DeWalt customers, too."

### TAG IT

The product uses radio frequency identification (RFID) technology to take inventory of tools and materials in the

truck. An 8-inch square "reader" box is installed under the truck bed, and paper-thin, weatherproof RFID tags are placed on all tools and materials that users wish to track. Each time the truck's engine starts, the individual tags for all materials are identified using antennae in the "reader" box.

Central to the system is an in-dash touch-screen computer that uses a Windows-based operating system and high-speed Internet powered by Sprint.

"When the engine starts, the system does an immediate scan [of inventory] and the computer tells you what's missing," Allen says. Users then have the option to either accept the scan or to attempt to retrieve missing materials before leaving the jobsite.

### WEB AND MORE

In addition to its uses with Tool Link, the in-dash computer is also fully Web-capable, so that users can access Web sites or print invoices and other job documents using a wireless printer.

The computer doubles as a GPS navigation device as well, complete with real-time traffic alerts and gas price updates, eliminating the need for a stand-alone (and pricey) GPS device.

Tool Link will be offered in F-Series trucks beginning in September 2008, and in E-Series vans next spring, but the product can also be retrofitted in trucks dating back to 2004. Though prices haven't yet been made available, users will pay a one-time fee to purchase the product and a monthly fee for Internet service. —C.K.

### JOE STODDARD

## Mobile Must-Haves

Armed with a cell phone and a good laptop or Tablet PC, remodelers can slash overhead and respond to clients more quickly than ever before. But what's the best mobile computer for a remodeler? Here are a few things to look for:

### ■ Specs vs. performance:

Raw speed is great, but fast processors produce so much heat that the computer can be hard to hang on to, and they require noisy cooling fans that are distracting in a sales meeting. They also shorten battery life. I want my mobile computers to last four hours or more on battery power, run cool, and be seen but not heard.

■ **Bigger isn't better:** While mobile, you should be able to hold the computer in one hand and operate with the other. Look for a total weight of less than 4 pounds and a 12- to 13-inch screen.

■ **Getting online:** WiFi is pretty much standard these days, but if you're going to be truly mobile, sooner or later you'll want a cellular broadband connection. Make sure you can add it via a PCMCIA or Express Card. Better yet, look for a laptop that builds in a cellular data card on the network you want to use (Verizon, Sprint, etc.). A built-in cellular card might be more limiting from an upgrade standpoint, but it's one less thing to lose or break.

■ **Screens:** This one's a deal-breaker.

Most "indoor" screens are useless outside, unreadable even in a truck cab. Look for terms like "reflective technology" or "outdoor screen." It's best to try the machine both indoors and outside before buying. —Joe Stoddard is an industry consultant and the director of builder operations for *Dynami Solutions*; [www.joestoddard.com](http://www.joestoddard.com).



Photo: right, Frank J. Borkowski