

## SMART RESEARCH SERIES

# What are user pain points when using sealants?

### ABOUT THE SMART RESEARCH SERIES.

Bostik regularly conducts in-depth assessments of its priority markets using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. As part of this research programme, a qualitative study was conducted between June and September 2018 on the sealants market with this series of papers presenting end user views and perceptions of the category.



In addition to the general findings where users view the application and replacement of sealants as a 'necessary evil' to ensure air and water tightness, the main pain points can be summarised under the following categories: →

#### PREPARATION OF SURFACES AND TOOLS

The preparation required in advance of sealant application was a regularly cited frustration among the participants, particularly non-professional users where use is more infrequent.

#### SEALANT DISPENSING & APPLICATION

Professional users expressed a strong preference for outlets catering for the trade when purchasing sealants. While they occasionally use channels such as DIY outlets, many participants indicated that this would only be in cases where they had an urgent need.

#### FINISHING & SMOOTHING

An interesting finding emerged in relation to the use of online channels to source sealants and related products. Seemingly contradicting the common convention that online channels will dramatically reduce the share of traditional channels across all categories, none of the participants in the study had ever previously purchased sealants online.

#### CLEAN UP

Clean up and the removal of excess sealant frequently arose in the focus groups and interviews. Due to the nature of sealants and their adhesive-like properties, without due care and attention, there is a high potential for transfer to surrounding surfaces, tools, clothing and hands.

#### REUSABILITY & WASTE

Sustainability-related issues were common themes to emerge from the research with the limitations on product re-use and waste frequently cited as areas of extreme dissatisfaction.

#### SEALANT LIFE

The final area of frustration regarding sealants was the perceived life of a finished joint with the estimated life varying considerably in the findings from country to country.



This paper presents an overview of the pain points and general frustrations of users with sealants as identified in the study. For copies of additional publications in the series or a detailed overview of the research findings, please contact your local Bostik sales representative or [info@bostik.com](mailto:info@bostik.com).

What are the main applications & uses of sealants?

How do users perceive sealant packaging?

What are user buying habits & channel preferences in the sealant category?

**What are user pain points when using sealants?**



# PREPARATION OF SURFACES AND TOOLS



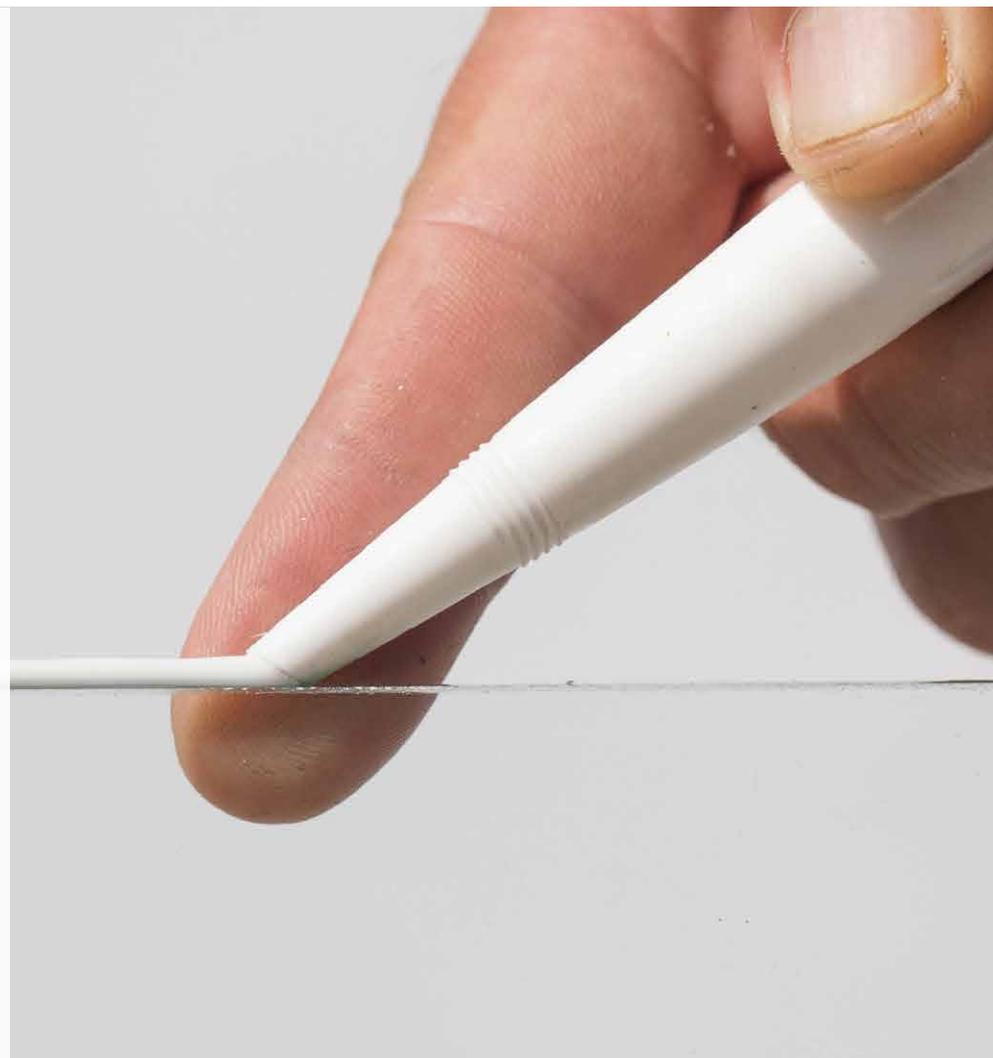
**The preparation required in advance of sealant application was a regularly cited frustration among the participants, particularly non-professional users where use is more infrequent. These limitations can be further divided into the preparation of the surfaces in advance of sealant application and the cutting of sealant tools including packaging and accessories.**

