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Why is it that 90 Percent of the Time It's My Fault?

Christopher Capobianco

The installers did a terrific job of floor preparation on this installation and were given the time to do so by the general contractor. The result is a beautiful installation everyone can be proud of. (Photo by Kevin Mays of the Stanley Stephens Company)

A friend of mine who works for an adhesive manufacturer passed along a quote from an installer he had been speaking to regarding floor covering complaints. "Why is it that 90 percent of the time it's my fault?" Those of you who have been reading my column for the past 2 plus years can imagine how the light bulb went on over my head at that moment. "That will be a column of mine," I told him.

By leaving too large a gap at the seam, the installer allowed a weakness that allowed this heat welded seam to split. This failure

Having grown up in the flooring business like

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seam to split. This failure was preventable. (Photo by Christopher Capobianco)

many of you who read Floor Covering Installer, one of the first things I did (after sweeping the sidewalk) was work with the installers. After school, school vacations, summers, you name it. I did it for several years with carpet, vinyl and wood installers. My brother did the same and went on to become a gifted resilient installer, while I went off to college but wound up back in the business in retail then commercial sales, then manufacturer's technical support, now independent consulting. Through all of those roads I was on, I was lucky enough to work with some very talented installers and see some amazing installations of carpet, resilient and wood. However, even the most talented of these installers wound up having a complaint about their work at some point in time. It's amazing how many times a mill or distributor rep would go look at the problem and blame it on installer error. It can be such a knee-jerk reaction to always blame the installer. To be fair, sometimes this assessment was justified and sometimes the rep was copping out. Installation failures are often a case of black and white, but sometimes it's a gray area.

I remember well a particular brand of sheet vinyl that had a lot of problems with dimensional stability, which led to a lot of seam failures and even pulling away from walls. Even completely by-the-book installations were failing but the installers were getting blamed for not sealing the seams correctly, or cutting material short against the walls. Further research by the manufacturer found that there were some product problems and they did the honorable thing and replaced most of the failed floors, and paid for the installer's time to do the replacements. So, in this case it was black and white and the installer was right.

Gray areas are usually the manufacturer's fault for not having clear installation instructions but the installer's fault for going ahead anyway without picking up the phone and calling someone for clarification. I have seen several examples of that recently with a manufacturer whose adhesive instructions were very difficult to follow with regard to open time and the porosity of the substrate. "Use a smaller trowel notch and a longer open time if the floor is non porous and a larger trowel notch and a shorter open time if the floor was porous and to test it do a small area with a 1/16" trowel notch and fifteen minutes open time and if that doesn't work"… or something like that. Confusing for the installer but you'd be amazed how many went ahead anyway, just guessed how to do it , and had a job fail rather than calling the technical department and having a five minute conversation to sort it all out. I have been the guy on the other end of those calls for several companies and believe me, a call like that can really make a difference. This case of "clear as mud' instructions can be blamed on the manufacturer, but if the installer goes ahead anyway, it's his fault for not getting some clarification.

A cross section of a job being done right. At the top is a rough concrete slab, then the self leveling underlayment that had been installed to smooth the floor, clear thin spread applied with the recommended trowel notch and VCT installed that

I can give you a lot of cases where problem resilient flooring products that have very specific and often unique installation procedures fail because the installer didn't understand the instructions or didn't read them in the first place, or because the dealer or the installer decided to save money by cutting corners in either time or materials. This can often happen around the issue of adhesive selection and use. Examples like using clear thin spread VCT adhesive on solid vinyl tile and plank come to mind immediately. This type of scrimping on adhesive is inexcusable. If you buy a four gallon pail of adhesive and it covers 150 square feet per gallon, that means that pail will cover 600 square feet. If you

and VCT installed that looks smooth as a pool table. (Photo by Mike Schilling of Pyramid Floor Covering)

scrimp and buy an adhesive that is $10 a bucket less, you have saved less than 2 cents per square foot. The more expensive adhesive will hold better, spread more easily, and may even cover more square footage, not to mention keeping the flooring manufacturer's warranty intact. It's well worth the extra 2 cents.

While we are talking about adhesive, how about trowels? I can't count the number of failures I have seen due to too much adhesive under vinyl-backed commercial sheet goods. A lot of these products call for a fine notch trowel such as a 1/32-inch notch because the back of the material and the smooth concrete substrates are both non-porous. With no absorbtion of the adhesive into the back of the goods or the substrate, it takes a lot less adhesive to hold the floor down. I supervised some testing several years ago that proved that there was actually better bond strength with less adhesive in these cases!

