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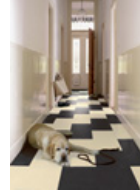
Resilient Answer Man: Don't Call It Linoleum If It's Sheet Vinyl

by Christopher Capobianco
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ASTM Standards at Work: The Resilient Flooring Dictionary Addresses Commonly Misused Industry Terms



The terms "linoleum" and "sheet vinyl" are not interchangeable.



A customer recently came into the store where I work and asked for linoleum. I replied, "Do you mean sheet vinyl or real linoleum?" and she said "Linoleum, and you are the first flooring store of several I have been to that asked me that question!" I smiled from ear to ear. Misuse of the word "linoleum" is a pet peeve of mine. Sadly, it is one of many misused words in our industry.

I have been a member of ASTM Committee F.06 on Resilient Floor Covering for over 11 years. According to astm.org, "ASTM technical committees are made up of professionals from around the globe who are responsible for developing ASTM standards. There are over 130 ASTM technical committees covering diverse industry areas ranging from metals to the environment."

ASTM Committee F.06 on Resilient Flooring, formed in 1968, today has 155 members consisting of "Producers," such as floor covering manufacturers; "users," such as architects and dealers and "general interest" members such as concrete specialists, inspectors, and consultants. With this kind of input, the 40 or so standards we have developed have a lot of knowledge and experience built into them. The consensus process ASTM uses produces a finished document that everyone agrees on. Each document is a true "Industry Standard".

Part of my work on this committee is on subcommittee F.06.10 on Terminology, which has jurisdiction over the document F 141, Standard Terminology Relating to Resilient Floor Coverings. F 141 establishes definitions for resilient floor coverings and other related products. In effect it is the "dictionary" for the resilient industry.

Here's how the chairman of subcommittee F.06.10, Dennis Bradway of Mannington, explains the work we do: "In F.06, our definitions are sometimes a little wordy, because of the consensus process utilized, however we hope the end result is an accurate definition that provides common understanding."

The process involves a lot of compromise, he explained, so that, "Once in a while, common understanding really means, okay I can live with that, even though..." meaning that the give and take involved in the process leads to a document on which everyone on the committee can agree.

Here are just a few of the terms in our industry that are often misused. I'll use the ASTM F 141 Definitions in italics to clarify these terms.

LINOLEUM. I'll never forget the smell of my each of my great grandfather's stores when I was young - they were full of rolls of linoleum and there is no aroma like it. In my days as a manufacturer's rep, I could often be seen in an architects' library sneaking a whiff of a linoleum chain set, and the memories of grandpa's store came back.

With the advent of sheet vinyl, the term "Linoleum" or "Lino" continued to be used. And it still is used today, pretty much for any material that is installed in sheet form,



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and even some tile products. How many advertisements, or signs on stores, lettering on vans, or just general conversation use the word "Linoleum"? I would bet that in many cases, you could walk into those stores and they would not have the real thing available.

What's the difference? Linoleum is defined as a surfacing material comprised of a solidified mixture of linseed oil, pine rosin, fossil or other resins or rosins, or an equivalent oleoresinous binder, ground cork, wood flour, mineral fillers, and pigments, bonded to a fibrous or other suitable backing. That mouthful describes good old fashioned natural linoleum like my great grandfather used to sell. There is no vinyl in linoleum. It's a natural product based on linseed oil, which is where the "Lin" in Linoleum" came from. Sheet vinyl (with backing or without backing) is a completely different material.

SUBFLOOR. I have heard many floor covering salespeople and installers tell customers that they would need a new subfloor. What they actually meant was "underlayment." A subfloor is actually part of the structure of a building – the base layer of the flooring system that can be wood or concrete. Underlayment is applied over a subfloor to provide a smooth substrate for the new floor covering. What's a substrate? That is what we lay the floor on. It could be a subfloor, an underlayment, or an existing floor. Confused? Here are the three definitions:

Subfloor: that structural layer intended to provide support for design loadings which may receive resilient floor coverings directly if the surface is appropriate or indirectly via an underlayment if the surface is not suitable.

Underlayment: a material placed under resilient flooring, or other finished flooring, to provide a suitable installation surface.

Substrate: the underlying support surface upon which the resilient flooring is installed.

Cement. It's amazing how often people refer to "a cement floor" to be covered by floor covering. The correct term is "concrete". Cement is one of the ingredients in concrete, which is defined as a strong, hard material made by mixing a cementing material (commonly Portland cement) and a mineral aggregate (as washed sand and gravel or broken rock) with sufficient water to cause the cement to set and bind the entire mass. In other words, cement + sand + rocks + water = concrete. Cement is the gray powder that goes into concrete along with water, sand, rocks, and sometimes various admixtures. If you go to the lumberyard or to a home center, you'll see bags labeled "cement" and bags labeled "concrete mix". There is a difference!

These are just a few of the terms defined in ASTM F 141. It may seem nitpicking to make these kinds of distinctions, but true professionals owe it to their customers to use the right language. In the long run this will prevent confusion.

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Christopher Capobianco is a fourth-generation floor covering veteran who has worked as a retailer, a commercial sales manager and a manufacturer's technical support manager. He is an active member of ASTM Committee F.06 on Resilient Flooring and serves on the board of directors of the Floor Covering Contractors Association (FCICA). He recently returned to work for East Northport, N.Y.-based Fred's Carpet, the company his grandfather founded in 1959.

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