## **PREPARATION OF SURFACES**

With respondents highlighting a strong preference to replace sealants rather than repair them due to concerns over their effectiveness, adequate preparation of surfaces in advance of sealant application is viewed as a key requirement. Users highlighted the difficulty and inconvenience of removing existing sealants using methods including cutting and scraping. A common problem was the difficulty in removing residue with some formulations being especially stubborn.

## **CUTTING OF PACKAGING AND ACCESSORIES**

Although predominantly associated with cartridges, which continue to be the primary packaging format used within the category, similar limitations were associated with other packaging types including pressure packs and squeeze tubes, where some degree of cutting is also required. Although there are a number of tools commonly available on the market, such as cartridge cutters, they are not commonly used.



# SEALANT DISPENSING & APPLICATION

A photograph of a modern bathroom sink with a large oval mirror above it. The sink is white and set on a wooden vanity. The background is a dark grey wall with a white towel hanging on a rack.

While this issue of skill level was highlighted by all user types in all countries, a surprising and somewhat humorous revelation emerged from the professional user community. In many cases, these regular sealant users also shared the difficulties they encounter when finishing sealants. Even after years of practice and regular application, it is a skill they still find difficult to grasp. Some pointed to the emergence of the 'Mastic Man' where contractors with a recognised ability to apply and finish sealants well are left to manage these tasks in new construction and renovation projects.

The research findings indicate that some of the most common frustrations with sealants are those associated with the actual dispensing and application of the products. These can be further divided into areas including dispensing the correct amount, the pressure required to apply the sealant evenly, difficulty in accessing tight spaces, the mess caused by sealant 'run on' and unpleasant odours.

## **DECIDING ON THE VOLUME OF SEALANT TO BE APPLIED**

After application, probably the most important task in a sealing application is to smooth and finish the joint to ensure an effective seal. This action not only pushes the sealant into the joints and against the adjacent surfaces but also smoothens it for a neat and aesthetically pleasing finish. This poses a conundrum for the person carrying out the task where a wider bead is more likely to seal effectively but may appear visually unattractive – while a minimal-width joint will look better but may not deliver an effective seal against air or water, especially when some sealant formulations shrink over time.

## **SIGNIFICANT SKILL REQUIRED TO ENSURE A SMOOTH AND EVEN FINISH**

Virtually all users agreed that sealant finishing is a skill that can only be mastered over time with regular practice. Unless the user carries out the task frequently, smooth and attractive finishes can be difficult to obtain. Numerous tricks and techniques were shared during the research sessions covering everything from the use of fingers, masking tape, ice cream sticks, sealant finishing tools and detergents. However, users do not appear to recognise a generally accepted finishing method to ensure consistent high quality results. An added complication is that some sealant chemistries cure faster than others meaning that users only have a limited time window to smooth the sealant.



