

16-Ga. Finish

The right tool can improve the speed, accuracy, and quality of your trimwork

BY RICK ARNOLD

Sometimes the difference in performance from one brand of tool to another is easy to detect and evaluate, and making a purchase is a painless decision. Other times, the field of tools is so broad and the differences so subtle that I need to fall back on a different guideline: Which tool will make me more money? Sixteen-ga. finish nailers fall squarely into the latter category.

A tool can help me make more money when it allows me to work faster without sacrificing the level of accuracy or quality that I demand. Often, it's the little things that make the most difference. How fast can I change the nails? How easy is it to adjust the firing depth? How much time will I waste opening the nosepiece to remove jammed nails? Is it easy to see how many nails are left in the magazine? Will the nailer keep firing even after it's out of nails?

While a broad selection of tools can make it harder to decide which one to buy, it also means I can be choosier about the features that are important to me.

Why one tool earned two awards

For the past few months, I've been using these nail guns for a wide range of jobs, but mainly focusing on their specialty: interior trim. In the end, my choice for best overall was without a doubt the Bostitch FN16250K2. It includes everything I want in a finish nailer and then some. As far as I'm concerned, it has no competition.

The choice for best value is more complicated. Everybody gives different weight to different criteria, so a nailer that has lots of features for a low price isn't necessarily a better value than a solid tool that excels in the areas that are most important to me. Best value also depends on the amount of use the tool will get. If I seldom did finish work, I might consider buying the \$70 Grizzly and having it in my toolbox for the rare occasion that I needed it. But because I do trimwork more than seldom, I would gladly spend the extra \$90 for the Bostitch, which would give me a return on that extra money in just one or two jobs. To me, the slight difference in price between all these nailers combined with my frequency of use makes the Bostitch best value as well.

Rick Arnold is a contributing editor. Photos by Krysta S. Doerfler.

