THE TOP 10 ROUTER TABLE BUYING MISTAKES

AND HOW TO AVOID THEM
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These mistakes and their solutions are not in any particular order of importance. However they do have a lot of information that you can digest before you make your purchasing decision. I am also including some really excellent articles that take you through features and buying decisions to help you make the right choice. I hope that by having a ton of information it will make you a better woodworker and a better purchaser in the future. We hope to win your business and help keep you covered in sawdust!

MISTAKE #1 – GETTING HUNG UP ON A BRAND

Some people come into the market with a specific brand name in mind to buy. Some have no idea what brands are good and which are not very good. Some swear to buy only made in America and some are just focused on price. Let me tell you this, I have owned or reviewed just about every brand of router table there is. The ones I have not owned, I have held in my hands at woodworking shows and poured over their details with others. I write a ton of reviews and work with manufactures in design and features. So I will say this, most people get hung up on brand.

I call this the Hyundai principle. When Hyundai first started making cars, they targeted the low price market and made some decent sales. After being in the marketplace for a while, they switched their strategy and started to target quality. It has been recorded by certain Toyota executives that Hyundai is the company that Toyota is the most nervous about competing with. And rightfully so since they started to target a market in one way and continued to develop their quality after entering the market.

However some people have trouble getting over the stigma of a newer brand that they or their friends associate with as an inferior brand. So instead of taking a chance, they stick with something they have heard of. So what is the best brand? Is it Rockler, Woodpecker, RTD, MLCS or Bench Dog? The answer is, “It depends on what you are looking for”. The features of the brand are what you should focus on instead of the make and model. Newer brands are being more and more innovative than established brands. Overlooking a brand because you have not heard of it steals your opportunity to save money or enjoy a new feature.

MISTAKE #2 – MIXING AND MATCHING

Most of us started with a piece of wood that we bolted a router to and we then started making sawdust. In essence, that is really all there is to it. The most important features are a good fence, a good flat insert and a decent table top work surface.

Guess what? All the brands mentioned above deliver that. So now the real question is, “How do you balance brand name with price and features?”

Just because a brand is established does not make it the best. Even the best brands sometimes have problems or get damaged in shipping. Newer brands sometimes over deliver in price and features in

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order to compete with established manufacturers. If I were to advise anyone today on what brand to buy, my advice would be to choose the brand that works for you. When I say this I mean by putting all the information that you read here together, you will figure out which one to buy. Getting the facts is the key and then incorporates them into your buying decision.

Most manufacturers are proprietary, so don’t think you can mix and match. Have you ever wondered why all router table inserts are different sizes? The tables sizes are all roughly the same but the inserts and lift sizes are all slightly different. The reason is so that you stick with one brand when you buy it since it will fit nothing else.

For example let’s say that you buy a Bench Dog router table and you’re happy with it. Later on down the line you decide you want to add a router table Lift to your table. You have to buy a Bench Dog lift for this table since a Woodpecker’s lift will not fit it. To change brands would mean you would have to lose the money you spent on the original table and most woodworkers do not want to do that. Manufacturers purposely do that so that you are more or less “all in” with a specific brand.

The same goes with Inserts. If you build a table around a certain size Phenolic insert and you want to change over to an aluminum one, you will have to use the same brand to fit that size. The same would also go for most fences, but there are always some exceptions. A router table depot fence may not line up exactly with the T-track on the Woodpecker’s table. You get the point.

MISTAKE #3 – BUYING TOO SMALL

If you are new to router tables, you may have trouble with this tip but it is still good to understand it when choosing what table to buy. The plain and simple fact is, you are going to love adding a router table into your shop. I have never heard of anyone saying that they did not like it. In fact, there is a reason that it’s the most popular shop tool; it opens up a whole new world.

It is tempting to buy the inexpensive beginners’ router table to see “if you will like it”. The price is good on this table, but you can quickly out grow it. So if you can consider the fact that you will most likely love the table, you may want to consider spending a little more and getting a table that you can grow with. Some smaller tables have smaller or “not industry standard” parts which will keep you from using the included accessories such as miter gauges and fences with another table. Just knowing that will help you make a better decision in the long run. If you need a bench top sized table, look for features that are “industry standard” size, such as the miter track, t-track and insert. Those three items are commonly scaled down on inexpensive tables.