# FINISHING & SMOOTHING



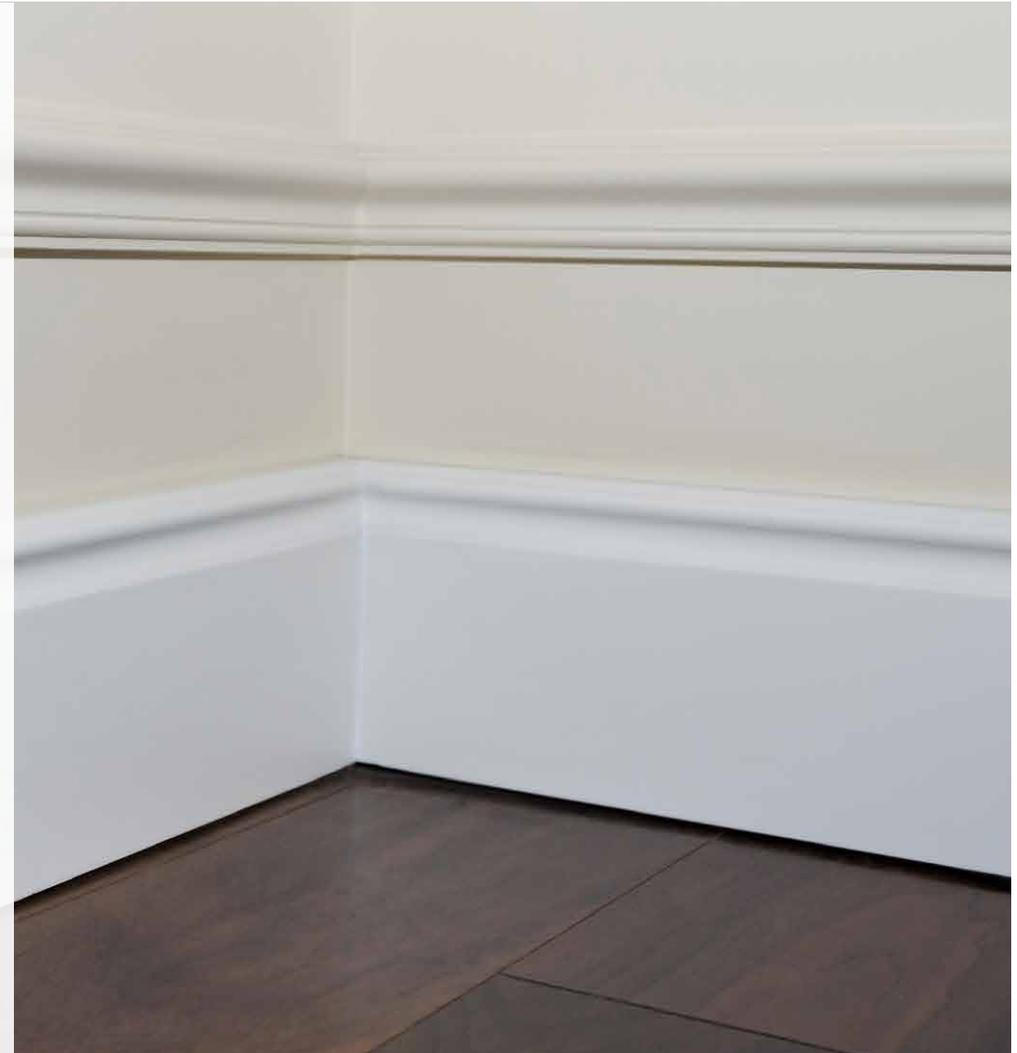
**The other most commonly raised concerns among users in relation to sealants were on the finishing and smoothing to ensure an effective seal and for aesthetic reasons. These pain points can be summarised under the themes of determining the volume of sealant to be applied and the skills required to ensure a smooth and even finish.**

## **CLEAN UP OF SURROUNDING SURFACES**

In most cases, users suggested that excess sealant can be easily removed if wiped away early enough. However, some suggested that problems can emerge when surfaces are porous or have uneven or rough finishes. In these cases, the sealant can be more difficult to remove after transfer and is a reason why some users use aids such as masking tape around the joint and adjacent surfaces.