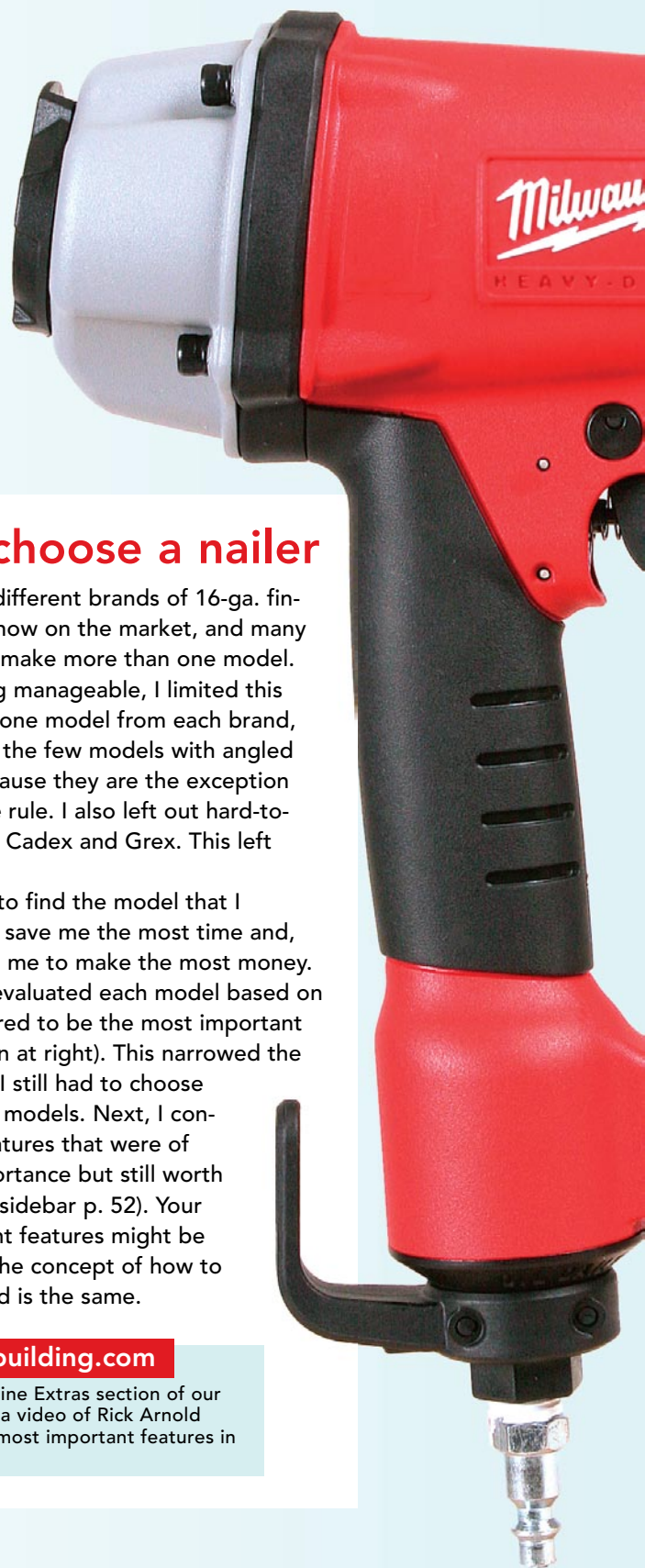
How I choose a nailer

More than 20 different brands of 16-ga. finish nailers are now on the market, and many manufacturers make more than one model. To keep testing manageable, I limited this review to only one model from each brand, and I set aside the few models with angled magazines because they are the exception rather than the rule. I also left out hard-to-find tools from Cadex and Grex. This left 14 nailers.

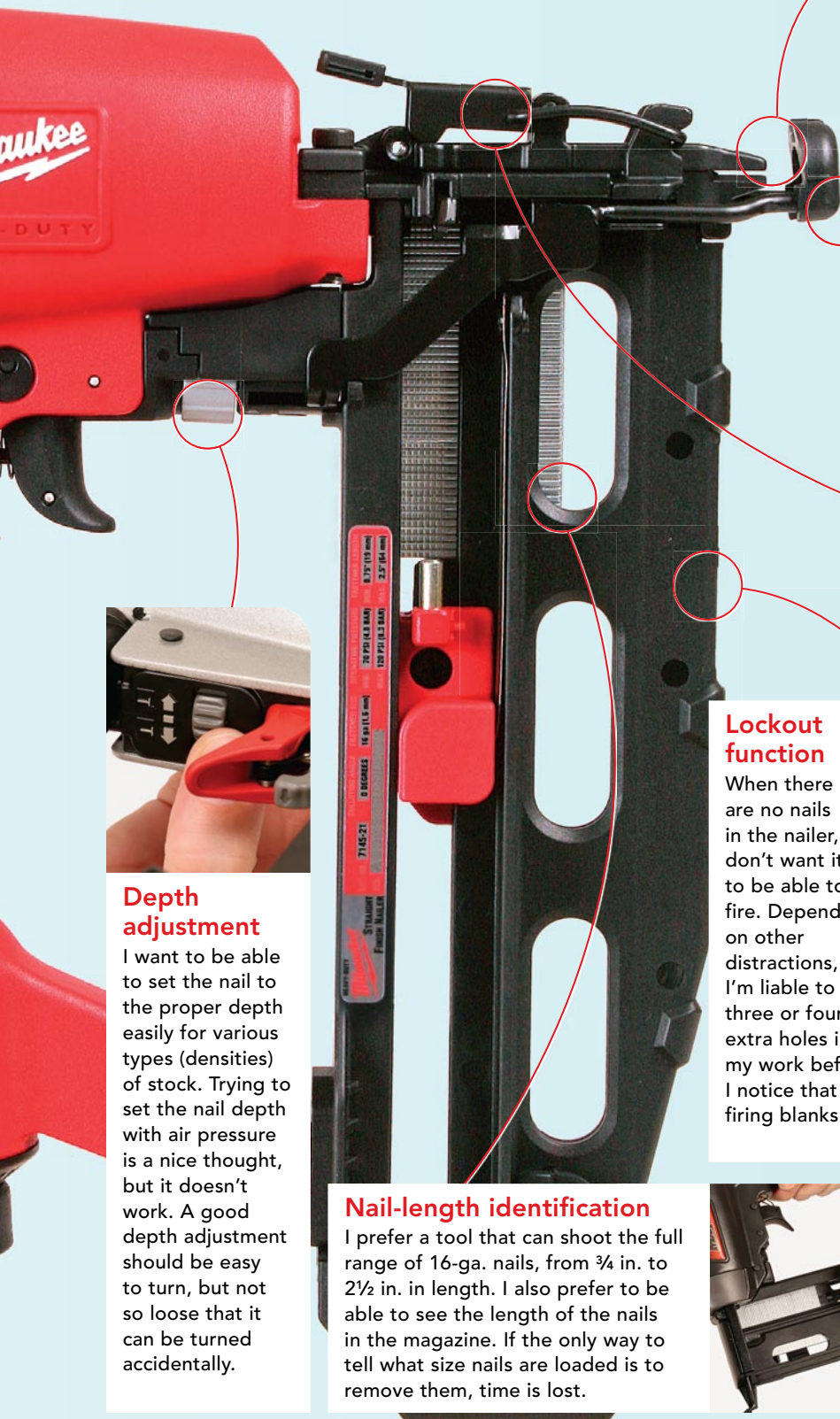
My goal was to find the model that I thought would save me the most time and, therefore, help me to make the most money. To that end, I evaluated each model based on what I considered to be the most important features (shown at right). This narrowed the field a bit, but I still had to choose among several models. Next, I considered the features that were of less initial importance but still worth consideration (sidebar p. 52). Your list of important features might be different, but the concept of how to narrow the field is the same.

