

# Refacing Kitchen Cabinets

A veneer face-lift makes a 'new' kitchen affordable

by Rex Alexander

**B**y the time she called me, Caroline McCary had already decided that her 32-year-old maple kitchen had to go. Caroline had antiqued the cabinets to a dark green a few years earlier (top photo, facing page), and now she was tired of them. What she had in mind was a whole new set of cabinets.

Caroline runs a beauty parlor in her house and had heard about me from one of her customers. But the customer hadn't mentioned the fact that I reface kitchens—just that I build new ones. In fact, Caroline and her husband, Robert, didn't even know that refacing the cabinets in veneer was an option for them. But when I realized the cabinets were sound structurally, and the layout was sensible, I knew their kitchen was a perfect candidate for a veneer face-lift. And that would mean big savings for the McCarys.

I can make old cabinets look new (bottom photo, facing page) for only two-thirds the price of new ones. What's more, the veneering process is far less disruptive for the customer than tearing out existing cabinets and installing new ones.

There are other advantages with the face-lifting process: First, you're recycling old cabinets, so you can feel good about taking some of the strain off the local landfill; and second, you're reducing your customer's exposure to the formaldehyde given off by the particleboard and plywood used in new cabinets. At the same time, a veneer face-lift is an opportunity for the homeowner to add some of those kitchen accessories that make life easier—things like self-closing door hinges, full-extension drawer slides or pull-out shelves and lazy susans. I get these items from Direct Supply (2832 Vineland, Grand Rapids, Mich. 49508; 800-878-8704) or from Superior Distributing (918 Ft. Wayne Ave., Indianapolis, Ind. 46202; 800-622-4462).

The veneering process can transform a kitchen in a matter of a week or two. Specialized tools are few. And when applied with care, the veneer is both attractive and durable. Some of the work—like filling and sanding the face frames and finishing the new veneer—is done on site. Other work—such as making new doors, drawer fronts and end panels—takes place back in my shop. When all these elements are combined in the kitchen, the results can be dramatic.

**Choosing veneers**—Wood veneers of almost all native American hardwoods, and of some imported species, are available from many wood suppliers. I use Pluswood Indiana (P. O. Box



**Shop demonstration.** In his shop, the author cuts veneer roughly to size before demonstrating the refacing technique. The cabinet is from the kitchen shown on the facing page.

1028, Elkhart, Ind. 46515; 219-295-4105). Veneers come in a variety of widths, from  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. strips all the way to 24-in. wide sheets. Veneer is available in at least two preglued varieties—pressure sensitive (sidebar p. 76) and heat sensitive—as well as in the traditional types with no glue at all. I use heat-sensitive veneer, which I apply with a clothes iron, and I've found it is durable enough to withstand the wear and tear of normal kitchen activities. In fact, in 15 years of kitchen face-lifts, I have not had a single callback because veneer loosened or was torn off during normal use.

But keep one thing in mind: The choice of wood can greatly affect the price of a kitchen face-lift. I use  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. plywood for end panels and door panels most of the time, and I've found it cost effective to use either birch or red oak. These plywoods are available in the northern Michigan lumberyards that I frequent, and they are economical. If you want something different, your supplier probably can order it. But ordering special plywood may be more expensive, and you'll have to buy solid lumber of the same species for drawer fronts and door frames. That matching solid lumber can be pricey and can cancel out the economies of veneer refacing.

**Are the cabinets worth saving?**—Cabinetry that is still sound structurally can provide the right foundation for new veneer—but some cabinets aren't worth the effort. I look for well-built carcasses and face frames. The bottoms, sides and backs of the cabinets should be in good condition and anchored to one another solidly.

Adjustable shelves should work. I also check that face frames are firmly attached to the cabinet carcasses, or can be reattached easily, and that the face-frame joinery is flush and secure.

A set of kitchen cabinets, of course, is made up of a number of smaller units that are assembled when the kitchen is installed. If there are gaps between the face frames on adjoining cabinets, I usually can pull the cabinets together with drywall screws. But there are danger signs when inspecting a kitchen for a possible face-lift:  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. plywood cabinet bottoms that are bowed, loose or falling apart; or face frames that are toenailed together. You might have to put more work into rehabilitating a kitchen like this than is profitable—for you or the customer.

