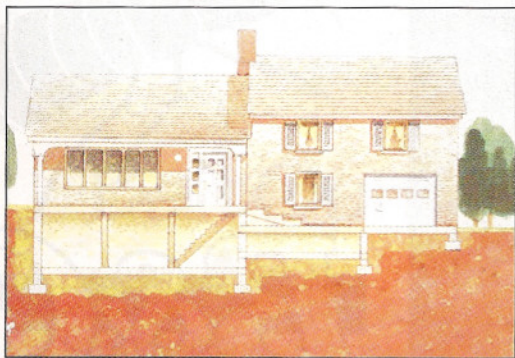




LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED

WHEN CONDUCTING TERMITE INSPECTIONS, THOROUGHNESS IS EVERYTHING. IF THERE IS EVIDENCE OF INFESTATION ANYWHERE IN THE STRUCTURE, IT'S IMPERATIVE THAT YOU FIND IT. YOUR REPUTATION IS RIDING ON IT.

BY
PAUL J. BELLO



The basement, attic, crawl spaces, garage and sheds are all essential areas to examine in conducting a thorough inspection.

Recently, I was invited to give a talk on termite inspections and retreat problems. Since I had done a few inspections in the past and there has been so much written about these topics before, I thought a little reading and "brush-up" would be all I needed to plan my presentation. However, an incident occurred that changed my mind.

I received a call from a "friend" I had not heard from in a while. You know the type of call — the kind where you're asking yourself, "What kind of favor does this guy need, and how do I get out of it?" He finally arrived at his point and muttered those all-too-familiar words: "I need a termite inspection by tomorrow."

To state it more correctly, he was in the middle of purchasing a new home and needed a termite inspection pronto. As he explained it, the seller's inspection had cleared the house, but he wanted me to take another look because his engineer thought there might be termites, and his attorney had recommended a second opinion.

We met the next day and I conducted the inspection. The point of the story is that while the house looked clean for the most part, I was able to find evidence of termites, while an inspector who preceded me had not. How was I able to do this? Because the more thorough the termite inspection, the greater the chance of finding an infestation if there is one present. The following article will examine the steps PCOs need to take to get on the road to conducting better termite inspections.

LOOKING CLOSER. The best strategy is to be thorough in your inspections, and not to compromise your own level of quality to meet a standard lower than your own. "The other guy didn't go in there" or "He didn't ask me to move my car from the garage" are typical comments I hear from homeowners during an inspection. I hope you hear similar comments as well. My response to the homeowner is simple: "I need to be thorough to do a good job for you."

Some homeowners are surprised that I insist on entering rooms such as attics, crawl spaces, sheds and garages. I explain that it is essential for me to enter these rooms if a thorough termite inspection is desired. In this article I've outlined several suggestions PCOs might want to follow when conducting a termite inspection, especially with regard to those areas of the structure the inspector should place special focus on. These areas include:

- *The basement.* Most inspectors go right to the basement to take a look at the sill plate and probe it with a heavy screwdriver or other type of tool. Many times, however, the sill plate is covered with electrical lines, and if it's double-plated, these electric lines may conceal termite tubing that lies between the two plate members. In most cases, you won't be able to fully view or probe the sill out to the box plate without some sort of step to stand on. You may need to bring a stepladder to better view the sill area or use a plastic toolbox. It usually holds a significant amount of gear and makes a good height-booster.



A basic understanding of how homes and other buildings are constructed will enhance your termite inspections and applications. One way to do this is to visit a construction site at various stages to learn how new homes are built.



termites come from underground? So why are you looking in the attic?" If you've never heard these statements before, you may need to be checking these areas more often. Termites that swarm from the basement or ground floor slab may find their way to the attic, drawn by the light from attic vents.

Toilets and septic systems are vented to the roof in most cases. Those 4- to 6-inch pipes that extend up from the roof about 2 feet are the septic system vents. If you doubt this, try placing a softball in yours and then go flush your toilet. These vent systems may be box-framed all the way down to the basement or first floor of a slab. Swarms that occur in the lower level may get up to the attic through these "framed conduits" and accumulate where daylight enters the attic near air vents. Remember: Check the attics when possible.

- *The garage.* One of my first requests to the homeowner may be to move the car from the garage. (Tell them, "We need the access to inspect thoroughly.") They can usually do this while you're checking around the exterior of the home. Don't wait for them to move the car and then inspect the garage — make good use of every minute, because your time is valuable! Sometimes when in a garage, you can't get to where you'd like because a riding mower, bicycles, old newspapers, garbage cans or storage shelves are in the way. I guess you might call this area "visually inaccessible," right? Wrong! Remember: You might not be the last termite inspector in that garage, and the person who is more thorough will find the evidence. How will that make you look in the eyes of the customer? And who is more likely to get the work referrals?