FineHomebuilding.com

Visit the Magazine Extras section of our home page for a video of Rick Arnold explaining the most important features in a 16-ga. nailer.



Nailers



Depth adjustment

I want to be able to set the nail to the proper depth easily for various types (densities) of stock. Trying to set the nail depth with air pressure is a nice thought, but it doesn't work. A good depth adjustment should be easy to turn, but not so loose that it can be turned accidentally.

Nail-length identification

I prefer a tool that can shoot the full range of 16-ga. nails, from 3/4 in. to 2 1/2 in. in length. I also prefer to be able to see the length of the nails in the magazine. If the only way to tell what size nails are loaded is to remove them, time is lost.

Lockout function

When there are no nails in the nailer, I don't want it to be able to fire. Depending on other distractions, I'm liable to put three or four extra holes in my work before I notice that I'm firing blanks.

Nail placement

Delicate trimwork often leaves little tolerance for nail location, and I don't want to spend time and money replacing a piece of trim that blew out because of an errant nail. I tested the line of sight on these nailers by making several Xs on a piece of stock, then tried to hit the exact center.



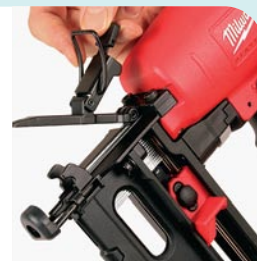
No-mar tip

Keeping the work free of dents is critical, especially on high-end jobs. Tips that are curved or have rounded edges let me work confidently at any angle.



Jam-clearing

I like a mechanism that allows the nose to open quickly without tools and the jammed nail to fall free. This feature becomes more important as the nailer ages.



Magazines

I prefer a nailer with a side-loading magazine. Rear-loading magazines are difficult to load and unload when using pieces of nail clips, and top-loading magazines, though relatively easy to load, often force me to invert the nailer and bang it on a solid surface to get the nails to fall out.

Pro tip

I don't like to work with more than one nailer at a time, and because one task often requires different fastener lengths, I change nails often. With a side-loading magazine, I can see the nails loaded and easily switch the position of nail groupings.



REAR-LOADING



TOP-LOADING



SIDE-LOADING

Seven top-notch nailers with the features I value most



Bostitch FN16250K2 www.bostitch.com \$160

This nailer has everything I want and more: a side-loading magazine with easy nail identification and nail-changing, an anti-dry-fire feature, good line of sight that allows for accurate nail placement, a quality no-mar tip, and a depth adjustment so well incorporated that if you didn't look for it, you might not know it was there. This oil-free nailer is also one of the lightest, most well-balanced models in the group. It has a rotating belt hook and onboard storage for its two hex wrenches. I could save a little bit of money and buy a less expensive model, but the fact that the Bostitch is right in the middle of the price range makes it my choice for best value as well.

Hitachi NT65M2

www.hitachipowertools.com
\$165

Probably the most comfortable nailer in this review, the Hitachi has a unique integrated air duster that comes in handy much more often than I would have thought. The fitting on the bottom of the gun is angled to ease the strain on the hose. There are no view ports on the top-loading magazine, and you have to invert it to get the fasteners out. At least the magazine is skewed away from the handle so that it doesn't interfere with the removal of longer fasteners.



**Maxus
MXN06499**

www.maxustools.com
\$140

Although it's the heaviest nailer in this review, the Maxus is still a good basic tool. A rear-loading magazine is not my first choice, but this one has a pusher that can be locked back out of the way, and the lower front edge of the magazine is slotted. These features allow long nails to slide in and out of the magazine without any restriction, a clever solution.

**Milwaukee
7145-21**

www.milwaukeetool.com
\$100

The Milwaukee is attractively priced and comes with an excellent belt hook, adjustable exhaust, and an extra onboard no-mar tip. The nailer has a good feel to it and can go from sequential to bump-fire mode with the turn of a switch. Unfortunately, the line of sight is poor, and the view ports in the rear-loading magazine don't allow me to distinguish a 2-in. fastener from a 2½-in. fastener.

**Paslode
T250S-F16**

www.paslode.com
\$150

This nailer has an excellent line of sight; I hit the center of the X every time. The trigger, which houses the firing-mode selector, has a nice short action and very little play. A pivoting cover plate makes it a cinch to access the nail track for clearing jams. The rear-loading magazine has graduated marks to indicate how many fasteners remain, but the nailer takes some shaking to get smaller sections of fasteners (groups of 12 or less) to slide toward the rear of the magazine for removal.