The drawer joinery and glide operation should also be checked closely. Many older kitchens are blessed with hardwood drawers held together with dovetail joints. These older drawers often run on hardwood glides that may need only a little paraffin. Many other kitchens will include drawers of fir or pine with stapled lock joints that have failed over the years. Some of these drawers can be reinforced and strengthened, but others will have to be replaced.

Although the McCarys' cabinets were sound, the existing cooktop and range hood were near death, so they had to be removed, along with the base cabinet in which they were installed. I replaced the old cooktop with a new drop-in range flanked on both sides by narrow tray cabinets. In addition, we slated the old built-in wall oven for the scrap heap. In the cabinet opening that resulted from the oven's removal, I planned a pair of tall cabinet doors that would open to reveal two pull-out shelves for pots and pans. Finally, we agreed that I would install a pivoting blind-corner shelving system to make better use of an existing corner cabinet. None of these cabinet changes altered the kitchen's layout. But the McCarys did want to extend the cabinet peninsula to house a built-in dishwasher.

They wanted simple, easy-to-clean frame-and-panel doors of red oak. They chose matching red oak for moldings, end panels and face frames. To finish off the room, Caroline wanted the soffit over the upper cabinets removed and  $2\frac{3}{4}$ -in. crown molding installed in its place. A plastic-laminate countertop with bullnose wood trim would complete the transformation.

**Make doors and drawers or buy them?**—I started compiling the lists and the drawings that



**A face-lift candidate.** Caroline McCary had worked in her kitchen for 32 years before deciding that the original maple cabinets, now antiqued to a dull green, needed replacement.

**Same view, new face.** Working with existing cabinet carcasses and face frames, the author transformed Caroline's kitchen with oak veneer, new doors and new drawer fronts.



would make the rest of the job easier. I drew a floor plan of the existing kitchen and added the pertinent changes. And I made elevation drawings of the cabinets (1-in. scale) on graph paper to show actual openings for all doors and drawers. These drawings were helpful back in my shop, 20 miles away from the McCarys' kitchen.

There are many pieces that go into a kitchen face-lift, and I make accurate lists of all of them. I took this process in several steps, beginning with the end panels. I also listed the lineal footage for the crown molding, the bullnose countertop trim and the baseboard, and I had my assistant double-check all measurements.

This is also the time to think about any special hardware that will be needed later—things like new drawer slides and pulls. I put in my order for that hardware, along with the plastic lami-

nate and substrate for the countertop, so that the supplies would be on hand before the kitchen installation began. With these initial tasks completed and supplies en route, I could concentrate on door and drawer-front construction.

Although I like to make my own doors and drawer fronts, you can also order them from a supplier and install them yourself. There are many such companies (see Sources of Supply, p. 76). Some suppliers can produce drawers and doors—as well as the veneer you will need—all finished and ready to install.

**D-Day for installation**—One big advantage of a veneer face-lift is that the actual installation can be carried out quickly. In a small, uncomplicated kitchen, I can get most, if not all, of the work done in three days. On the first day I remove the

countertops, the doors and the drawers; install the new end panels; and veneer and stain the face frames. And I'm still home in time for supper. On the second day I lacquer the frames and apply new doors and drawer fronts. That leaves the third day for installing the countertops and the moldings. Larger kitchens may take five days to complete once we get on the site; the McCarys' kitchen took a little longer than that because of extra cabinets and molding they wanted and because I, or my assistant, often worked there alone.

When the doors, the drawer fronts and other parts and supplies were ready, we loaded our tools and converged on the McCarys' house. I had given the McCarys plenty of notice, so they had time to clean out the cabinets. I also prefer to have everything off the countertops, the

**Scuff sanding.** The author demonstrates the veneer technique in his shop on a cabinet originally part of the McCarys' kitchen. The first step is to sand the face frames with 120-grit paper to remove dirt, grease and any other residue. Sanding also scuffs the surface to provide a good hold for the veneer that will follow.



