Episode Book

EPISODE #5781

Measuring Keyhole Spacing: Why the Tool You Want Doesn't Exist

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SYNOPSIS

Daniel wants a measuring tool between a caliper and a laser range finder — something like a slider over a ruler that reports millimeters, for mounting plug strips in a rental with almost no outlets. The problem: he's describing two tools and trying to buy one. Digital tape measures are structurally wrong for point-to-point spans between keyhole slots, lasers can't see inside a slot and are too coarse at 1.5mm, and the closest digital slider on the market is a tape. The real find? A $27 self-inking keyhole marker that skips measurement entirely — you use the object as its own template.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Herman, I want you to picture the scene. Daniel, leaning over a countertop, one thumb clamped over the keyhole slot on the back of a plug strip, the other hand holding a steel ruler at an angle that makes the numbers swim.



Herman

And the screw holes that he's trying to match are spaced to a logic he describes as entirely their own.



Corn

His new rental has almost no outlets, so he's mounting plug strips all over the place, and every single one starts with this. Measuring the keyhole spacing. He says you need to be accurate to the millimeter or the screws don't line up. He's tried to find a digital tape measure that gives a readout, says they're oddly thin on the market, and he suspects the tape form factor isn't right anyway. What he wants is something like a slider over a ruler. You position it exactly, it reports the distance in millimeters. He's also got screw widths, computer case dimensions, tabletop edges, all of it under thirty centimeters, all of it needing to be spot on.



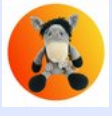
Herman

And then the actual question. Is there a measuring tool between a caliper and a range finder for this kind of work.



Corn

And here's what I noticed reading it. He's asking for the right category and the wrong category at the same time.



Herman

Say more.



Corn

The slider-over-a-ruler thing he's imagining, that's a marking gauge. That's a real tool. The digital readout he wants, that's a caliper. He's describing two tools and trying to buy one.



Herman

Which is exactly why he can't find it. Let me start with why the tape form factor is structurally wrong for this job, because that's the part that explains everything else. A tape measures along a surface. You hook the end on an edge, you pull, the blade runs flat against whatever you're measuring. Keyhole spacing isn't along a surface. It's a point-to-point internal span between two holes on the back of an object. You need something that touches both points at once. Jaws, or a sliding reference. A blade physically cannot do it, because there's nothing for it to lie against.



Corn

So the reason no one's built the digital tape Daniel wants is that the shape is wrong for the measurement, not that the industry hasn't gotten around to it.



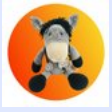
Herman

Right. And the market data backs that up. Digital tape measures are a real category, three point four billion dollars in 2024, forecast to eight point one billion by 2034, about eight point nine percent a year. That's not a dead category. But the restraints listed in the market reports are telling, high price points limiting adoption, and resistance from traditional users. What's actually selling in that category is laser hybrids. Room-scale stuff.



Corn

Give me the long-distance case, because I want to be fair to the tool before we bury it.



Herman

A contractor review from August ran a timed test. Whole-room flooring measurement, one hundred and forty-five seconds with a traditional twenty-five foot tape. Thirteen seconds with a digital one. That's a real win. Standing alone in an empty room, no second person to hold the end, the digital tape solves that. But the reviewer's own verdict on the short end is blunt. He spent two years calling digital tapes a gimmick. His words, most of them are junk. Batteries die, screens go dim, numbers drift. And a laser will never replace a blade. You cannot mark a two by four with a laser.



Corn

That's a good line.



Herman

It's a true line, and he's a licensed contractor, so it's not a hobbyist grudge. His framing for why digital tapes exist at all is the key. A tape measure is a two-person tool. Most of the time there is only you. That's the entire pitch. It's a solo long-distance tool.



Corn

Which is the opposite of Daniel's problem. He's not alone in a big room. He's alone at a countertop with an object that's thirty centimeters long and two holes in it.



Herman

Long and solo versus short and precise. Different problems, different tools.



Corn

What about the laser, then. Because I think a lot of people, when they hear digital measuring, that's what they picture. Point it at the wall, get a number.



Herman

And it's the wrong tool for this range by an order of magnitude. Here's the accuracy spread across the premium models. Leica Disto S910, up to three hundred meters, accuracy between one and two millimeters. Disto D2, a hundred meters, plus or minus one point five millimeters. DeWalt's fifty-meter unit, plus or minus one point five millimeters per ten meters. Ozito's twenty-five meter, plus or minus three millimeters. Best case, you're at one and a half millimeters of error.