I have found termite evidence and activity that was missed by others simply by moving a bag of fertilizer or a snowblower. There was one recent case when more than 6 square feet of paper was eaten off the plaster board, a clue that went undetected by a previous inspector. But I found it by moving a bicycle, lawn mower and card table to see what was behind them. I realize it may not be your job to move these things, but I am in favor of performing a superior inspection and not merely providing a clearance form.

- *Inside the house.* The interior living areas of a home present other problems for PCOs conducting termite inspections. Structural members are hidden by plas-

Cantilever construction offers us yet another challenge while in the basement. Usually the cantilever is insulated, and you must move the insulation to find evidence of termites. This insulation may hide damage, evidence or tubes to the sub-flooring, or gaps in the siding through which other pests may enter the home. It gives added value to your inspection to point out conditions that may be conducive to pests other than termites when speaking with your customer. These conditions may represent additional opportunities in the form of pest-proofing work for your firm, while making your inspection more comprehensive and valuable.

There are also several areas in the basement that offer you advantages when looking for evidence of an infestation. The washer/dryer area of any basement is a

good spot to find wings or dead swarmers. This area is often well-lit, which will attract the swarmers. Also, look in the lens of any light fixture and behind the machines. A check of window sills, curtains and spider webs for evidence of swarmers is also recommended.

These are the easy areas to find evidence of a swarm. But you should also be aware of areas that could be overlooked or difficult to sweep or vacuum; this is where you may find wings or dead swarmers. When you find evidence of a swarm you must look further to find where the activity has moved or where it might have been.

- *The attic.* Sometimes finding evidence of a swarm is very difficult. The homeowner may say, "No one ever looked in the attic for termites before" or "Don't

terboard, wallpaper or paneling, while the floors may be carpeted wall to wall. PCOs should know termites may reveal themselves subtly in these areas, and look for these signs during their inspection.

Look for "ripples" on painted surfaces of wood or plasterboard, and even in vinyl-clad wallpaper. Often, termites eat the paper off the plasterboard, wallpaper or wood to just beneath the surface covering. The area above these tunneled areas will sort of "sink" and create a rippling effect in the surface. This defect in the surface may be more difficult to see on light-colored surfaces. But if the direction of the light is just right, a shadow effect is produced, making the defect more easily visible.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, check light fixtures, windows and similar areas for wings and bodies of swarmers. Using a moisture meter will enable you to locate questionable areas that may require further investigation.

In finished areas, termite inspectors are limited in their visual inspections. To solve this problem PCOs have installed "inspection ports" in accounts. These ports are simply holes cut in strategic areas of the structure that allow the inspector to look for evidence. These ports are camou-

TERMITE INSPECTION TIPS

The following suggestions are meant to help PCOs improve their inspection techniques. When used properly, they will lead to increased renewals and more satisfied clients, who will refer your company to their potential customers. The tips include:

- Start the inspection with the right attitude.
- Have the appropriate equipment, including flashlight, bump cap, coveralls, kneepads, dust mask or respirator, wood probe, and ladder or stepstool.
- Be thorough. Remember: You might not be the last inspector there.
- Use a prepared inspection form to save yourself time.
- Prepare your structural diagram accurately, including measurements, damaged areas, activity areas, conducive conditions and inaccessible areas.
- Be careful when working near electrical, plumbing or other conduits.
- Be courteous and honest when dealing with the public. It is acceptable to answer a question by saying "I'll find out for you" rather than making up an answer that may not be right.

flaged by covering them with false electrical outlets, air ducts or other such devices.

• *The exterior.* The ideal inspection home is a full basement, unfinished and built about 24 inches above grade. This type of construction provides adequate access for inspection and detection. In the field, however, you can run into all types of structures. When inspecting the exterior, there are a number of features that may hide

evidence from you. If the sill plate is built close to grade level, as it is with many slab homes, it is difficult to inspect for tubes without getting a good look beneath the siding.

Landscape mulch, grass and other plants may also prevent the inspector from taking a good look. When we consider the average width of a termite tube and how easily it might be hidden by various mate-

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rials on the exterior of a structure, it reinforces the importance of inspecting behind all plants, conduits, leader pipes and other obstructions.

The exterior may also reveal signs of previous swarms, moisture problems, and other conducive conditions. Areas of concern include:

- Leaking or clogged gutters.
- Plants laying against the structures.
- Sill plates in close proximity to the exterior soil.
- Soil-filled concrete porches, stoops or steps.
- Areas hidden by decks, planters or other structures.