MISTAKE #4 – BEING WARY OF DRILLING YOUR INSERT

I could go on and on here, so I will try and make it as short as possible. If you are considering buying a table that does NOT have predrilled holes for your router, rest easy, it is not that hard. I hear a lot of people get concerned over doing that. There are video directions and text directions on the Router Table Depot site that helps you.

You are basically using the base plate of your router as a guide. If you buy a pre-drilled model, then you will not have that decision. The pre-drilled models cost about $20 extra. What is better Phenolic or Aluminum? Remember, it depends on what you are doing.

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If you are insisting on using a 3HP router in your table, buy the aluminum model. For some reason people have to have the biggest and baddest router they can find and they want to hang it on the most inexpensive router plate they can find. Then they are upset when it eventually bows and displaces the flatness of the insert.

The other significant problem is woodworkers who store their router installed on the router plate in the table. Gravity is a powerful force of nature and will eventually pull the flattest insert out of level. All inserts are priced basically the same so as to be competitive. The nicer, heavier duty aluminum inserts (Woodpecker) tend to run around $90.

**MISTAKE #5 – PARALYSIS OF ANALYSIS**

Most people want to be able to use after market accessories for their router tables. There are a ton of really good and ingenious items to choose from. Most fall into two categories. The ones that fit in the Miter Track and ones that fit into T-track.

I often get asked if a “Brand A” miter gauge will fit into a “Brand B” miter track. The answer is, “Usually yes”, based on what is called *industry standard*. The Miter track is cut to accept most ¾” *industry standard* accessories. When something does not fit, it is usually the difference between tolerances of what *industry standard* is. Items made in different factories may vary from tooling or acceptable standards. This means, they want it to fit, but sometimes it might be a hair off.

Tooling is usually the culprit here and it’s hard to control. This is where a little ingenuity comes into play. Sometimes you can coax things to fit with a little light sanding or a little lubricant. Also a lot of times Miter Track may be tight due to climate changes in MDF tables. Let your new table adjust to your shops climate before getting radical. When it comes to T-track, most ¼” 20 Hex Head Bolts fit inside the track. Sometimes you can go up to 6mm bolts as well. Anything larger than that rarely fit. Again that *industry standard* mystery sometimes has a factor in bolt head sizes.

**MISTAKE #6 – NOT PLANNING FOR DUST COLLECTION**

I answer a fair amount of calls about people not being able to use their shop vacuums directly into the dust port of their new cool fence. Most of the time this will not work and it is usually about economics. It would be great if you could just go down to your local Home Depot or Lowes and buy the adaptor that you need and get back to woodworking. However that is not likely the case.

There are a lot of dust port sizes out there as well as a large amount of dust collection and shop vac hose sizes. Getting one size to fit all is almost impossible and the manufactures don’t really want to accommodate that anyway. You’re better off buying a dust port adaptor or universal adaptor and custom cut it to fit with your own system.

Sometimes just adding the $6 or $8 to the cost is easier than trying to figure out why they did that. One word of dust collection wisdom, if I may; if you do not use a dust collector now, you most likely will in the future. Router tables make a huge mess and dust collection at the fence is an amazing way to cut down on your clean up job. This is one of those features that you will be glad later that you got it today.
MISTAKE #7 – IGNORING THE BENCH TOP MODELS

Many woodworkers that add router tables to the shop run right by the smaller bench top models on their way to a full size table. The fact is, there are some really excellent sized smaller tables that have all the same features as their larger counterparts. You can save substantial money if you invest in a bench top sized model and attach it to your own stand thus making a free standing unit.

Most bench top models can do all the same type of projects since they usually have the same style fence and inserts. Currently there are even a couple of models that can accept a lift. If you are worried or concerned about table size, you can always create or make an in-feed or out-feed extension that can be used on your router table. This will give you all the work space of a larger table and the flexibility of a smaller table for a smaller budget.