## **CLEAN UP OF TOOLS, CLOTHING AND HANDS**

Although inconvenient, respondents generally indicated that tools and hands can be easily cleaned if washed soon after application. They highlighted particular ease of cleaning with acrylic-based formulations. Even after curing, many suggested that most sealant formulations can generally be removed from tools by scraping. However, in the case of clothing, feedback tended to be more negative with responses indicating that it is highly unlikely that sealants can be removed from clothing.



# REUSABILITY & WASTE



**Sustainability-related issues were common themes to emerge from the research with the limitations on product re-use and waste frequently cited as areas of extreme dissatisfaction. These can be further classified in terms of premature curing in the packaging after opening and the amount of packaging waste.**

## **PREMATURE CURING IN THE PACKAGING AFTER OPENING**

A high proportion of respondents highlighted the inability to re-use sealants once the packaging has been opened. While this was less important to professional users who may be able to use remaining product on the next job or who have built product waste into their costs, DIY users persistently highlighted this as a significant issue. Not limited to one particular packaging format, users raised frustrations with sealants curing either inside the nozzle or within the main packaging in a matter of weeks. This, coupled with the relatively large size of the packaging and fill level is a particular pain point in terms of value for money.

## **PACKAGING WASTE**

As well as the wasted product from premature curing, a consistent theme from the research was packaging waste, particularly in relation to plastic cartridges. The growing global movement towards eliminating or minimising plastic waste seems to be repeated among end users of sealants. Participants pointed out the various cartridge components including the cartridge body, plunger and nozzle which are predominantly made from plastic. An inability to clean and recycle the packaging is a consistent issue with users suggesting this as a significant area for improvement.



# SEALANT LIFE



**The final area of frustration regarding sealants was the perceived life of a finished joint with the estimated life varying considerably in the findings from country to country. While there is a general acceptance that sealants will not last forever, a number of particular pain points which necessitate the reapplication or repair of sealants emerged. These can be summarised under the themes of sealant breakage and disintegration, appearance of mould and discolouration.**

## **SEALANT BREAKAGE AND DISINTEGRATION**

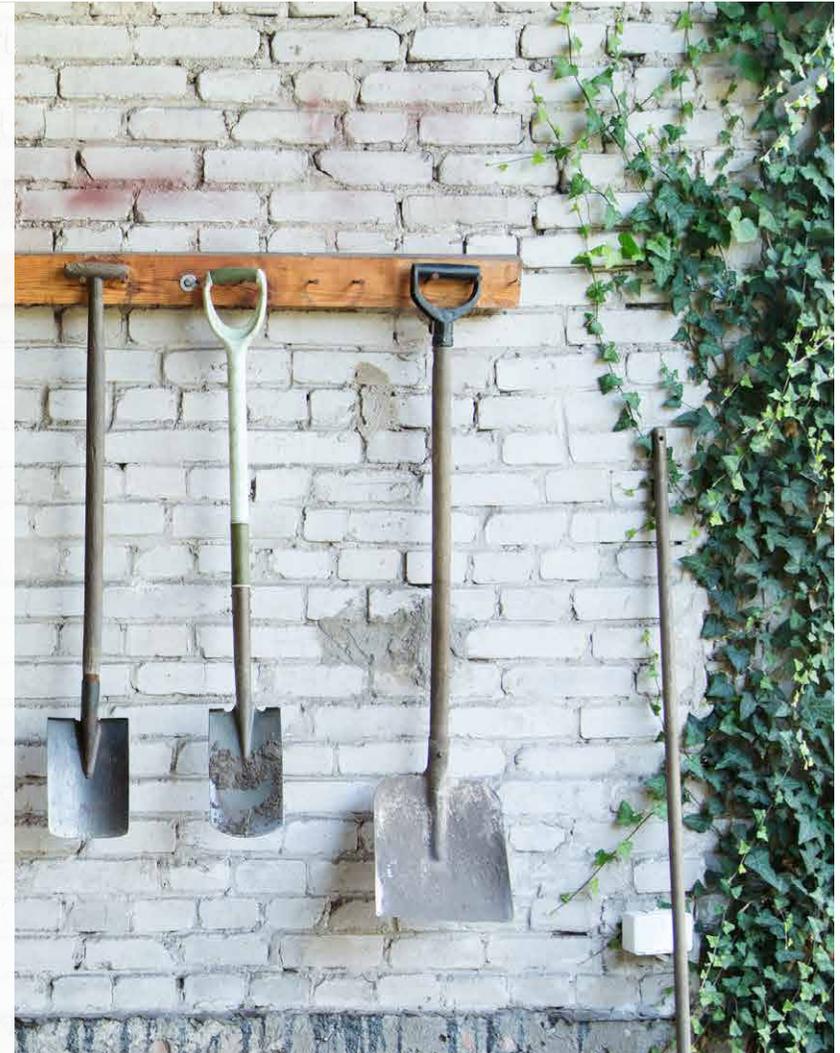
While some users indicated that broken seals may be caused by incorrect or insufficient application, numerous professional users appeared to recognise the role of sealant shrinkage in failed joints. A number of comments also suggested that sealant formulations such as acrylics can disintegrate over time, particularly in exterior applications which are exposed to extreme conditions such as high levels of rain, moisture or high or low temperatures.

