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Resilient Answer Man: Note to salespeople -- if you promise the moon, be sure you can get it installed

by Christopher Capobianco
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We hear so much griping about a lack of qualified installers and how retailers are frustrated by slipshod installation jobs. Then of course there are the customers who claim their new floor covering is not what they were promised. One of the problems is unrealistic expectations generated by the people who sell flooring materials. Too often they give the wrong information, exclude information, or make promises the installers or the floor covering itself can't possibly keep.

This can be the case with retail or wholesale salespeople, or architectural reps. Of course it's usually not intentional, but the situation underscores the need for better training and communication throughout our industry. I have seen this first hand and also have had some anecdotes shared with me from others in the industry. Here are just a few such examples:

Explaining the Process

There are many examples of customers complaining. Frequently you hear them say "I didn't know I would have a seam," "You didn't tell me I'd have to move my furniture," "I didn't know I would have to stay off the floor after it was installed," and so on. In every circumstance, good communication is the key.

"One of the most common sales related issues I encounter is not with the quality of the installation, but the misunderstanding of the installation process," says Phil Ashley of Bonitz Flooring Group in Greenville, S.C. "When a sales person is asked how long an installation will take, the answer is often given without consideration for extenuating circumstances like furniture, a difficult removal or limited access to the building, "Additionally, we are all guilty of telling our customers what they want to hear at times. I find it is much better to 'under promise and over deliver.' It's easier to be realistic with the customer, than it is to place an installation crew in a no win situation with unrealistic deadlines."

Bruce Newbrough, director of technical service for Ardex Engineered Cements and W. W. Henry, recalls one such situation: "A sales rep for one of our specialty installers went into an architect's office and made a pitch for what we call a 'Designer Floor.' This is our white self-leveling topping that is then acid stained or pigmented to achieve some very unique looks. The rep told the owner all about the colors and effects that can be achieved, and the owner placed the order. After paying big bucks for this unique floor, the owner then saw that there were joints in the floor that are inconsistent with the pattern or design. These are expansion joints that have to be carried up through the topping.

"The presence of these joints, while necessary from a performance standpoint, ruined the image that the owner was trying to make," Newbrough continues. "What's worse is when these expansion joints aren't honored up into the topping. The floor looks spectacular for a few days but then hairline cracks begin to form that gradually widen into an aesthetic nightmare. Not honoring the joints at all leaves a worse result than you'd get by telling the owner about the need to honor joints in the existing slab and doing the right thing."

What 'seams' to be the problem?

The retail salesperson claims "This carpet won't show a seam." The sales rep tells the architect "our welding rod is so close to the color of the floor, you'll never see the heat welded seam" or somebody tells somebody "these tiles (carpet, vinyl or rubber) are cut so well that the floor will look seamless."

In the real world, these claims put enormous pressure on the installer and on the product to make good on these promises. Every carpet will show a seam to a certain degree. Even so called "camouflage" heat weld rods are noticeable, and even if tile joints don't show much on a brand new floor, they almost always will as the floor ages.



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Perhaps a more realistic way of having this conversation would be "This is a well made product that will be properly installed so that the seams are tight and will blend as well as they possibly can." Remember, the only invisible seams are in invisible floor coverings.

Joe Bianculli of Floor Masters in Floral Park, N.Y. on Long Island shared this story with me: "I recently had a complaint on a seam. It was done perfectly by the installer, but the problem was the windows on two walls of the room. The light shining in made the seam slightly visible, and this could not be avoided. Unfortunately, the decorator never mentioned that this condition could exist. I explained it to the customer and demonstrated by closing the blinds."

Honesty about specifications

On the commercial side, I have seen many cases where the written specifications are misused in order to close the sale, or where test methods are "modified" from their original intention. Nowhere is this more blatant than in the test ASTM F 970, Static Load Limit, a test for a resilient floor covering's ability to recover from a load such as a piece of furniture. However, F 970 is a product test, not a system test, so it does not show the impact of a load on the adhesive, the underlayment or the subfloor. The test has a precision for weights up to 250 PSI, but many manufacturers are publishing much higher numbers, or modifying the test to jack the numbers up.

Skip Johnson, technical services manager for the resilient flooring distributor Compass Concepts in South San Francisco, Ca. spoke to this. The sales rep, he explained, had used the so-called PSI (pounds per square inch) ratings that were published by the manufacturer to sell a high quality vinyl floor. After the installation, he explained, "The customer said 'My cart doesn't weigh 700 pounds, but the floor is rated at 700 PSI. Look at the dents.'" This, Johnson maintains, "is misleading."

In reality, different adhesives, such as epoxy, can be used to improve the indentation resistance of a finished floor, but the fact is that under a heavy load all flooring will indent to a certain degree. Any "Static Load" numbers you see published that are over 250 PSI have not been subject to a "precision and bias" process, and they are not a test of the complete flooring system. The industry needs to clean up its act and get honest about this test.

We could go on, but I think you get the idea. Sales people need to learn more about the installation process and the products they sell, and be honest about what the customer can expect. Sal Calamia, a territory manager for Tuflex Carpet in the New York metropolitan area summed it up in this way:

"There are several reasons for failed installations, and a few come to mind as far as the involvement of the sales team. I don't think that the owners of stores are communicating with their sales people about product knowledge and performance in certain situations. They need to be told when to sell and when not to sell. In other words, use the right product for the right application.

"There is a lack of schooling for sales people on installation success and failure," Calamia says. "I have dealers that have no hesitation about selling a product in a situation that would be wrong for the product. Another area is the lack of knowledge by the estimators or the people who measure. If they don't communicate certain conditions back to the dealer, then the installer doesn't get the right information, and the customer won't know about potential problems in certain situations."

There are a number of organizations doing good work to improve the level of professionalism in our industry, from your local floor covering association to national organizations like the Flooring Contractors Association, (FCICA) and The World Floor Covering Association (WFCA). Even so, many of these organizations will tell you that attendance at educational events is never what it could be. The flooring trade needs to make training more of a priority so that our customers get the product and the installation they expect, and not just empty promises.

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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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