MISTAKE #8 – MISINTERPRETING PRODUCT REVIEWS

I read a lot of product reviews and I see a trend occurring with a lot of them. Most people do not really review the product; instead they rate their service experience with the vendor or how their product was shipped.

Let's face it, if you buy ten different things from the same vendor, you will most likely not have a consistent experience. Router tables have a lot of parts that are all susceptible to not being machined properly or having a small blemish. The majority of the vendors want you to be happy since they want to keep you as a customer. A onetime customer is not the goal in today's competitive landscape. So "screwing" the customer (for lack of a better word, sorry) is a really dumb idea.

The best product reviews mention which router they are using with the table and any unforeseen problems using the table. Assembly notes are always good too, as well as the quality of the parts of the table itself. There will always be the guy who does not read the directions or does really dumb things with his table and then wants to vent to the world at how disappointed he is.

Another good point is to notice if the product is supported well or not. Sometimes items get damaged in shipping and parts can be easily replaced. Most will let you know in the review if the vendor was helpful or not. Another good shopping point to keep in mind is how many people wrote the review after they took the product out of the box verses reviews written after they used it for a while.

MISTAKE #9 – BUYING THE WHOLE STORE

Another common mistake is that people immediately want to buy everything under the sun to go with their new table. While I applaud that from a sales point of view, it’s not always the best thing for you, the woodworker.

If you never had a router table before, buy one and start working with it for a while. Watch some video (you tube is great for this) and start hanging around in forums to ask some questions. You will have a much better feel of buying all the extra fun stuff after you start using it. You may find you really do not need that coping sled or box joint jig until you hone up your skills a bit. It is tempting to get all the
goodies at the same time, but you may end up with buyers’ remorse. Slow and sure is better than blowing your whole budget at once. If you buy anything extra I would recommend getting a nice set of router bits. Over the lifetime of using the table you will use and learn a lot of router bits. Its probably the one accessory that you will need for sure.

MISTAKE #10 – SKIPPING THE DIRECTIONS

Generally, men are not predisposed to do this for some reason. However you would most likely laugh at how many people don’t read the directions for assembly. Then they have a problem and immediately pick up the phone to get it straightened out. Frustration kicks in when they get an operator who really does not know the ins and outs of the machine and they have to wait for a specialist to call them back. Some sites even put the directions and video online to help you.

Most likely all the help you need is available if you use it. Router Table Depot keeps copies of all the directions for all of their products online for reference. Let’s face it, sometimes those documents don’t make it into the box for some reason. I am amazed at how many calls I get asking if this will fit a Bosch router when it plainly says, “Fits Bosch routers” on the site and instructions…..have a heart. Also please keep in mind there is a lot of information out there about using the tool in regards to directions. Forums and blogs can give you some really great ideas.
OUR MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. Can you buy large tops with no miter slots?
A. Yes, you can. You may have to look harder or ask for some custom work. Having the slot is not all bad; you may advance later down the line.

Q. What’s better, aluminum or acrylic inserts?
A. Some people claim aluminum does not flex at all. I have never seen an acrylic insert flex, so it would come down to user preference. There is a price difference.

Q. What are the larger routers used for?
A. Larger routers are generally used for heavier duty applications. However I can get everything done that needs to be done with my 2 HP router. The key is not to take large chunks at a time, instead take small passes with small amounts. If you do this, larger routers do not have the advantage. Larger routers are good if you need features that larger routers have such as speed control, which you would want if you use large diameter router bits.

Q. How heavy is a standard 1 ½" thick large top?
A. The top weighs about 48 pounds

Q. What kind of lamination should I look for?
A. You want a high quality horizontal work surface laminate. Melamine is not what you’re looking for. It qualifies as a good vertical work surface. (Shelf sides, etc.)

