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Resilient Answer Man

by Christopher Capobianco
April 12, 2006

Mailbag: What's new, what's hot...and should I use commercial flooring in my kitchen?



Solid vinyl, linoleum, cork and even rubber have been successfully used in residential kitchens for years. But while commercial flooring may be durable, it often requires a bit more maintenance than consumers are accustomed to.

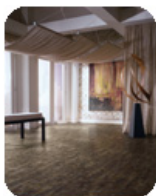
This marks the start of my third year contributing "Resilient Answer Man." In that span of time, I have, indeed, been called on to provide answers to people working in all aspects of the resilient business. I regularly receive e-mails asking me about installation, product choice, sustainability, job site issues and a host of other things that come up in the field. Sometimes I know the answer off the top of my head, other times I have to do some digging (which I am happy to do). So, with this in mind we offer a "mailbag" of some of the most frequently asked questions.

Dear Resilient Answer Man: I keep hearing that residential resilient flooring is a dying category. What say you?

I may be biased but I refuse to buy into this thinking. Sure, residential resilient sales have flattened out - but many in the business believe that's due to the popularity of laminate, wood, ceramic and stone. There is also a matter of perception. Having worked in a retail environment, I have had the opportunity to talk to a good number of shoppers looking for kitchen flooring. Often, those who were around my age (47) or younger did not want to hear about vinyl for their kitchen. "Oh, you mean linoleum?" they would ask. After I explained the difference between sheet vinyl and linoleum, they would make a comment like "Oh, that's what my mother had" as if that was a bad thing.

So, there is, admittedly, a perception issue that the industry needs to address as far as residential sheet vinyl. I am a big advocate for the category, having had a half-dozen vinyl floors in my kitchens over the past two decades. The last one I had installed was in 2002 (Mannington "Naturals" African Slate). It is as good (or better) as any vinyl floor I have ever put down. At the time it was installed in my 400 square foot kitchen/dining area, my four children were between eight and 15, and we had three dogs, each over 65 pounds. Even with my kids, their friends and the dogs beating this floor to death, it still looks as good as the day it was installed. I'll tell anyone who asks that it is by far the best choice for a residential kitchen with a family. In short, the more people know about today's resilient flooring, the chance of it becoming a dying category becomes more remote.

I understand many companies no longer recommend lauan underlayment for resilient? What gives?



From Centiva's Event Series, Urban Loft is made to withstand the toughest commercial environment. The manufacturer says it is easy to care for and

Today, the three most common underlayments are standard plywood, lauan, and fiber reinforced panels. I have included lauan as a separate category of plywood because most resilient flooring manufacturers are no longer recommending it as an underlayment. I did a research project for a client last year and in a short time I was able to find more than 20 references advising against lauan.

For example, here's what the National Association of Home Builders says: "Typically, 1/4-inch lauan plywood is used as an underlayment when vinyl is installed over wood subflooring. The problem with lauan is that it is soft and susceptible to denting and crushing under concentrated loads such as furniture legs or high heels." Then there is this from



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easy to care for and, as such, is also a good choice for residential settings.

The Import Plywood Marketing Group's website: "lauan...was never intended to be used as an underlayment for vinyl flooring. It was originally designed as a three-ply plywood for paneling." Flooring makers agree. Tarkett, for example,

cautions that "a wide variety of species and grades of lauan plywood have been imported into the United States and sold for use as underlayment. Many of these panels have caused severe problems such as discoloration, delamination and adhesion failures." Many other resilient manufacturers have issued similar statements, so if you are using lauan, the word "warranty" may not be in the conversation.

Other panel underlayments are available that are of much higher quality than lauan. Personally, I prefer "real" plywood that is comprised of layers of wood throughout, so there are no voids. My favorite is what is known as "5-ply Arctic birch," also known as "Baltic or Russian birch." These products are made from woods originating from central Europe, and are manufactured using five layers (for the 1/4" thickness) of birch, a very hard wood. These products, which are sold under a variety of brand names, perform extremely well even under heavy traffic conditions.