**Rough cutting the veneer.** Alexander roughly measures strips of veneer and cuts them to length. On the job site, he cuts all of the strips for one cabinet, puts the veneer inside the cabinet and moves on to the next one until he has worked his way around the kitchen.



**Ironing on veneer.** After the iron has warmed up, the veneer is bonded to the face frame by heat. The iron should not be held too long in any one spot, or the wood will be scorched. The author also is careful not to iron down areas that will later be trimmed—like the short section of veneer extending onto the cabinet rail immediately above the iron.



refrigerator and stove out of the way and all of the plumbing dismantled (if the countertop is to be replaced). Any patching or painting of walls or ceilings also should be done in advance.

Homeowners usually are around the house during the installation. So I keep dust and the general mess under control by blocking off door openings to the rest of the house and by using an exhaust fan to control dust and any finishing odors. It's also handy to have a shop vac on site.

When it's time to start, I remove the doors, the drawers, the countertop, the false drawer fronts, the valances, the cabinets that won't be used and anything else that may hinder the veneering and finishing process. Then it's time to make sure individual cabinet units are fastened to each other securely. I plane any uneven spots in adjoining face frames and close any gaps between cabinets with drywall screws. If the cabinets can't be screwed together, I fill gaps with wood filler and sand down the surface.

Other work on the face frames may include filling in around new appliances with new wood or cutting portions out of existing frames so that new hardware will fit into place. At the McCarys' kitchen, for example, a new pivoting blind-corner shelf system called for a 14½-in. opening—2½ in. more than what was there. I had to cut the stile to accommodate the new shelf before any veneer was applied.

After these alterations have been made, I start by applying the new end panels. I cut the panels ⅛ in. oversize in width so that they can be scribed to walls that may be slightly out of plumb. The edge of each panel should be flush with the face frame so that the veneer will iron on smoothly to both surfaces. End panels that are ¼-in. plywood may be attached with construction adhesive and hot glue—the hot glue holds the panels in place while the adhesive sets. If the new end panels are of frame-and-panel construction, they can be attached with screws from the inside of the cabinet.

**Applying the veneer**—Before applying the veneer, I scuff sand the face frame with 120-grit paper in an orbital sander (top photo, left), then wipe the frame clean. The Porter-Cable #330 Speed-Bloc sander is perfect for this operation because it allows you to sand into tight corners, and the sander won't fall out of your hand.

My veneer applicator is nothing more than a standard household iron that I plug in and set between perm-press and wool. The iron warms up while I cut the veneer roughly to size. Once the veneering begins, I like to keep at it without interruption, and that means having all the veneer precut and the other tools I will need close at hand. The tools include a utility knife with a sharp blade, an edge-trimming knife (available from Tapes and Tools, P. O. Box 1195, High Point, N. C. 27261; 919-884-5371), a flexible 10-in. dry-wall knife and a 3-in. J-roller. My roller comes from Woodcraft Supply Corporation (210 Wood County Industrial Park, P. O. Box 1686, Parkersburg, W. Va. 26102-1686; 800-225-1153).

As a rule, most kitchens require both 2-in. and 3-in. wide veneer strips. I buy mine unfinished in rolls; the material is easy to cut with sharp scis-

sors. I work my way around the kitchen, cutting all the rail and stile pieces an inch or two longer than they need to be and putting the pieces in the cabinet for which they are intended (middle photo, facing page). Where two 1½in. face frames meet, 3in. veneer can be used to cover both surfaces at once. Should a kitchen have areas that need more than 3in. coverage, I use two pieces of 2in. veneer and iron them on at the same time.

When I've got the pieces of veneer cut, it's time to apply them with the iron, which by now is warmed up. I iron with a slow, steady movement (bottom photo, facing page). Stopping the iron may scorch the veneer, and while scorch marks can sometimes be sanded out, the damaged veneer often must be replaced. First I veneer the stiles (the vertical members of the face frame) and allow the veneer to hang over the inside and outside edges (I'll trim it later). I also allow the veneer to lap onto any adjoining rails (horizontal members), although I'm careful not to iron that part down yet. That excess, too, will be trimmed a little later.