Q. Who makes the best tops?
A. Look for a manufacture that you feel comfortable with their reputation. Just because the popular catalog merchants carry all the different brands, does not make them the best. They are merely the best marketed tables. You can find plenty of manufactures on the internet and even Ebay. Look for someone that you can answer your questions. If that person is a salesman, then the chances are they are not good woodworkers. If you buy from a woodworker, you have the best chance that the features were well thought out.
RECOMMENDED ROUTER TABLES AND ACCESSORIES

Router Table Depot Tables

- Large Deluxe Router Table, RM405
- Woodpeckers Premium Router Table Package
- Bench Dog Pro Lift
- Woodpeckers PRL-V2-350 Lift
- Universal Dust Collection Adaptor
- Dust Adapter 1" to 4"

Rockler Tables

- Router Table Package #1 Plus Rockler Stand
- Portable Router Table
- Rockler HPL Table Complete Setup with FX Plus Lift - Special Offer
- Router Table Package #2, Plus Bench Dog Steel Stand

Tool King

- Kreg PRS2000 Precision Bench Top Router Table
- Incra RT COMBO#4 Stand Alone 37-Inch Wonder Fence System with Router Table and Stand
NEW TO ROUTER TABLES?

Are you new to woodworking? Is this your first router table?

If your answer is yes to either question, then this article is for you.
Here is an easy seven-step list to help you through the router table buying decision process. We try to put them in order so that in a short amount of time you can figure out what to do.

STEP 1: Do your homework, build or buy your router table?

*Why you want to build:*
- You get a custom router table
- You have a unique space to fill
- You want to brag about it
- Merchandise available does not fit your ideas
- You like to build

*Why you would buy:*
- You have no time to build, or are in a hurry
- You don’t know how to build a quality table
- You are new to woodworking

STEP 2: Know the features you are looking for.

Read the article “How Much Router Table Should I Buy?” below for more info.

STEP 3: Benchtop or Full Size Router Table?

- If space is a big issue, and you can store a small table under a bench or out of the way.....Choose Benchtop.
- if space is not an issue, and you want a free standing unit.......choose a Full Size Router Table

[Click here to take a look at our Benchtop Comparison Article]

STEP 4: Make a Budget

*Sounds logical, doesn’t it? Here are some average price ranges:*

- Small Benchtops – $69 to $129
- Larger Benchtops – $89 to $169
- Full Size – $129 to $300
- Advanced – $350 and up

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STEP 5:  More Good Reading:

Practical Purchasing
Building Tops

STEP 6:  Choose your router table.

Now you know what to look for! Before you go, make sure you read #7 below.

Click Here to Browse Our Range of Benchtops

Click Here to Take a Look at Our Full Size Router Tables

Click Here for Parts and Accessories

STEP 7:  You're not alone!

We are not just going to throw you in the sawdust bin after you buy. Feel free to ask questions, make comments and check our FAQ's (frequently asked questions) often. We are woodworkers too.
INTRO

Buying a router table can be a confusing experience. Which one do you need? Which size, how many features do I really need? What’s the difference between tables? In this article we will discuss features to look for and tables you can eliminate in your search. Keep in mind, most people think they should have more table than they really need. This is usually the same case for routers. So what are the features out there? Let’s take a look.

Router tables come in many basic packages. You usually can find router tables in two basic sizes, benchtop and full size. Benchtop tables are usually purchased because the user has a lack of shop space. Benchtop tables can be stored under workbenches and still handle a variety of chores.

Most router tables are made of metal or aluminum but they are a few wooden ones as well. Let’s take tables in general and discuss features and break them down into their basic components and then talk about the pros and cons of each.

TABLE TOPS

Table tops are made of metal, wood, MDF, plastic and Phenolic.

Aluminum: Generally, the thinnest tables are aluminum tables. The increased strength of the aluminum lends itself to being thinner and thus lighter.

