

Cabinet Class

Learn from the professionals how to install ready-made cabinets

BY CONNIE BASTYR

Whether you fantasize about a transformed kitchen or a more efficient laundry room, you'll like this reality check: Cabinet installation — a project that dramatically influences the functionality and style of a room — is not a daunting undertaking. It's a manageable job that offers significant cash savings and requires only a few basic tools, minimal skill and the help of a willing assistant.

Ready-made cabinets are easier to install and less costly to buy than you may think. They're available to suit all styles, budgets and space needs, so you can create an entirely new look and gain more useful storage — without rearranging plumbing or rerouting wires.

Homeowners who aren't considering a kitchen remodel may find that adding cabinets to an unused wall would improve their organization, enhance storage and provide a place to work on projects. Whether you reinstall hand-me-down cabinets in the garage or remodel an entire kitchen, the following lessons from the cabinet installers of M C Squared from Coon Rapids, Minnesota, will help ensure your success.

Planning

Whatever the degree of complexity, your project will require some shopping, planning, measuring and drawing. Designing can be as simple as a scale drawing on graph paper or a more elaborate computer-aided design. Expert help is also available at home centers and cabinet supply stores.

If you haven't been in the market for cabinets lately, you may be surprised at the range of styles and features — even in ready-made units. The only element that's standard is size: Base units are 34-1/2-in. tall, and wall units are available in heights of 42, 30, 24, 18 and 15 in. Widths range from 9 in. to 48 in., in 3-in. increments. (For

horizontal spaces that are not perfect multiples of 3 in., filler strips can be trimmed to accommodate the space.)

With your storage needs and design goals in mind, talk to a supplier about the many alternatives. (The cabinets for this project were made by Omega Cabinetry of Waterloo, Iowa, and purchased through Expo Design Center, a division of The Home Depot, see SOURCES.) Seize the opportunity to rethink how to organize your space. For example, a bank of drawers may provide easier access to pots and pans than the shelving unit they currently occupy.



With manufactured cabinets and sound advice, you can become your own expert installer — and enhance your living and storage space.



LEAD PHOTO BY MARK MACEMON
HOW-TO PHOTOS BY SCOTT JACOBSON
CABINETS FROM OMEGA CABINETRY



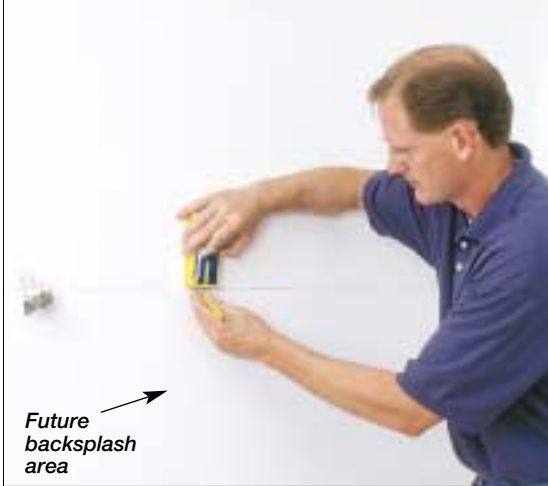
With a 6- or 8-ft. level (or a 4-ft. level resting on a long, straight board), find the highest spot on the floor where the cabinet footprint will be (left-hand photo). From that point, measure up 34-1/2 in. for the height for the tops of the base cabinets. Then use a level to mark along the wall on which cabinets are to be installed. In the center photo, Brian is marking a second line at 54 in. for the lower edge of the wall cabinets. (With a 1-1/2-in.-thick countertop on a 34-1/2-in. base, that leaves space for a typical 18-in. backsplash.)

Getting started

If your old cabinets are going to a new home (a garage, laundry room, cabin or yard sale), be careful when removing them. Your ultimate goal is to strip the room down to a blank shell. At this point, it's a good idea to set out the new

cabinets to verify the inventory and determine a plan of attack.

The project will be more complicated if your plan involves relocating a sink or an appliance that relies on plumbing or utility hookups. If you're simply replacing a cabinet that houses a



Use a stud finder to locate the wall studs, and mark each with a pencil. Tip: Verify the stud locations you have marked by drilling above or below the pencil lines (depending on the cabinet location).

sink, just disconnect the sink's plumbing and remove the existing base unit.