The above-listed areas pose problems, either by providing conducive conditions or by preventing you from inspecting adequately. These are the sorts of areas that should be noted on your report.

INSPECTION PAPERWORK. The paperwork is a critical part of any termite inspection program. It's also an area where many PCOs can improve. I have seen inspections done with no paperwork, and when questioned, the inspector told me, "When you've done as many inspections as I have, you can draw the diagram and write the report from memory. Plus, it's easier to make a diagram at the office." This may be so for him, but a pencil and paper are usually better than the best memory.

Approach each inspection as a challenge. It's you versus the "other termite inspectors."

Your inspection paperwork should serve to make your job easier. We often see the same conditions or write the same notes for many structures during an inspection. This being the case, we can produce inspection report forms that allow us to simply check boxes instead of writing things out in longhand, which can result in a substantial time savings. Also, the inspection report might be structured to lead us through the inspection, thus ensuring that no areas are missed.

A word processing program on your company's computer will allow you to produce an adequate termite inspection form. Care should be taken when producing these types of forms to be as comprehensive as possible. Even the best forms should include an "other" area in which to include items that are unusual or that are not otherwise included on your report.

THE RIGHT ATTITUDE. To perform superior inspections, a proper attitude must be

adopted by PCOs. Approach each inspection as a challenge. It's you versus the "other termite inspectors." Statements like "The customer is relying on you" or "Your company's success is dependent upon you" may sound trite, but in reality they are very true. It takes the proper attitude to go into some of those crawl spaces we've all seen and do a truly thorough inspection.

For example, you'll never find the termite tubes on the opposite side of beam supports in a crawl space without getting over to the other side. It may not be easy or a pleasant experience to get all the way into a crawl space, but if you plan to carry that account as a renewal for years to

come, it must be done.

When dealing with customers, always be courteous and honest. In other words, treat the customer exactly as you'd like to be treated by a contractor in your own home. When showing damage or activity to the client, it is not necessary to "destroy" their structural lumber to show them how bad the damage is. (I've seen technicians pry damaged pieces of wood to pieces before horrified customers.)

Simply showing them a portion of the damage and explaining the situation should be enough to make your point. Refrain from scare tactics. Termites won't make a house fall down overnight, and

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the customer will realize the situation needs attention when you explain what you've found.

THE REPORT. Generally, when you are asked to perform an inspection, it is either for a real estate transaction or as part of an annual renewal service. In either case, you should provide a written report in a timely fashion to the customer. Remem-

ber, the report should reflect your professionalism. Always use a typewriter or computer to prepare your reports. It will look more professional than a handwritten report.

What if no damage or activity is found? Recently I had the pleasure of presenting a talk at the Long Island Pest Control Association conference. A television reporter and cameraman were there, and the reporter asked a pest control operator, "Would you treat a house that didn't have termites?" This seems like a simple question at first, but think of the complexities that are ignored and might be exploited to your detriment.

It is not my place to suggest your com-

pany policy or to suggest the correct answer to this question. Undoubtedly, we inspect structures where no evidence of termites has been found and are asked this question. What should be considered, however, is determining exactly what type of inspection you're providing and what its limitations are.

We can't possibly provide 100% assurance that there are no termites based on a visual inspection, due to the inaccessible areas and the ability of termites to enter a structure undetected. There are pest control companies that guarantee or warranty their inspections, but realizing the limitations of inspections, this may not be wise. Companies that provide such warranties need to perform the best inspections possible, to protect both themselves and their business interests.

UNDERSTANDING CONSTRUCTION. Pest control operators can't expect to possess the same level of construction knowledge as a professional carpenter or contractor. However, a basic understanding of how homes and other buildings are constructed will enhance your termite inspections and applications.

PCOs should become familiar with the proper terminology of construction and use the terms correctly in their reports and when discussing work with customers. Sources where PCOs can learn more about construction include home improvement magazines and National Pest Control Association manuals.

Another suggestion is to visit a construction site at various stages to learn how new homes are built. This will familiarize you with the design of the structure, and enable you to see what materials are used and identify potential entry routes for termites. Remember, the more familiar you are with construction, the better able you'll be to detect hidden voids and other trouble spots.

SUMMARY. In this article we've discussed several items that can enhance your termite inspections and improve the overall efficiency of your management program. Performing effective inspections is dependent on establishing a mindset that strives for quality work on a continuous basis.

Knowledge of construction practices is very useful for a PCO who conducts termite inspections to have, but it is only acquired by putting forth an extra effort. Likewise, possession of the latest tools is useful, but without the willingness to enter a nasty crawl space or be more thorough than the next guy, termite activity may go undetected, and the effectiveness of your treatment will suffer. **PCT**

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