Once the veneer has been ironed on, I roll it out to ensure a good bond (top photo, right). Then I use the edge trimmer to slice off the excess on the edges (middle photo, right). A word of caution about that process: It's a good idea to keep an eye on the direction of the wood grain. Even though the veneer is thin, it can tear out if you try to slice against the grain. I read the grain on the veneer just as I would if I were planing a piece of solid lumber.

After veneer has been applied to the stiles, it's time for the rails. That veneer goes on the same way—overlapping the edges and the stiles. But I pay close attention not to iron the rail and stile veneers together quite yet. Once veneer is bonded to both rail and stile, I use the 10in. drywall knife as a straightedge to cut the excess veneer at the rail-stile joint (bottom photo, right). Because the drywall knife is flexible, I can register it against the inside edge of a stile and at the same time bend the knife over the face of the rail. I cut both layers of veneer at once. With the excess cut and peeled away, the rail veneer fits snugly against the stile veneer, and both can be ironed and rolled.

Once the veneer has been applied and trimmed, I sand all the edges. The bottom edges of the bottom rails are usually hard to sand because most toe kicks are only 3 in. or 3½ in. high—not enough room for the sander. I simply use a file in those tight spots and round over the edge slightly.

The veneer is now in place, the joints have been cut, and all of the edges have been slightly rounded. Next I test for any voids where the iron might have missed the heat-sensitive glue on the back of the veneer. Tapping lightly over the surface of the veneer with two fingers in a rhythmic motion, I listen for a hollow sound, which tells me the veneer has not held. These areas are ironed and rolled again to ensure adhesion. I also test all the veneer edges to make sure they are secure and have been rounded over. I flick the edges with my finger to check for any looseness. After re-ironing and rolling



**Rolling out the veneer.** After the veneer has been ironed on, the author uses a roller to ensure a good bond. A few quick passes over the veneer are all it takes.



**Trimming the excess.** Alexander uses an edge-trimming knife to cut away the excess veneer that hangs over face-frame edges. It's a good idea to watch the grain in the veneer because tearout is possible if the edge trimmer is pushed against the grain.



**Double cutting the overlap.** Using a 10-in. drywall knife as a flexible guide, the author cuts away excess rail and stile veneer in one pass with a utility knife. He then irons and rolls out the joint to fix the veneer permanently to the face frame.

any spots that need it, I sand the face frame with 220-grit paper.

**Finishing the face frames**—With the veneer firmly in place, it's now time to prepare the kitchen for finishing. I discard the veneer scraps and vacuum the cabinets, paying particular attention to the face frames. Because I spray my finishes, I also mask off all areas in the kitchen that might be damaged by finish overspray.

I like water-based finishes, especially if I'm doing the face-lift during winter. The new generation of water-based lacquers are manufactured without the volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that make nitrocellulose lacquer so dangerous outside a spray booth. And the water-based materials dry very rapidly, allowing me to apply multiple coats in a single day. I use Hydrocote stains and finishes (The Hydrocote Co., Inc., P. O. Box 160, Tennent, N. J. 07763; 800-229-4937)

When I'm ready to apply the finish, I bring in my air compressor and lightly spray on any stain that might be required. I stain small sections at a time and wipe them down as I go. Spraying stain is quick, but hand application may be best when overspray would damage wallpaper or other surfaces. While the stain is drying (about one hour), I busy myself with other tasks like installing glides to drawers or hinges to doors. When the stain is dry, I begin applying the lacquer. I apply two light coats at a time and do that three times, so there are really six thin coats of lacquer in all. Between each of the three applications, I sand the face frames with 320-grit paper.

After the lacquer has been applied, it's time for another inspection of the face frames. Air pockets resulting from poor glue adhesion will really stand out now. They can be made to lay flat by heating them with a hair dryer set on high, followed by a quick roll.

**Installing drawers and extras**—With finishing out of the way, all of the hardware that makes a kitchen efficient and fun to use can be installed. That might include pull-out shelves, blind corner systems or special tilt-up shelves for heavy kitchen equipment like mixers. I also fit new drawers and drawer glides and set any new cabinets that I've made.

