

Because "Combo" machines have such a greater cutting capability, are sturdier, are easier to work with when handling full size sheets, we'll go with the Combo machine over the Mat Cutter.

Of the "Combo" machines, which one do you buy? There are basically two brands to choose from. Cost for similar models may appear close but looking at what is included with the package shows about a \$450 or more difference. The Saw Trax package includes the knife, saw dust hook up with hose and wheels for the frame as standard equipment.

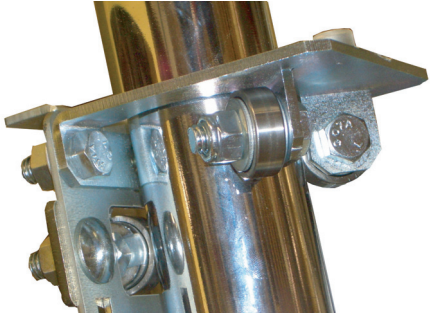
Panel Saws are inherently safer than table saws or hand held circular saws. The saw is guided in a carriage on a track and the saw blade is only exposed under the carriage. Safety issues arise when the saw plate or knife plate is removed from the machine. The Saw Trax brand has a blade guard on its saw at all times that prevents injury. The other brand does not. The Saw Trax brand uses an OLFA knife that has a retractable knife blade. The other brand does not. These safety features can not be stressed enough in these days of lawsuits.

Next there is the ease of use issues. The Saw Trax brand comes assembled with a folding stand and a "set and forget" alignment system. The stand and saw must be attached to the other brand and it has up to 13 adjustments that can affect the squareness of your cut. Saw Trax offers a new sheet clamp option that holds a sheet in place close to the cutting area under the carriage. This is extremely handy for holding in place a long piece on the mid fence or for holding a narrow piece on the material rollers.

The next thing you'll notice is that Saw Trax does not use a backer board with its knife. This eliminates the tedious task of reaching behind the machine with one hand to screw on a wing nut, while holding a Phillips head screw in place on the front of the machine with the other hand. Tool swaps are easier with the Saw Trax machine because it uses two spring loaded pull pins that are permanently attached to the top of the carriage. The other brand uses two knobs that must be screwed onto studs to hold the tool insert in place. These knobs can be dropped, lost or misplaced, crippling your machine. When you look at tool change times, which include the backer board, you are looking at 10 seconds with a Saw Trax vs. several minutes with the other brand.

The saw replacement will be an issue at some point. The Saw Trax brand uses an off the shelf Porter Cable Mag saw that can be purchased at a home center store. The other brand uses a proprietary saw that must be purchased through their company causing long and expensive down times for your machine.

Saw Trax uses a new sealed bearing system on its carriage called "Accu-Glide". It makes the movement of the carriage much easier and more precise than the system used on the competing brand. This is a factor if you have a big job that requires a lot of vertical cuts at one time.



Saw blade changes are faster and easier with the Saw Trax machine. The Porter Cable saw used by Saw Trax boasts a "Tool-less" blade change where a wrench is not required. Besides looking for the wrench, the other brand makes you take the saw blade housing off, exposing the entire top of the blade. Blade change times may be a significant consideration if cutting aluminum and plastics, which should be cut with different types of saw blades.

While we are talking about blades, the Saw Trax brand uses the very common 7 1/4" size blade while the other brand uses a harder to find, more expensive 8" blade. Cutting on a mark is easier with the Saw Trax since you can see the blade line up with a mark on your material. The other brand has a housing that blocks your view of the blade.

Lastly, the Saw Trax knife insert RIP cuts as well as cross cuts. The other brand can only cross cut with their knife. The Saw Trax brand uses an OLFA knife with a segmented blade. This blade retracts when it is off the machine and can be sharpened by snapping off a segment. The other brand does not have these advantages.



The short story is the combo machine gives you the benefits of a panel saw and a mat cutter without buying both, costs about the same as a mat cutter and saves floor space. As far as we could surmise, the best bang for your "Combo" machine buck is the Saw Trax. It is significantly easier in day to day use, costs less and has design features that are much safer.