Also, keep in mind that fiber-reinforced panel underlayments are starting to gain popularity for resilient flooring as well. These products may remind you of drywall in appearance and in their "score and snap" method of cutting, but they offer the performance characteristics and warranties for use under resilient. I have one of these products installed in my own home and it is performing very well. Although most of these better underlayments cost more than lauan, the warranties and superior performance are worth it—so sell it that way! I can't imagine a well-informed consumer who would be unwilling to pay another half-dollar a square foot for a better product with a strong warranty.

Any tips on selling commercial resilient products for use in residential setting?

First, be up front about what they will and will not do. Floors like solid vinyl, linoleum, cork and even rubber have been successfully used in residential kitchens for years. I have seen this from two sides – 15 years as a dealer and 13 years as a consultant or commercial manufacturer's rep. The statement you want to avoid is something like "Relax. It's a commercial product. It will last forever." There may be true some truth to that but commercial resilient also requires a bit more maintenance than the "no wax" floor consumers have grown fond of. Most of the patterns found on commercial flooring are smooth in nature so they are more likely to show scuffing from sneakers and chairs, and they perform best with a few coats of floor finish on them.

I notice that some shelter magazines and websites are recommending rubber in residential kitchens. Rubber is one of my favorite floor coverings, but, to me, it's more of a commercial product. Most types of rubber will be damaged by animal fats, vegetable oils and petroleum based materials, which is why it is not recommended in commercial kitchens and should be used with care residentially.

What are your favorite resilient products since you've been in the business?

That's an easy one. I've been in the business just shy of 30 years and my two favorite residential products were Kentile Solid Vinyl Tile and Armstrong Coronelle Vinyl Corlon sheet goods, both of which worked well in light commercial environments as well. Both of these products were tough and beautiful but did not classify as "No Wax" which is probably why they fell out of favor. Kentile SVT had designs in brick, slate and quarry tile that looked just like the real thing. Coronelle was the inlaid sheet vinyl that predated Designer Solarian and had some great looking patterns, my favorite of which was "San Marco" a pattern of small stones made up in a 27-inch circular pattern. I wish someone would make these wonderful floors again!

Make a prediction for us: What will be the "hot" category in residential resilient in the coming years?

If manufacturers and dealers can re-think the way they market my favorite flooring—sheet vinyl—I think it still has a bright future because it is still a great value for the money. "Luxury vinyl" which is a catch-all term for products ranging from solid vinyl to various composition products, is growing in popularity because of its realistic looks (and manufacturers seem to be working the "bugs" out of some of the ceramic look products which have had problems with chipping and scratching.)

I have talked with many people using cork in kitchens, and now that a lot of cork floors are available in the floating "click" construction, this is an easy-to-install product that performs well under light to medium traffic. I am also a big fan of natural linoleum and that is a category seeing growth residentially. And, something that's not on anyone's radar screen is good old VCT, which has a load of colors and possibilities for creating patterns and borders. Call me crazy, but I think this is a great value that will last a long time, especially with so many people going "retro" in their décor. Of course, many of these products like VCT, linoleum cork, and solid vinyl must be sold, installed and

maintained properly, so it pays to be honest about how they will perform.

Someone told me recently that I was “passionate about resilient flooring” and that, I confess, really is true. I think it is here to stay and has a bright future in our industry.

For our next Mailbag, we’ll tackle commercial resilient issues. So feel free to email me with your questions. Thanks again for all of your e-mails and letters. Keep those questions coming and I’ll keep the answers coming!

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A fourth generation floor covering specialist, Christopher Capobianco's background includes retailer, architectural sales representative, technical support manager, consultant, writer, educator and activist. His consulting company, Flooring Answers, provides technical support, trouble shooting, training, testing and inspection services to manufacturers, distributors, dealers, architects and end users. He volunteers his time as Chairman of the FCICA (The Flooring Contractors Association); ASTM Committee F.06 on Resilient Flooring; and the IICRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification). You can reach him at www.FlooringAnswers.com.



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