At this point the drawers are just boxes—with out their fronts. With the new drawer boxes in position, I drill two holes in the front of each box so that I can attach the drawer fronts. The holes are 1 in. from the inside front edges and centered top to bottom. To the outside of the drawer, I apply double-stick carpet tape to hold the drawer front in place while I make sure it fits. Then I use drywall screws to attach the face to the box.

Drawers that are in good condition need only new fronts. But this is rare. More often, older drawers don't have separate drawer fronts—the existing front also has a lip edge. If that's the case, as it was at the McCarys, I chuck a flush-trimming bit with a pilot bearing in my router and cut the lip off. New fronts can then be applied. Occasionally, a drawer also will need some type of reinforcement. If the drawer sides are pulling away from the front or the back, several repair methods may be used. Small wood screws may be

enough to hold the sides together. Reattaching the sides with pneumatically applied staples or brads also may work. Yet another technique is to glue small triangular pieces into inside corners to reinforce failing joinery.

**New doors, countertops and trim**—Most homes have carpeted living rooms. This is a perfect staging area for the next part of the installation—hanging new cabinet doors. I finish the doors in my shop before taking them to the kitchen for installation. Once at the job site, I line up doors face down on the carpet where the finish won't be damaged and, in assembly-line manner, install the hinges. Each door is then moved from the living room to the kitchen and applied to the appropriate cabinet.

Because the door hinges I use are fully adjustable (up and down and side to side), I simply open the hinges, eyeball their placement on the inside edge of the face frame and screw them in place. Once the doors are hung, I use a jig (available from most woodworking suppliers) to drill all the holes for knobs or pulls in both doors and drawers. I also use felt cushions on inside edges of doors and drawers.

After that, crown molding, soffit trim and baseboard all can be cut and nailed into place. The top perimeter of the McCarys' cabinets was accentuated with 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. crown molding that was glued and nailed to a 1x that had been screwed to the top edge of the cabinets. I also dress up the toe kicks by gluing  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. oak plywood to the recessed surfaces. It is sometimes appropriate to make the toe kick as unobtrusive as possible, and I do that by painting a strip of hardboard flat black and gluing it in position. In other situations, I apply baseboard right over the toe kick—as was the case on one cabinet at the McCarys.

Because my shop can be far from a customer's house, it's easier to construct the countertop right on the job site (for more on laminating countertops, see *FHB* #75, pp. 60-65). In the McCarys' kitchen, I used  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. high-density particleboard as the countertop substrate and covered it with plastic laminate. The countertop was edged with a  $1\frac{3}{16}$ -in. oak bullnose trim that I made on the shaper. After scribing the counter to the walls, I secured it from below with drywall screws. Then I glued and brad-nailed the bullnose trim into place and finished up by filling all nail holes. □

*Rex Alexander is a cabinetmaker, specializing in kitchens. He lives in Brethren, Mich. Photos by Scott Gibson except where noted.*

#### SOURCES OF SUPPLY

The veneers used in kitchen refacing are widely available—check the yellow pages or call your local lumber supplier. There also are many companies that make cabinet doors and drawer fronts. Your lumber supplier probably can direct you to one in your area. Another source of information is the *Custom Woodworker's 1993 Buying Guide*, which includes an extensive listing of door makers and veneer suppliers. The guide is available for \$25 by writing to Helen Kuhl, Custom Woodworking Business, 400 Knightsbridge Parkway, Lincolnshire, Ill. 60069; (708) 6344347.

## Another option: pressure-sensitive veneer

by Herrick Kimball

After a career of rip-and-replace kitchen remodeling, I refaced my first set of cabinets just three years ago. At the time I had virtually no veneering experience, and all I knew of the process came from a conversation with a veteran refacer. As you might guess, I was a little nervous about that first kitchen, but there was really nothing to worry about. I found that using pressure-sensitive veneer was downright easy.