**Porter-Cable
FN250B**

www.portercable.com
\$140

The Porter-Cable is close in appearance and function to the DeWalt, but costs much less money. The rear-loading magazine allows me to identify nail length, but nail-changing is somewhat difficult because the magazine has to be held open. Then I have to work the fasteners past a nail stop, which requires too much effort. On the plus side, this nailer has a good line of sight through the curved no-mar tip, which also leaves fewer marks than competing nailers. It also has little kickback, making it less prone to bruising softwood.

**Ridgid
R250SFA**

www.ridgid.com
\$140

This nailer has a lot of smaller features that add up to a decent tool. The depth adjustment is easy and unobtrusive; it includes a quality belt hook, a rotating exhaust port, and a sequential/bump-firing selector switch. It's also the only model I tested that comes with a swiveling air-hose connector, which helps to keep the supply hose lying flat. The fasteners slide in and out of the rear-loading magazine easily when the pusher is locked out of the way, but there is no way to see the length of fasteners in the magazine.

Other features may be more important to you

My list of important criteria (p. 49) is subjective. Although the features shown below are secondary considerations when I'm shopping for a new nailer, they do matter and could be deal breakers for you.

Adjustable exhaust ports

This feature can be helpful in preventing the exhaust from blowing a cloud of dust and debris into your face, particularly if you remember to adjust it before the first shot.



Oilless

This can be an important feature. If you or your crew is heavy-handed with the daily oil and you work with a lot of stain-grade material, I would consider moving this up to the list of most important criteria.

Belt hook

Because finish nailers are relatively light, I often hang them on my belt. If you do lots of work from a ladder, this is a big convenience and should be a top consideration.

Trigger action

Some triggers have more travel distance before engaging. I prefer those that have little play.



Ergonomics

Even the heaviest finish nailer is still pretty light, so an out-of-balance design is still usable. Some models, though, are definitely more comfortable than others, which helps on long jobs.

Firing mode

Many nailers allow you to switch between sequential and contact-trip (bump) firing modes. I have never found it advantageous to bump-fire onto millwork because unlike framing, one misplaced fastener or one double shot can cost me much more time than any time I might be saving.

Nail capacity

Because the fasteners are light and easy to carry in my toolbelt, and because I'm constantly changing nail sizes, even the lowest nail capacity is sufficient for me.

Seven more 16-ga. nailers to consider

Craftsman 18175

www.craftsman.com \$180

This magnesium-body nailer is simple and solid. Like most nailers with rear-loading magazines that can't be locked open, switching nails is a two-handed operation. On the plus side, it's easy to see the length of the nails that are loaded. The exhaust port is difficult to rotate, and the depth selector spins a bit too easily. A push-and-spin switch makes it easy to select firing modes.



DeWalt D51257K

www.dewalt.com \$170

This nailer seems to be constructed ruggedly. The magazine allows for fastener-length identification, the curved nosepiece and no-mar tip offer good line of sight, and the smooth, responsive sequential trigger has a pivoting safety lock for when the nailer is not in use. This nailer is clearly a close relative to the Porter-Cable, but it costs more.



Grip-Rite GRTFN250

www.grip-rite.com \$155

This basic, no-frills nailer has an average price, average features, and average performance. Although it didn't shine in any areas, it wasn't disappointing, either. Rotating exhaust, a belt hook, good line of sight, and fastener identification are all part of the package. To me, the only real drawback is the rear-loading magazine and the resulting difficulty in switching nails.



Grizzly H6143

www.grizzly.com \$70

This nailer worked adequately, and the price is attractive. But it didn't do well in terms of the criteria that are important to me. There are no view ports in the magazine, and as with all the top-loading nailers, I had to invert it to empty the magazine. However, when I was holding the nailer, there wasn't enough room between the magazine and my hand for 2½-in. nails to fall out.



Max NF352-ST

www.maxusacorp.com \$300

In competition with Spotnails for being the most compact, this nailer comes with the same restriction: It can shoot only up to 2-in.-long nails. It has a great side-loading magazine, but it is the only model here that has no depth adjustment or no-mar tip. The Max also was the only nailer without a case. It's almost twice the price of nailers that I think are better.



Senco FinishPro 32

www.senco.com \$140

This nailer has been on the market for years, and as far as I can tell, there have been no changes. The Senco has a nice trigger and good line of sight, and though it's on the heavy side, it doesn't feel awkward. There is no way to identify the fastener length without sliding the nails to the end of the rear-loading magazine, and to do that, I have to work them past a nail stop.



Spotnails WB1650

www.spotnails.com \$130

This nailer is compact, shoots well, and has little kickback. The rear-loading all-metal magazine looks durable and allows for easy fastener-length identification. Unfortunately, the longest nail it takes is 2 in., which limits the nailer's use for many trim applications. The depth adjustment is also a little difficult to set, and the driver leaves a comparatively larger indent.