"I always use a 1/16-inch trowel on sheet goods," one installer told me. When I asked him what he installed most of the time, I found out he mostly did felt-backed goods on plywood. Big difference compared to vinyl backed goods on smooth concrete! So, when an installer does a beautiful job of installing the floor but used the wrong amount or the wrong type of adhesive, it's his fault if the job goes bad. A $15 trowel that lasts for 1,000 square feet costs a penny and a half a square foot – and most trowels cost less and go further! There is no reason not to use the right one.

You can bet that if the floor fails one of the first things an inspector or mill rep will look for is the type and amount of adhesive used. I sure do when I do trouble shooting! If either the adhesive or the trowel notch size is not right, there is a good chance the installer will buy the job.

The installer had damaged material but did the job anyway because, "We were under a big time crunch from the owner and I was hoping the edges would go down." They never did. (Photo by Christopher Capobianco)

Another case of shortcuts in action is failure to prepare seams correctly. All seams need to be trimmed so that the edge is clean and uncontaminated and the trimmed edges must be fitted snugly without gaps, whether they are to be heat welded or chemical welded. Often I see installers leave a gap when they are going to heat weld so that it is easier to find the seam and groove them for welding. However, if the gap is too wide, you don't get a full groove and the bottom part of the seam is not welded, just the top is. If there is any movement in the material the seam will split. Heat welded seams need to be trimmed, butted to within the thickness of a knife blade and grooved. Just butting factory edges may work some of the time, but if the seam opens a simple magnifying glass will show that the seam was not grooved, or that too wide a gap was left.

In fairness, there are plenty of examples where I see flooring failures that were installation related, but they are gray areas because the installers are often told to go ahead with installations that they know are not being done under proper conditions. Every day installers are being told, "Just do the job," when they know the conditions or the product are not right. For example, jobs being done in buildings with no heat or air conditioning are a potential problem, as are installations being done with products that have not been acclimated to job site conditions. Flooring products, especially resilient flooring, are temperature sensitive. Warm products can grow or be stretched during installation. When the air conditioning goes on and the products cool

to normal temperature, gaps appear. These gaps are blamed on product shrinkage when in fact the condition is truly installation related because of the temperature at the time of installation. This is especially true for rectangular products such as vinyl plank, vinyl base and vinyl edgings. Installing these products in the summer when they are very warm is risky because they are so easily stretched. By the same token, installing cold flooring materials can lead to bucking if they expand as they warm up to room temperature.

Bad floor prep is another area that can get an installer in trouble. Sure, the general contractor or the owner doesn't want to pay for two coats of patching compound or the extra expense of pourable underlayment. However, you can bet that when the floor is down a while and has a nice glossy floor finish applied, every little bump will show through and the installer will get blamed.

Doing a job on concrete where moisture testing has not been done, or even worse, where the readings are too high can be very expensive if the job fails. With the epidemic of moisture-related failures in the industry today, this is a mistake you can't afford to make if the job fails.

The installer was told to go ahead with the job even though no moisture testing was done and there was no heat in the building. As a result his beautiful craftsmanship was ruined by a concrete moisture problem (Photo by Christopher Capobianco)

I could give many more examples, but I think you see where I am going with this. These cases, where installers are told to go ahead despite knowing the job or the product is not ready are not necessarily 100 percent the installer's fault. However, even if the dealer or the owner tells you to go ahead, it's the installer's responsibility if the job goes bad. It doesn't seem fair, but that's the way it is. Once you touch it, you own it and it usually will not hold up to a challenge if you say, "But I was just doing what I was told. I am not an attorney, but I have heard of enough cases where a judge will ask if you are a professional installer. He'll ask if you knew the job was being done incorrectly. When you answer "yes" to both questions you will be held responsible.

By this time you are probably cursing at me under your breath and saying I don't live in the real world. The hardest thing is to just say no when you can't do the job by the book. We all have to make a living, so how can I tell you not to do the job when you are being told to do so and paid for it?

The fact is that today's installation instructions and industry standards such as ASTM documents are very specific about how flooring is to be installed. If you don't read the book or don't follow the book you do so at your own risk. Manufacturers are fed up with buying installations where they made a good product and it wasn't done correctly. Installers who believe in integrity and quality workmanship are taking the time to fill installation training classes and are starting to stand up and say no to doing jobs the wrong way. In the process they are building a reputation as an installer that can be counted on to do the job right or not do it at all. Our industry needs to raise our level of professionalism by taking the time to do the job right and by saying NO when asked to cut corners and not do the job by the book.

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