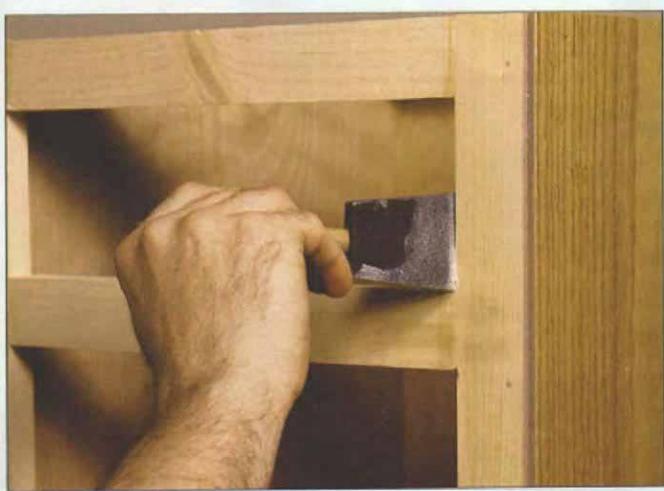
My approach to veneer refacing includes basic steps that most kitchen-cabinet refacers are likely to follow: the removal of cabinet doors and the repair of imperfections in the existing frames; the application of  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. hardwood plywood end panels; and finally, the actual veneering. But I use pressure-sensitive veneer—or what is sometimes called peel-and-stick veneer—instead of the type treated with a heat-activated adhesive.

The veneer I use is 10 mil thick with an adhesive backing made by 3M (3M, 3M Center, St. Paul, Minn. 55144-1000; 800-362-3456). I buy it in 2-ft. by 8-ft. sheets and using this veneer is about as simple as "peel and stick" implies. I simply cut the veneer to size, apply a bonding agent to the cabinet (more about that later), peel off the backing paper and stick the veneer to the surface I'm refacing. There is, however, one major caveat: pressure-sensitive veneer is very much like contact cement. That is, once it's stuck, there's not much chance of moving or adjusting it. If the veneer you apply goes on crooked—and that's bound to happen as you learn this procedure—you'll need a sharp chisel and exceptional patience to get it off.

All the material I use for kitchen refacing—doors, plywood end panels, drawer fronts and veneer—is prefinished by my supplier. That saves me a lot of time. There are many places to buy material, but the company I use is Concepts in Wood (4021 New Court Ave., Syracuse, N. Y. 13206; 315463-8084).

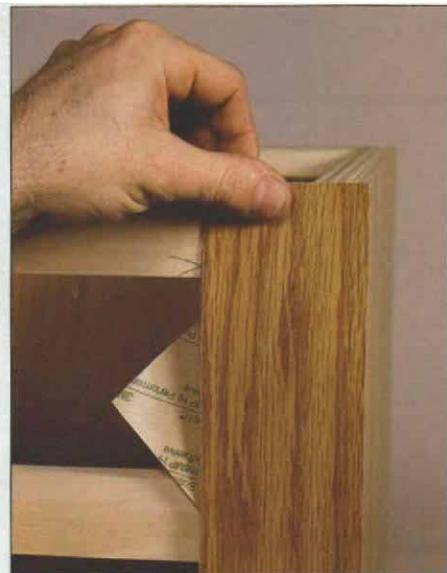
**Veneer the stiles first**—Once any repairs have been made to the face frames, and the surface has been sanded with 60-grit or 80-grit paper, I get ready to apply the veneer. The pressure-sensitive veneer sticks best to smooth, nonporous surfaces like old-fashioned metal cabinets. But let's face it—few surfaces are in perfect shape, so I use a bonding agent made by 3M called NF30. This is a water-based contact adhesive that is neither flammable nor noxious smelling. Just before I put on the veneer, I go over the frames with a damp cloth to remove any dust. Then I paint on a coat of NF30 with a disposable foam brush and let it dry.

I prefer to veneer the inside edges of the stiles and rails as well as their faces. By doing this, the entire face frame looks like



Step 1.

