

Cabinet Renewal – Refinishing a damaged cabinet

Level of Difficulty – 3

If you have kitchen or bathroom cabinets that in good shape structurally, but are cosmetically challenged, you can salvage your existing cabinets, while giving them a completely different look. This procedure will strip the existing finish down to bare wood, stain to a new color and finish them so they look like brand new cabinets.

Here's what you'll need:

- TSP (Trisodium Phosphate)
- Oil-based stain (preferably equal to or darker than original)
- Minwax wipe on poly (or other oil-based finish)
- Random orbital or palm sander w/ sanding discs
- Gloves
- Scotch-brite pad
- Buckets, scouring sponge, rags

Step by step instructions:

Oak cabinets have an open grain, so it will be difficult to remove the stain from the grain. It is easy to stain your cabinets equal or darker to the original stain color. If you elect to stain them lighter, stain that remains in the grain will still look dark, unless you use a paint stripper to remove it.

1. Remove the doors, drawers and all cabinet hardware (hinges, pulls, etc.)
2. Clean the doors and cabinet frame with TSP.
 - a. Follow the directions on the package for mixing instructions.
 - b. Clean doors, front and back, paying special attention to the edges and to the edges of any raised panels where grime tends to build up.
 - c. Clean using a scrubbing sponge, taking care not to scrub through the finish, disturbing the stain color.
3. Rinse the cabinet, doors and drawers with clean water. Dry with towels and allow to air dry before staining.
4. Sand your cabinets down to bare wood.

If you are working with veneered cabinet doors or veneered framing, be careful not to sand too deeply, burning through the veneer to the subsurface. Solid wood doors and framing are not a problem. Sometimes the end of the cabinet is made of plywood which has a thin veneer. Use caution.

- a. Use a random orbital sander or palm sander and course (80-100 grit) sandpaper to sand through the polyurethane and original stain, down to bare wood.
 - b. Use a sanding block or loose sandpaper to sand down to bare wood around details and around raised panels. Pay particular attention to the end grain of the wood at top and bottom of raised panels. Work to get down to bare wood color.
 - c. Once you're down to bare wood, use a finer sandpaper (120-150 grit) to prepare for staining.
 - d. Wipe away all sanding dust with a tack cloth, or with a rag dampened with mineral spirits.
5. Stain a color

Hint: Test your stain color and application time by applying it to the back side of one of your cabinet doors. Determine how much time is required to get your desired color/coverage and use that time on the front of the cabinet and doors.

- a. Use an oil-based stain.

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- b. Apply the stain with a rag or foam brush and allow it to sit the amount of time that you determined from your test.
 - c. Wipe all stain from your door, drawer or cabinet. Be sure to get it wiped out of small details and spots where stain can collect.
 - d. If you are happy with the appearance of the stain, allow it to dry completely before applying the finish coat (polyurethane).
 - e. If you find areas where the stain did not take, it is likely that there is some of the original finish remaining on the cabinet. Allow the stain to dry, sand the bad spot and touch up the stain.
6. Apply the finish coat
- a. Using a soft, absorbent cloth, apply a thin coat of minwax wipe-on poly.
 - b. It is critical that whether wiping or brushing a polyurethane finish that you apply it in only one direction and do not repeatedly go over the surface to level it. Wipe-on poly levels nicely, but only if it is still “wet” and can flow to level itself.
 - c. Moving quickly, apply the finish to the edges of the doors and edges of any raised panels first. Finish by applying the wipe-on poly to the flat surfaces.
 - d. Allow the finish to dry based on the manufacturer’s instructions.
 - e. Scuff sand your cabinets using the scotch-brite pad. The poly should powder up as you sand. Try to achieve a smooth feel before applying a final coat.
Be careful not to be too aggressive in sanding because you risk sanding through the stain that you just applied. Scotch-brite pads are preferred for beginners over sand paper.
 - f. Apply a second coat (and third if desired) of wipe-on poly, scuff sanding between each coat. Allow to dry per the manufacturer’s instructions, then reinstall the doors, drawers and hardware.