Corn

And Daniel needs sub-millimeter.



Herman

He needs better than that, yes, and this is the point people miss. One and a half millimeters doesn't sound like much. But when your two holes are a hundred and thirty-six millimeters apart and you're off by one and a half on each end, the screws fight each other on the way in, and the plug strip sits crooked on the wall and you get to look at it every day.



Corn

So the laser's not just coarse. It's coarse in a way that's specifically annoying for this job.



Herman

And it can't do the measurement at all. A laser tells you the distance to a surface. It has no idea where the far edge of a keyhole slot is. You cannot point a laser at the inside span between two holes and get a number out. There's nothing to bounce off. It's a reach tool. It's for the other end of the job entirely.



Corn

Say the Tool Hub line. I know you've got one.



Herman

Digital caliper versus tape measure comes down to a simple choice. Pick precision or pick reach.



Corn

There it is. So reach is solved. Precision is the caliper.



Herman

Precision is the caliper, and this is where I'd point Daniel first for the general case, the screw widths, the case dimensions, the tabletop edge. A digital caliper reads to zero point zero one millimeters. That's five ten-thousandths of an inch. Typical accuracy on a decent one is plus or minus zero point zero two to zero point zero five millimeters. You're talking



Herman (continued)

about a tool that is thirty to a hundred and fifty times finer than the best laser measurement.



Corn

Ranges?



Herman

Common ones are one hundred and fifty millimeters, two hundred, three hundred. So the hundred and fifty covers most of what Daniel's doing, the three hundred covers all of it with room to spare. And it does four measurements in one object. External with the big jaws, internal with the small jaws at the top, depth with the rod that comes out the end, and step. That's four of Daniel's five tasks handled by one pocket-sized thing.



Corn

And on the stainless steel caliper objection he raises, carrying the hard jagged thing around.



Herman

He's right that it's not a pocket tool for a rental walkthrough. But the modern ones aren't the machinist's block of stainless he's picturing. There are rechargeable IP54 models now, sealed against dust and splashes, still zero point zero one millimeter resolution, still plus or minus twenty microns. You can leave one in a drawer with the screwdriver and the bubble level and it'll be fine.



Corn

Hmm. Okay. Now the slider. Because I think that's the most interesting part of what Daniel wrote, and I want to be fair to it, because it's not a stupid idea. He's basically describing a marking gauge.



Herman

He is, and it exists, and it costs less than the caliper. The Kreg Multi-Mark. Sixteen ninety-nine. Zero to six inches, zero to fifteen centimeters. Sliding ruler with three scale configurations, imperial and metric. There's a reveal gauge on it, three sixteenths of an inch, so five millimeters, which is exactly the kind of offset you want for laying out hardware. There's a built-in torpedo level.



Corn

So on the specific task of laying out a screw position at a fixed distance from an edge, it's more or less the thing Daniel invented in his head.



Herman

That's what I find funny about this prompt. He's describing a product that has existed for years, at seventeen dollars, and he's been doing the thumb-over-the-hole method instead.



Corn

He didn't say he invented it. He said he wants it to exist.



Herman

Fair. Fair. And there's a real gap in it, which is the readout. The Multi-Mark is analog. You read the scale. Which for Daniel's stated requirement, precise to the millimeter in a readout, is not quite it.



Corn

So the closest thing to the digital slider exists, but as a tape. You mentioned the Reekon.



Herman

Reekon T1M Utility, a hundred and thirty-four ninety-nine. Its blade reads to a thirty-second of an inch on a screen instead of hash marks, it remembers measurements, the blades swap out, sixteen and twenty-five foot options, USB-C, a hundred and fifty hours. It's the closest thing on the market to the digital readout Daniel's asking for. And



Herman (continued)

it's a tape. Wrong shape for keyhole spacing, and the resolution, a thirty-second of an inch, is about zero point eight millimeters. Eight times coarser than the job.



Corn

Two-thirds of the price of the caliper plus the Multi-Mark, and it's the wrong tool for both his problems.