When it comes to installation, even professionals agree that there is more than one correct approach. For some expert instruction, we spent a *cont'd. on p. 32*



To join cabinets, first drill three clearance holes that are slightly larger than a screw (about 3/16 in.) from the outside of the frame through the width of the stile (top, center and bottom). If the hole is too small, the screw may not draw the cabinets together. At the top, drill at a slight downward angle so you can more easily drive the screw from the inside with a drill/driver.



From the inside of the cabinet, counterbore so the screwhead will be flush with the wood.



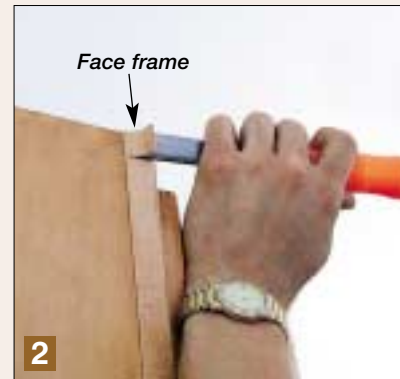
Clamp the units together or hold them firmly together. Insert a screw and drive it partially in. Check that both frame faces are flush, and adjust if needed by tapping with a soft-face mallet. Keep checking alignment as you drive the two remaining screws. Inset: An alternate method is to use Pony Cabinet Claws (see SOURCES) to hold the frames together while you predrill and fasten.

CROWNING TOUCH

For a furniture-quality look, enhance cabinets with crown molding (often available in prefinished 8-ft. lengths). A continuous crown adds style and makes a bank of cabinets look like a single unit. But reveals that protrude beyond the sides of cabinets create a challenge. You could attach the crown right over the lip and fill in the resulting gap with matching putty, but that throws off the angle of your miter cuts and leaves more gaps to fill. The professionals at M C Squared take this approach:



With a speed square and pencil, mark the area along the edge of the reveal that you need to remove to support the crown molding (about 3/4 in. down from the top). Use a thin-kerf saw, such as a pull saw or hacksaw, to carefully cut through the reveal, angling slightly away from the side of the cabinet case to avoid scratching the surface. Watch the face of the cabinet to keep from cutting too deeply into the front of the reveal.



Use a sharp chisel to pare the frame corner flush with the side of the cabinet. Now the crown trim will fit snugly onto the side surface of the cabinet and meet perfectly in the mitered corner.



A pneumatic finish nailer works best to attach the crown molding. When you add the second trim piece, apply wood glue to the miter cuts before nailing the corners. To counter-sink nails, especially on the delicate corners, a spring-loaded nail set (see SOURCES) keeps from pushing miters out of position as you work. — CB



WALL UNITS



Support the wall units with T-Jaks (see SOURCES) because they're more reliable than using a ledger board, which levels the cabinets along the back edge only. To position, use the predrawn line as a guide for the bottom and a plumb line marked for one end of the cabinet.



Tack the unit to the wall with one screw; then make any needed adjustments. Check that the face is plumb, and if necessary, add shims behind the cabinet in areas where you'll attach it to the wall.



Attach cabinets that have glass doors to the wall through the bottom and top lip rather than through the inside, where screws may be more visible. For all cabinets, but especially upper units, use flathead wood screws rather than drywall screws, which can be brittle.



Insert shims as needed to level cabinets along the front and back edges. Be sure all units are supported at their corners.

day with installer Brian McNallan and the crew of M C Squared. We watched them install cabinets in a remodeled kitchen, asked questions and photographed the steps so we could show you how it's done.

"Every kitchen has its own design that dictates the order in which we install cabinets," says Brian. Typically the sink is centered under a window, which determines positioning of the units on either side. If a corner cabinet is in the plan, it too becomes a fixed starting place.

As far as which to install first, we recommend starting with the wall cabinets. That way, you won't have to reach across the lower cabinets or risk damaging them. Working with an assistant, fasten to the wall a temporary ledger board on which to rest the back of the cabinet, or use a jack system, such as the T-Jaks (model TJ-104) that Brian used (photo, bottom left, p. 31). If you're working alone, the Gillift by Telpro (available at equipment-rental stores) enables one person to maneuver, lift and support a cabinet for fastening.

On the other hand, if you begin



Check for level along the front face and from front to back, especially when working on a section that meets another unit in a corner.

with the base cabinets, you can use them to support a shorter jack for hoisting the wall cabinets. But be sure to protect the base units with heavy moving blankets or padding while working above them.

Installing

To reduce weight and improve maneuverability, remove drawers and doors, labeling the parts with painter's tape. If doors are too complicated to remove from the cases, tape heavy cardboard over their faces to prevent marring. For cabinets with glass-front doors, you may leave the door frames in place and remove only the glass panels.

