


the installer

A photograph of a kitchen backsplash made of stone. A stainless steel sink is installed in a wooden cabinet. A yellow arrow points to a cutout in the cabinet below the sink. The text 'having the cutout work for you (part I)' is overlaid on the bottom half of the image.

## having the cutout work for you (part I)

By Jason Nottestad

An outlet cutout in a full-height backsplash is a relatively simple procedure to demonstrate and teach to a worker learning installation. Unfortunately, it's also easy to measure or cut one wrong – making it inevitable that even the most-careful of your installers will goof one up along the way.

The tolerances for an accurate cutout are small; usually no more than  $\frac{1}{4}$ " top-to-bottom if you want to make an outlet work without a lot of extra fuss. Cut one wrong on a stone that flows from the base piece into the full-height backsplash and you could be replacing the base as well as the splash.

Outlet cutouts can also be time-consuming if they're not done efficiently, and tough on the bottom line if not included properly in a bid. On a kitchen with one or two cutouts, an inefficient method may not adversely affect your schedule or profit margin.

But, I once installed a kitchen

with 31 outlet cutouts. Overlooking that would have been giving away a long day of labor, not to mention the risk involved in measuring that many cutouts. Forgetting to add the labor cost and time for one or two outlet cutouts in each unit of a large condo project could really throw off your schedule and margin projections.

In order to be successful with outlet cutouts, you'll need an efficient and accurate cutting method as well as a good way to track labor costs. With the proper tools, training, and a little thinking ahead, this can be accomplished with relative ease.

The first decision to make when dealing with outlet cutouts in full-height backsplash can also be the most costly. As Shakespeare might've said if he'd based *Hamlet* on top-polishing: "To return or not to return, that is the question."

In other words – do you make a single trip to a jobsite, bringing along slightly oversized backsplashes to be

cut onsite? Or, do you set the base pieces and measure for full-height backsplashes, returning later to install pieces that are cut-to-size and complete with outlet openings already cut in?

As a rule, the strength of your staff and the size of your business area should determine your strategy. If the majority of your jobs are within reasonable driving distance, and you have a strong fabrication staff, you may want to consider taking measurements and having the backsplash work, including the outlets, done in the shop. If you have a client concerned about noise and dust on a job site, or you don't have a good place to set up your cutting equipment, working in the shop becomes your only option.

If your work area is spread out, the expense of windshield time may make it impossible to return to a job and still make money. In a competitive market, you may not have the luxury of padding your bid for a second trip either.

This one ended up being a two-trip job – if the base pieces needed to be shimmed and ended up out of plane with the sides of the cabinet, there'd be trouble. Trying to place outlets without knowing the situation on-site would be a disaster. (All images courtesy Jason Nottestad)



Here's a tough one in getting the outlets right between a base and a snack bar. It took some pre-planning (left) and a good on-site cut (middle) to get the job done right. (Right) Here's another one done on a Caesarstone® splash between a base and a snack top.

The two biggest risks involved with in-shop fabrication of full-height backsplash from field measurements are bad communication and poor piece management. For most companies, the installers are not the same workers templating the job on the front end.

Because of this, an installer who has to measure for outlet cutouts and splash height is also going to have to communicate those measurements back to the shop in a clear and concise way, and be comfortable with the process. A quick sketch with a few numbers on it may work for him in the

field, but when it comes to getting accurate pieces from the shop guys he's going to need to present them with something a little more legible.

The best way to avoid communication problems is to create a method for your installer to transfer his information into shop tickets that the fabricators understand. In many cases, this means bringing a CAD guy into the communication chain. If you do, make sure he clearly understands what's needed in the shop drawings; his technical skill set may not include installation of full-height splash or

cut outlets. An installer/templater needs to spell out every measurement and double-check them, as a CAD tech may not be able to spot when something isn't right and avoid a costly mistake.

One method for gathering good outlet cutout and splash height information – and bypassing a risky step in the communication chain – is to use a measurement-capture kit in a photo-templating system such as Photo Top®. Your installer can be trained to correctly place marker panels, arrows, and outlet cutout jigs and

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(Right) Sometimes, when cutting outlets, you just have to grin and bear it when you're doing outside work – even in sub-zero weather. The final result on this job (below) shows that on-site work was a must.

take pictures of them for processing in the shop. The measurements gathered this way, aside from being more-accurate and -reliable than a guy with a tape measure, can also be used to verify the measurements your installer brings back from the field.

This method also gets the information quickly into digital form for work with computer-controlled saws and waterjets. In addition, the pictures can be used by the sawyer to ensure that the color and pattern of the backsplash will match the base pieces.

If you or your installation crew are less than thrilled about relying on the installers to bring back quality measurement information for expensive backsplash, schedule your templater to stop back on the tail end of an install. With a laptop that has mobile broadband, it's possible to send the CAD file back to the shop



from the jobsite and then move on to the next template.

Make sure your installers have a good line of communication open to your templater for adjusting the measuring schedule to fit the timing on the base countertop installation. If your installers run into problems and your templater shows up before it's possible to take measurements, time is being wasted and the installers may feel rushed ... thus increasing the risk of a mistake.

Piece management for full-height splash is an issue beyond the control of the installer, but it can affect the job nonetheless. Before a sawyer cuts a job with full-height splash, there should be a clear layout of his pieces on the slab to ensure everything will fit in a logical and aesthetically pleasing manner.

Simply cutting the slabs haphazardly and saving the remnants for backsplash may result in some full-height splashes that have oddly placed seams or badly located color changes. A shop that operates like this may also suffer from this prob-

lem - the stone being saved for full-height splash is broken, thrown away, or used for another job.

Think that doesn't happen? I've dealt with this issue several times, including once when the sawyer was running a side business and made a double-bowl vanity out of a piece being saved for backsplash. Mark your backsplash stone clearly and set it aside in a safe area.

Once splash measurements are brought back, the seam placement needs to be carefully considered in relation to the locations of outlet cutouts. Placing a seam too close to a cutout may result in one side of a cutout blowing out or breaking away, which is never an easy or enjoyable fix.

If your company is a template-and-install operation like mine, you may find it more difficult to measure and then install on a second trip. For one, you are at the mercy of the fabricator's schedule, since you may not get fast-tracks priority for your full-height backsplash.

Installing the base pieces and then

telling the homeowner you'll be back in a week or two also can be a problem. On a remodel, the countertops are coming in at the tail end of the project, and the homeowner is usually sick of being inconvenienced by her torn-up kitchen. She wants you finished with her kitchen in one trip.

Next month we'll cover the skills and techniques for cutting outlets, as well as the best ways to ensure you're covering yourself on their cost and risk.

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*(www.countertopsbymts.com). He'll be one of the panelists on the "Countertop Installers Forum" on Oct. 17 at StonExpo/Marmomac Americas in Las Vegas. Check [www.stonexpo.com](http://www.stonexpo.com) for more details. ■*