MDF: You can find MDF tables in a variety of thickness. ³⁄₄", 1 1/8", 1 ½", and 2 ³⁄₄" thick tables are the standard thickness of store bought MDF. I MDF is a great material because it is very flat. The 1 1/8" size seems like a weird size, but MDF manufacturers make that size standard for the cabinet and countertop industry. If the MDF is glued together (two 3/4" pieces), the stability is increased due to the gluing process. MDF is small particles glued together and form into perfect tops. Thicker MDF decreases the chance of any flexing or warping of your top. The one draw back is that it can be heavy. But with heaviness comes stability. Ask anyone that has a heavy cast iron table saw if they love the stability that comes with it and you may not leave his shop for a while until he tells you all the great things about it. 2" thick models are even thicker and are just as stable as their 1 1/2" inch counterparts. Again, more weight.

Lamination: If you buy an MDF table, check whether both sides of the table are laminated. Lamination prevents flexing of the top and throwing it out of true flatness. Depending on the thickness of the table and the climate you live in, lamination may or may not be necessary. 1 1/8th is a pretty thick top, so whether you need lamination really depends on the climate you live in. If you live in seasonal areas such as the Midwest, I would recommend having both.
sides laminated. Also if your hanging a big heavy 3 HP router on the top, you might consider lamination on the bottom. Again it depends on what you’re doing. 1 ½” thick tops are very heavy duty. The need for lamination on the bottom is nonexistent since these tops are so thick.

**Edge Treatments:** Worth mentioning is the way that all three of these tops are edge treated. Most manufactures add a edge treatment with a T-molding. This is a rubber edge that is glued around the edge of the table. The manufacturing process of this treatment is simple thus making it widely available. T-molding is installed by a shallow rabbit routed around the perimeter of the top. Then the molding has a small tenon that fits into the rabbit or groove routed into the table. Some people argue that this weakens the top. It really depends on the thickness of the top. On thinner tops I can see how the argument has more value. On thicker tops, the argument does not go far. By far, the best looking edge treatment is real hardwood. Not only does it look excellent but it adds more rigidity to the top itself. Having a nice thick 3/4” of hardwood around the edge is also handy if you ever want to attach something to your table.

**INSERTS**

Not all tables have inserts. Inserts are made so that you can attach the router to them and then install the insert into the top. This is so that bit changing is made simple. When you want to change a router bit you pull the router and insert together up through the table and change your bit. If you table has no insert you have to attach the router directly to the top, thus making bit changes more difficult since you would have to remove the router from the top to change the bit. Insert can be made of Phenolic, acrylic or aluminum.

**MITER SLOTS**

Miter slots are an advanced feature. They can be used for a variety of things. The most common use is for a coping sled to slide along the miter slot. The coping sled gives the user a very stable platform in which to cut stile and rail joinery for raised cabinet doors. Cutting these cuts without a coping sled or miter slot is very difficult and somewhat dangerous. You can also use a miter gauge to fit in the miter slot. There are also several feather boards that fit in standard miter slots.

**T-TRACK**

T-track is very popular on router tops because it gives a way for router fences to be held down and adjusted on the router top. They are usually milled into the top and are flush to the top. T-track can also be installed on the fence front face to be used in conjunction with stop blocks.
DUST PORTS

**Dust ports** on router tables are very handy to keep the table clean while working. You can usually find them in 3 basic sizes: Shop Vac, 2 1/2" and 4". Shop Vac sizes obviously are designed to fit Shop Vac attachments. These are not popular and you will not find many of these. The standard dust hoses are 2 1/2" and 4". Ports that fit these two sizes fit standard dust collection systems. Once you have dust collection attached and operational on your system, you will wonder how you lived without it. It is a definite advantage.

STARTING PINS

**Starting pins** fit in router inserts and are generally used to help start wood onto the bit when free hand profiling on a table.

FENCES

There are two schools of design on fences, fixed one-piece fences and split fences. Each have their advantages and every woodworker has his own preference.

**Fixed Fence:** *Fixed fences* are generally used with bits that have no profile bearing on the top. Using the fixed fence allows the user to adjust the exact distance from the bit to the fence. A good example of this is if you were going to rout a groove down the middle of a board. You would want to have the groove in an exact location. Fixed fences are also good with profile bearing bits even though the fence is not integral to the operation. The fence holds the dust port in the ideal position to collect dust. The profile bit determines the distance of the wood to the edge of the bit. A good example of this would be a roundover bit which cuts a round over on the edge of a board.

