

Taking Fiber to the Living Unit – Visibly

A new crown molding technology allows fast, easy fiber installation and has an attractive appearance.

By Masha Zager / *Broadband Communities*

In the last several years, 3M, OFS, Samsung Fiber Optics and TE Connectivity (see p. 60) have all developed technologies that make fiber easy to install in MDU hallways and living units and difficult to see afterward. Crownduit, named one of this year's Companies to Watch in 2015, chose to swim against the tide.

Not that Crownduit makes fiber hard to install – its technology is just as installer-friendly as the others. In fact, many residents could perform the installation themselves without any problem. It's on the subject of aesthetics where Bob DePaul, Crownduit's CEO, begs to differ. Rather than hiding fiber, DePaul prefers to make it an eye-catching feature, covering it with crown molding inspired by classical designs.

DePaul, a master-of-all-trades, was working as a molding contractor several years ago when he helped a friend with a fiber installation job in Virginia. At one apartment building he visited, he was asked to repair an existing installation that had gone awry. "Parts were popping off," DePaul recalls. "The fittings were squeezed in, and they were falling off. It was very hard to get the centerpiece into the track."

A group of residents walked down the hall while DePaul was working and complained about the appearance of the molding. "We don't want that here," one resident said. "These are beautiful hallways and expensive apartments. Isn't there anything better available?"

There wasn't, but DePaul was sure he could make something better. He spent the next several years developing a molding system that would improve on the one he helped install in Virginia, and he launched his product, Crownduit, at the FTTH Conference and Expo in June 2014.

A MULTIPART MOLDING SYSTEM

The Crownduit molding system has several parts. A patented PVC backtrack, which attaches to the wall with two screws, has a built-in wire chase that is part of the extruded form. (Although DePaul conceived of the product with fiber optic cable in mind, the wire chase actually has plenty of room for low-voltage wire or coaxial cable.)

The molding faceplate is made of medium-density fiberboard (MDF), an engineered wood product that is stabler and more attractive than plastic, and it snaps easily onto the backtrack. This allows an owner to replace either the molding or the cable without using tools.

In a typical crown molding installation, the molding must be cut on-site to ensure that the joints and seams fit tightly. The Crownduit system, by contrast, uses snap-on covers for the joints and seams – which means the backtracks and faceplates can be cut to length off-site. These covers are made with the same materials and the same finishings as the faceplates, so they can be guaranteed to match.

Prefabricated mitered corner blocks snap over the corners where molding strips meet, freeing the installers from having to create the mitered corners, a task that is time-consuming for a professional and beyond the abilities of most amateurs. (In a room with crooked corners, the installer does have to adjust the corner blocks.)

Finally, wherever two pieces of faceplate meet along a straight wall, the seam and the nail holes are covered by a decorative block that snaps on the same way the mitered corners do. This means installers can leave small spaces between the pieces of faceplate and not have to cut lengths to a high degree of precision. In addition, the wood can expand and contract in response to fluctuations in temperature and humidity without pulling the seams apart.

In hallways and other public spaces, owners can use the corner and seam cover blocks to hide high-definition security cameras. “No one will ever know the camera is there,” DePaul says – which this reporter can attest to after having had one pointed out to her. Owners can add cameras and other equipment after the molding is already in place because installers have such easy access to the wire chase.

GEARING UP FOR PRODUCTION

For the standard molding design, Crownduit uses a traditional profile



Seam covers and mitered corner blocks are snapped on over the faceplate.

that was derived from classical Greek architecture and has been widely used in the United States from the 1820s onward. The company offers a variety of decorative elements, lamination options and sizes (larger sizes for hallways and smaller sizes for living units) to enable property owners to customize the look for any particular building. In addition, an owner could design a custom profile – DePaul stands ready to help with CAD drawings.

Pac Trim, a major manufacturer of MDF moldings, is making the faceplates, and Crownduit manufactures the PVC backtracks. DePaul even designed a machine that enables a single operator to extrude the backtracks. The

systems are assembled in a Missouri factory and can be shipped anywhere in the United States. Training will be offered for professional installers.

Because the system is cost-competitive with standard molding systems, DePaul expects it to appeal to MDU owners, individual homeowners and even to commercial property owners. And the product line may expand soon with an all-plastic molding for exterior walls, currently in development. Stay tuned! ❖

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Taking off the corner and seam covers provides easy access to the fiber cable.