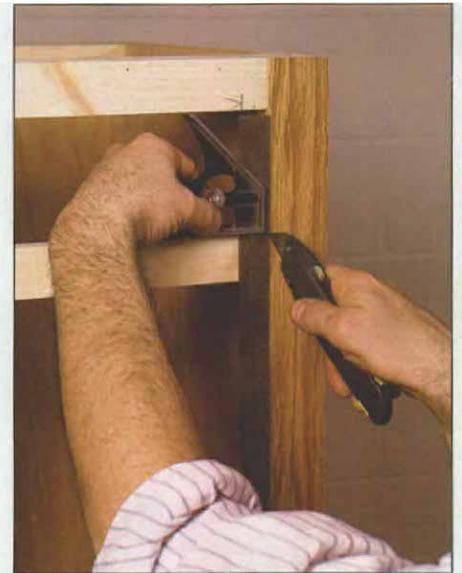
**Saving a tired cabinet.** Beginning at left: A water-based bonding agent is applied with a disposable foam brush (1) and allowed to dry for a few minutes; a strip of veneer is lined up with a reference mark on the rail of the cabinet, applied to the stile (2), then bonded with a roller; the veneer is cut where it overhangs the cabinet rails, then it's folded around the edge of the face frame (3); excess veneer on cabinet stiles is trimmed with a sharp utility knife and a square (4).



Step 2.



Step 3.



Step 4.

it's new—even when the doors are opened. Fortunately, the veneer I use is flexible enough to wrap around a corner, and I don't have to cut separate pieces for faces and inside edges. With that in mind, I cut the strips, allowing  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. extra in width and  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. extra in length (I trim that excess off later). I start with the vertical pieces of veneer, so after cutting the pieces I apply a coat of NF30 to the stiles, including the inside edges (step 1 above). For the moment I don't coat the rails with any adhesive.

Before I apply the veneer to the stiles, I make a reference mark on the top and bottom rails. These marks will show me how much veneer must overhang the face to fold around the corner and cover the inside edge of the stile. With the marks made and the veneer cut, I peel the backing paper from the top of the veneer strip and lightly stick the veneer to the stile so that the inside edge is aligned with the reference mark (step 2 above). Then, with one hand holding the piece taut and with the veneer lined up with the bottom reference mark, I press the top firmly into place. The rest is easy: I slowly peel the backing paper down and off the veneer, pressing the veneer to the face frame as I go.

To ensure a good bond, I apply pressure with a hand roller or a stiff putty knife that has been covered in cloth.

The veneer must be sliced horizontally at both top and bottom rails so that it can be folded around the inside edge of the face frame. Using the rail as a guide, I make these cuts with a sharp utility knife. Once the cuts have been made, the veneer is folded around the edge (step 3 above) and smoothed to ensure a good bond. Because a roller won't fit into corners, I smooth inside edges with the shank of a fine-point nail set. Any excess veneer inside the cabinet is trimmed with a utility knife and sanded smooth.

There is still some excess veneer extending onto the rails of the face frame—and that must be trimmed, too. Because no bonding agent has yet been applied to the rail, the veneer can be peeled off with relative ease. I use a square against the rail as a guide and make the cut with a utility knife (step 4 above). As a last step, I trim off any extra veneer that hangs below the bottom of the frame. The stiles should now be complete.

The rails are next—Horizontal surfaces are handled in much the same way: first the

bonding agent, then the veneer and, finally, a roller. I find the exact length of the rail veneer simply by holding up a strip of veneer between the two veneered stiles and marking the strip. I make the marks with a utility knife and then cut the veneer on a cutting board with a square. Once cut to exact length, the rails are applied in the same way—with one notable difference. Instead of marking the face frame to show the correct overhang for the inside edges, I apply pieces of masking tape to the stiles and mark the tape. That makes removing the marks a snap.

When rails and stiles are veneered, I sand outside corner edges carefully with 120-grit paper. Then I stain any bare wood and spray on a couple of coats of aerosol lacquer. Where the veneer wraps around the edges of the face frames, it can crack slightly. If that's the case, I use 150-grit paper to knock down any high spots, then stain and spray finish the area.

On larger surfaces, the pressure-sensitive veneer can be unwieldy. Here's a tip: those bulletin-board push pins can substitute for an extra pair of hands while you scribe a sheet of veneer to the wall.

—Herrick Kimball is a remodeling contractor in Moravia, N. Y.