**Split Fences:** *Split fences* are generally used when you have larger bits. The ability to move the fence to accommodate the size of the bit allows you to have the fence right up to the edge of the bit. If you are making raised panel doors, you will be using different size bits thus needing the flexibility of and adjustable fence. You can use the split fence with profile bits as well. You can now use your router table as a jointer. This is now growing in popularity, but it is limited. If you were interested in this application, you would need a split fence UNLESS you had a fixed fence that was solely dedicated to being a jointer fence. This would mean you would need two fixed fences which is fine.

**Stop Blocks:** Stop blocks are handy to have if you are routing material that has to stop at a certain point. I find this feature nice but not necessarily essential since I can clamp any piece of scrap wood to a fence and thus create a cheap replica that functions the same.
TABLE SIZES

So now you have all these features lets look at some of the common sizes out there: benchtop, larger benchtop, full size, advanced.

**Benchtops:** Benchtops are generally sized from 12" deep to 20 and 17 wide to 24" wide. Keep in mind that not all benchtops have a standard sized miter track if at all. Look for benchtops that have inserts installed and a nice fence. Also look for benchtops that have at least 12 inches from the bottom on the insert to the table. This allows for greater flexibility of router sizes. You generally don"t use big 3 HP routers on benchtop tables.

**Larger Benchtops:** Usually measure 15 x 24 and have more features. They are more heavy duty to standard benchtop sizes. They can have the upgraded miter slots and t-tracks or be plain. These heavier tables can accommodate any size router.

**Full Size:** These generally measure 24" by 32" The main advantage of the size is being able to router longer material with more surface availability. Shorter tables might require making some sort of support on the outflow of the table. Full size tables also generally have more features. You can find both types of fences on full size tops. Full size tops usually sit on a wood or metal base. Look for a good stable heavy design.

**Advanced:** These are usually tops that are designed with special purposes. You can find horizontal tables, pin router tables, and sliding tables. Sliding tables are a unique table that offers a very clever sliding miter much like a sliding table on a table saw. These tables eliminate the need for a coping sled and are top quality if your thinking about cutting a lot of stiles and rails. All these tables fetch higher prices but are also jam packed with features and dust collection. Most but not all, are made of aluminum but are larger and incorporate unique features.
"Excellent storefront and great customer service. This is a great addition to our shop, ....Bob C. ",

"This table was better a quality than I imagined... Conrad R. ",

"Great product, my husband is well pleased, fast shipping!...Bob L",

"I called them up and got an answer to my question. Usually it's an operator, I am sure this guy had sawdust on him. Patrick S. ",

"I will definitely buy from here again, my experience was wonderful. Now if I could just get my husband out of the garage. Annie B. ",

"No surprises when shopping at Router Table Depot, except the guy knew what he was talking about. Norm J. ",

"I wanted to buy the biggest baddest router and router table on the market. Just to make sure that I was on the right track I called the support person. He actually steered me to the right table for the project I would be building, that saved me a $100. Pete S. ",

"Excellent table, if you're looking for a router table, this is where to shop......Jim C. ",

"Over the top, above and beyond amazing service! No kidding! Thanks so much!!!!....Keith S. ",

"Awesome Quality !!!!!!! Router Table Fence. thanks for your fast shipment.....Vinny Z. ",

"Like buying from your uncle, sweet experience, wish I lived next door....John H. ",

"This site is exactly what I was looking for. Because there is so much free information, I don't feel rushed to buy, I can do my research.....Frank H. ",

"It's about time there was a site and service like this, I appreciate the ability to contact them and actually get an answer....Alfred G. ",

"Imagine the fact that if you need to know something specific, they will actually go out in the shop and measure it for you....John P"

"Try going to Home Depot and asking a question, all I got was a blank stare since the kid only works for minimum wage and does not know a thing about router tables. This is the place for me!.....Jimmy Z"

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