

**NEW PRODUCT**

**Cool**

# “Invisible” Outlet and Light Switch Covers

**Plaztex features paintable plastic that blends with walls.**

Dallas Balma, a highly successful paint contractor, was finishing a simple job one day when he encountered a problem that, he says, nine out of 10 customers complain about: the fact that outlet and light switch cover plates stand out like sore thumbs against freshly-painted walls.

So Balma put his creative mind to work and came up with an ingenious solution. He developed plastic cover plates containing a patented texture and primer that can be painted and textured to match various types of wall surfaces exactly. The cover plates then blend in, and become virtually “invisible.”

Today, these Plaztex cover plates can be purchased online at [www.plaztex.com](http://www.plaztex.com), and from selective Sherwin-Williams stores in Dallas, Texas; southern Colorado; Greensboro, North Carolina; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and the Buffalo Lake Erie area of New York. Balma's product is expanding rapidly, as more and more paint industry insiders become aware of his innovative idea.

### What exactly is the Plaztex product?

It is a paintable, plastic, textured cover plate that matches four of the most popular wall textures used in homes today. The cover plate has a patented primer on it which enables paint to adhere easily to its surface. The idea is to buy a cover plate that matches your wall texture, and paint it the same color as your wall so it will blend in and disappear. It will also resist scratching and chipping. The covers come in four textures and 16 sizes. The specific textures are Splatter Drag/Knock-Down, Hand Trowel/Skip Trowel, Orange Peel and Smooth.

### What inspired you to create the Plaztex Plate?

I'm a paint contractor, and nine out of 10 customers complain that their outlet covers show up too much against their walls. One day, while painting a wooden cover plate, it occurred to me that I could texture it to match the wall and then paint it.

### What was your first step in creating your product?

I knew the idea would sell, but I was also very busy with my paint business. So my first step was to find a partner. My main objective was to find a “bulldog,”

someone who believed in the product, and who would never quit until we succeeded. That person was Sean Taylor. He was a paint contractor who started as a Sherwin-Williams store manager. He was offered a sales position with a paint contractor. In his first month, with no leads, he was selling \$40,000. After 16 months, he was selling \$160,000 a month. I knew that was what I needed!

### How did you raise money for the company?

We hired a company to pursue a Small Business Administration (SBA) loan. The process went on for months,



and was always coming back with less than our projections showed that we needed. Sean and I went to the bank and each got a line of credit for \$100,000 cash. We also had \$100,000 each. Today, we have investors calling who want to give us money!

### ***Is this a patented product?***

Yes. We found a patent attorney to get the process started. We were able to barter on his fees because he needed work done on his house. Getting a patent pending is important, because the patent office will come up with objections that you might have to fight for five years. But your product will be protected the whole time. The process will also let you know if there is something similar on the market. In our case, there was nothing! If you have very little money, but need a patent, try to find a retired attorney for a third of the cost.

### ***How did you make the first prototype?***

My first prototypes were made in my garage. We have 64 covers, so it took about a month. We would make one, throw it away, and make another until it was perfect. A manufacturer in China will make your prototype, but saving money was important to us, so we made it ourselves.

### ***Do you have a company to manufacture your product now?***

We tried getting the product made in the United States, but the cost was five times greater than it would have been to have it made in China. So we decided to go with a company called Kontaxx International in Dallas (972.490.0914). Kontaxx is co-owner of the Mainland China Corporation and Silver Dragon Enterprises located in Shenzhen, China. It is an operation that assists its clients in product development in the areas of overseas manufacturing, importing and local distribution.

We gave them our prototypes, they made samples for us to approve, and we started production. The first 20,000 were seized at Customs because our label was incorrect. We now have a product that has been through Customs three times

**Partners Sean Taylor, left, and Dallas Balma, right, in their Dallas warehouse.**



**Plaztex employees assemble displays to send to selective Sherwin-Williams stores for the company's second test market.**

without any problems. On our second shipment, the cover plates arrived with the wrong screws in the package. We had to ship in a week, so we changed screws for 30,000 pieces by hand.

### ***What kind of marketing have you done to promote your product?***

When we started, we decided to spend our money on displays and brochures, and just have a simple Web site. The investors we've met with have all said that our business cards, brochures and displays make us look like we know what we're doing! Stan Trent at Mosaic Creative in Dallas (214.871.7494) has done a great job. To promote our product, we started out with a list of decorators who are certified by the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), and sent them a brochure. We followed up with a phone call and mailed them samples, if they wanted. We also contacted builders and told them that if they bought the plates at Sherwin-Williams, we would paint and install them in their first three houses free of charge.

### ***How did you approach Sherwin-Williams to begin carrying your product?***

I got in the door because I had done a paint job with Steve Oberfeld, who helps run the southern division. After our first meeting, we were in eight locations doing a test run within two months. We sold 6,000 pieces in the first 90 days out of eight stores. We are doing the next test run in 75 locations. If that goes well, we will be in 2,800 Sherwin-Williams stores

by the end of 2007. We knew our product might not be a huge moneymaker, but we approached Sherwin-Williams with the idea that it would draw new customers to the store. And it's doing just that!

### ***Do you have any other stores interested in selling your product?***

Several electrical distributors have contacted us wanting to sell our product. But we decided to hold off and use the products we have to grow our Sherwin-Williams account in order to have a national distributorship. We need this in order to be on Home & Garden Television (HGTV) and other decorating shows. People need to be able to purchase the product in a store, not just on our Web site.

### ***What is your dream for your business?***

We have several other products in our patent that we will break out over the next several years to help grow our company. We envision having a national distributorship with our cover plates and other products. But, in addition, a major dream for both Sean and myself is to have the time to raise our young boys. We each have two sons. We coach them in sports and love it! A very important aspect of starting a business is knowing your long-term goal. Secondly, it's knowing how to structure your business.

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