Rather than installing each unit independently, Brian joins two or more components together before mounting them to the wall. With the wall units lying on their backs on the floor or another level surface, he drives three screws through the adjacent face frames of neighboring cabinets. Base units are joined together while standing upright. If your working surface is not perfectly even, support low spots with shims as you join two units together,



Attach base units to the wall with 2-1/2-in. self-tapping flathead wood screws, driving through the nailing strip and into studs. In this case, the stud fell behind a corner block.

making sure the adjacent ends and faces are flush with each other.

When possible, drive screws into the stile on the hinge side of the cabinet, where the screw heads will be less visible. Choose the appropriate screw length for the size of each connection (stile widths may vary), making sure the screw is as long as possible but at least 1/4 in. shy of going through the stile when countersunk.

In addition to these general recommendations, consider the following tips for installing specific types of cabinets:



Corner cabinets with curved backs are made for fitting through 36-in. doorways. However, unlike corner units made with mitered backs, they need extra ledger boards attached in the corner to support the countertop.

• **Wall units** — To hang a grouping of two or more components, provide additional stability by driving a screw through the top lips of both cases near the backs of the units. This adds support for lifting and positioning multiple units. If you need to place fasteners from the inside of cabinets that have glass fronts, be careful to place them so the screw heads are as inconspicuous as possible.

• **Base units** — Floors and walls are rarely plumb and level, so expect to add shims to compensate for structural imperfections. Level base cabinets side-to-side and front-to-back by inserting cedar shims under the frame of the unit, being sure to support spaces under joints where two units come together. With base units that form a corner, it's especially important that the tops and fronts be level and flush to properly support the countertop. You may need to use shims behind the cabinet units to ensure that the corners are square and that the top surfaces are level. After installation, use a utility knife to score the parts of shims that protrude beyond the cabinet and snap off the excess.

• **Sink cabinets** — Drain pipes and supply lines can be reminiscent of a Chinese puzzle when you try to maneuver the sink base into position.



Filler strips are ripped to the required width and attached to the face frame of neighboring cabinets in the same way you connect two units, as shown in the "Making Connections" photos, p. 31.

It's easier to win the game if you have accurately measured and cut openings in the cabinet.

To cut holes that look clean and splinter-free, start by making careful measurements and marking hole locations on the outside surface (the back and bottom of the cabinet); then drill pilot holes in the centers. Next, cut from the cabinet's inside surface with a hole saw so splintering doesn't mar the interior.

For the drain pipe, use the same method to cut a second hole below the first one; then link the two by cutting two lines between them with a circular saw or jigsaw from the outside of the cabinet, creating an oval opening. (Remember that a circular saw blade pulls up, causing the surface that is facing you to chip.) This elongated hole lets you slide the cabinet down along the drain rough-in while positioning the unit over the two supply lines (photo, top right).

Finishing

Some cabinet manufacturers sell finished toe-kick boards in 8-ft. lengths, which you cut to fit. You can also cut 1/4-in. plywood to size and finish it to match the cabinets. To attach the toe kick, apply silicone



Cut two large holes; then connect with straight cuts

To mark locations of pipes, measure horizontal distances along the wall from the edge of the neighboring unit. For easier transfer of dimensions, keep the sink base close to the wall as you measure and mark.

adhesive caulk and secure the piece with finish nails. Miter the corners and touch up the ends with stain or putty sticks to match the finish.

For a seamless look, apply matching Minwax Color Putty to the joints between components and to the nail holes. Simply rub the putty in with your finger and buff the area with a soft cloth.

You can use a variety of techniques to mask any gaps along the wall where the cabinet ends are visible. Brian applies a bead of paintable caulk at wall/cabinet joints. Another easy method is to add a strip of scribe molding along the edge where the wall meets the cabinet. After these finishing touches, your new cabinets will appear to be an original built-in feature of the room — unless you brag, visitors will never know you added them yourself.

SOURCES

Adjustable Clamp Co. (Pony Cabinet Claws) (312) 666-0640, www.adjustableclamp.com

Expo Design Center: www.expo.com

Noxon Inc. (nail set); 800-356-6966, www.noxontools.com

Omega Cabinetry (319) 235-5700, www.omegacabinetry.com

Spotnails (T-Jak) 800-873-2239, www.spotnails.com

Telpro Inc. (Gillift) 800-448-0822, www.telproinc.com