## **APPEARANCE OF MOULD**

The appearance of mould on sealant joints was also viewed as one of the main drivers to replace or repair sealant joints. Despite the availability of sealant formulations marketed as mould resistant, many users question their effectiveness.

## **DISCOLOURATION**

The aesthetic appearance of sealants also plays a role in their replacement or repair with discolouration commonly raised as a reason for their re-application. In the case of white-coloured sealants, yellowing is cited as a significant limitation of certain sealant formulations while it is suggested that other colours lose their vibrancy over time.



# CONCLUSION

To conclude, although advances continue to be made in the field of sealant development and formulation, the core pain points continue to frustrate end users. While many of the findings appear to offer clear direction to sealant manufacturers on potential areas to focus innovation activity, others rely on improved education and additional resources which manufacturers and other players in the sealant value chain could offer in the future.

The research findings indicate that while sealants are viewed by both professional and DIY users as highly valuable products in terms of sealing joints for air and water tightness, they are also a source of considerable frustration.

In terms of the preparation of surfaces and tools in advance of application, users highlighted the challenges around cleaning and removing sealant residue and also in cutting packaging and nozzles in advance of applying the sealant. They also highlighted issues when applying sealants citing problems such as dispensing the correct amounts, applying consistent pressure with a gun, the potential for mess as well as unpleasant odours. Finishing and smoothing tasks are also viewed as difficult to master while clean up is another frustration. Users continue to be frustrated by the perceived lack of value for money as a result of the premature curing of sealants once opened as well as packaging waste. And finally, the perceived lifetime performance of sealants and the main reasons for replacement or repair include breakage and disintegration, mould appearance and discolouration.

## MARKET RESEARCH OVERVIEW

**The research included fieldwork in France, Germany and the United Kingdom which was conducted by an external research firm. Both focus groups and face-to-face interviews were used as the primary research methods.**

### Focus groups

Two focus group sessions with seven to eight participants were conducted in each country with each lasting approximately two and a half hours. Pre-qualification of invitees was done in advance to ensure diversity in age, gender and sealant experience. All participants were homeowners.

The groups were divided according to level of experience with one group classed as Novice/Occasional Users and the other as Occasional/Regular Users. Novice/Occasional users were those who had used one product from the sealant category on one or two occasions over the previous 12 months. Occasional/Regular users were identified as those who had used at least two sealant products four to five times over the previous 18 month period.

### Face-to-face interviews

Four face-to-face interviews were also conducted in each of the three markets. These were reserved for professional users of sealants with each interview lasting between 45-60 minutes.

The interviews covered both professionals in defined trades such as decoration or tiling as well as general contractors who perform a variety of repair and maintenance tasks. All were pre-qualified as regular users of sealants who routinely use multiple types of products from the category.



**SMART HELP:  
PLEASE CONTACT YOUR  
SALES REPRESENTATIVE.**

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