Herman

It's a beautiful piece of kit for a different job. That's the honest version. And here's the negative finding, which I think Daniel will appreciate because it vindicates his search. There is no standalone digital measuring tape designed for short, precise, sub-thirty-centimeter work. I couldn't find one. The category he's describing, the digital slider that reports millimeters, does not exist as a distinct product. The two closest analogues are the Multi-Mark, which is analog, and the Reekon, which is a tape. He's got a real gap.



Corn

Hold on. That's three times now you've said some version of the tool he wants doesn't exist. Let me put the question to you plainly. Is that because nobody's thought of it, or because nobody needs it?



Herman

...I think it's because the job has a better answer that isn't a measuring tool at all.



Corn

And there it is.



Herman

Can I make the case?



Corn

You've been waiting to make the case since the top of the show.



Herman

The Keyhole Companion. Twenty-six ninety-five from the manufacturer, and here's what it does. You snap the tools into the keyhole slots on the back of the object. You press the object against the wall. A self-inking pad transfers the exact fastener locations onto the wall. Then you drill where the marks are. You never measure anything.



Corn

Say the manufacturer's line.



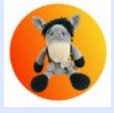
Herman

Use your object as your template. No measurements are needed to determine the fastener locations.



Corn

That's the whole episode, isn't it.



Herman

It's most of it. It handles molded-in keyholes, cut-in keyholes, add-on keyhole hardware. It takes thicknesses from thin metal up to three eighths of an inch, which covers plug strips and surge suppressors and a UPS. The ink is rated for over a thousand marks and more than five years of life. It marks in black and white. It cleans off with a Magic Eraser or denatured alcohol. Metal internals, one year warranty. Four and a half stars from two thousand eight hundred and nineteen reviews.



Corn

And it lists power strips.



Herman

It lists power strips, surge suppressors, and UPS units as target use cases. Daniel is the exact customer this thing was designed for.



Corn

Which means the correct answer to "what tool do I use to measure keyhole spacing" might be "you're asking the wrong question."



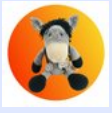
Herman

That's my take. The best solution to a measurement problem is sometimes to eliminate the measurement. And it's not even the only product in the space. There's a cheaper one, the SIMPLE MOUNT Keyhole Hanging Kit, about five dollars less at Home Depot. It uses wall marking pins that insert into the keyholes and prick the wall where the screws go. Rated to a hundred pounds, and it includes a bubble level, which matters more than people think for two-keyhole items.



Corn

Because the object can be off-level even when the holes are the right distance apart.



Herman

Keyhole mounts are frequently not level from the factory. So the level is doing real work, and the marking pins skip the ink entirely, which some people prefer.



Corn

So to bring it back to what Daniel actually asked. What's between a caliper and a range finder.



Herman

There's a two-tool answer and there's an honest gap. The two-tool answer is a digital caliper, one hundred and fifty millimeter, for point-to-point precision on everything that isn't a keyhole. And a purpose-built template tool for the keyhole case, because the keyhole case has a tool that skips measurement, and using a caliper to measure keyhole spacing is like using a caliper to find a stud. It works. It's also doing it the hard way.



Corn

And the gap is the digital slider Daniel invented.



Herman

The gap is real. Nothing occupies the space between a seventeen-dollar analog marking gauge and a hundred-and-thirty-five-dollar digital tape. The market went to calipers for precision and lasers for reach and left that middle empty.



Corn

Alright. Two last things before we get to Hilbert. One, what about the freehand thumb thing specifically. Because I think there's a diagnosis in Daniel's prompt he's being too hard on himself about.



Herman

He's not bad at measuring. He's doing a two-handed job with one hand while leaning over a countertop, which stacks three errors on top of each other. The lean puts the ruler at an angle, so now you're reading a foreshortened scale. The thumb is covering the hole, so you're approximating the thing you're trying to measure precisely. And you've got no third hand to hold the object steady while you mark. Every tool we've talked about beats it for one of those reasons. The caliper is one-handed because the jaws bite the part. The template tool is one-handed because the object holds itself against the wall. The ruler and the thumb is the only method on the list that needs three hands.



Corn

So it's a method problem wearing a tool problem's clothes.



Herman

Which is also why the angle idea doesn't work, and I want to say this because Daniel half-raised it. Reading a scale at an angle is its own error source. The caliper doesn't have that problem because the jaws make the position for you and the number is on a screen facing you.



Corn

What's the second thing.



Herman

I'd add one thing to the buy list that he didn't ask for. Masking tape. A roll of it. If you're going to mark a wall for a keyhole mount by hand anyway, tape the strip of masking tape to the wall, mark on the tape, and drill through the mark. It's the cheapest way to hold a layout still. If the mark's wrong you peel the tape off and the wall is clean.



Corn

Twelve shekels of validation.



Hilbert

The Companion's ink pad doesn't do textured walls.



Hilbert

I hung pictures for money for about three years. Frames, mostly. Some shelving. Keyhole mounts are keyhole mounts whether it's a picture frame or a plug strip, so I measured hundreds of them. You learn pretty fast that the spacing isn't standard and nobody publishes it. Not the frame shop, not the plug strip box. Because they all expect you to use the object itself as the template. That part of the research is right. The thing it doesn't tell you is the pad failing. On a smooth wall the ink transfers beautifully. First mark, every mark. On a heavy texture, the orange-peel stuff, the thick roller texture, the pad doesn't make full contact, and you get a partial mark or nothing at all, and you're standing there with a plug strip in one hand and a faint smudge on the wall wondering whether that's the hole or a shadow. So test on a hidden spot first. Behind where the strip's going to sit, down low, anywhere you won't see. It takes ten seconds and it saves you drilling three holes in the wrong place.



Corn

That's a real caveat, and it's not on the listing.



Hilbert

It's not on the listing. And if your walls are really bad, the marking pins in the cheaper kit are actually more reliable, because a pin doesn't care about texture. It presses a dimple in. The other thing, and this one saved me more times than I can count. The bubble level matters more than people think. The keyhole slots on a lot of these products are not level from the factory. A surge suppressor, a power strip, whatever it is, the slots can be a millimeter or two off from each other, and if you trust the manufacturing and hang it by the holes, the whole thing hangs crooked and you tighten the screws and it stays crooked. I had a batch of surge suppressors once, a client's home office, thirty-some of them, and I spent an entire afternoon with a ruler measuring the keyhole spacing on every single one, writing the numbers down on a pad, checking them against each other, because the first two I hung sat crooked and I thought I was doing something wrong. I was not doing anything wrong. They were off. And the whole time the client had a Keyhole Companion sitting in a drawer in the room I was working in. In the drawer. I found it when I went looking for a pencil. The afternoon was entirely wasted and it was wasted by me, nobody made me do it. If I'd used the object as the template, the crookedness would have transferred into the marks and the strip would have hung straight anyway, because you hang it on the holes it actually has, not the holes you think it should have.



Corn

The tool doesn't just save the measuring. It absorbs the manufacturing error too.



Hilbert

It absorbs it. You're marking where the holes are, not where they ought to be. And for two-hole items, level the object first, then press. Not the other way around. That's the sequence. One more thing. Testing on a hidden spot, if you're going to skip that, at least keep the denatured alcohol on the shelf before you make the first mark. Not after. Before.



Herman

The failure mode of a mark is that it's invisible until it isn't and then it's very visible.



Hilbert

Yeah.



Corn

Here's what I keep circling back to. Daniel asked for a tool that sits between a caliper and a range finder, and the honest answer is that the tool he wants doesn't exist, the tool he needs does, and the tool that solves his actual problem isn't a measuring tool at all.



Herman

There's a real gap in the market, though, and I want to leave that open rather than close it. The space between a seventeen-dollar analog marking gauge and a hundred-and-thirty-five-dollar digital tape is empty. The market went to calipers for precision and lasers for reach, and nobody built the touch-based digital short-range thing. The digital tape category is growing, three point four billion to eight point one billion, but the growth is all in the long-distance laser hybrids. The precision short-range niche is just not where the money's pointing.



Corn

Which is the argument for it being a small market rather than an underserved one.



Herman

It's both. A hundred and fifty millimeters of travel with a digital readout and jaws. It's a caliper. The caliper is the answer. That's why the product doesn't exist. The caliper already occupies the space and does it for twenty-five dollars.



Corn

If you've found a tool that solves the keyhole problem better than the Companion, or a digital short-range measuring tool we missed, write in. We'd like to know.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for keeping the levels honest and the stories exactly as long as they need to be.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a tool that's earned its place in your drawer, tell us about it. Email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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