

The Tools They Are a Changin'

by Christopher Capobianco

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Commercial resilient installers need to master the art of heat welding seams, and understand that each flooring material may have its own unique tools such as different sized welding rods, which require a specific tip on the hot air welding gun. (Photo courtesy of Tarkett)

First of all, I'd like to acknowledge the fact that I have just celebrated five years of writing "Lets Talk Resilient" here in FCI. My first column, "Concrete Moisture Problems: Causes and Detection," was published in the October, 2003 issue. The late great Howard Olansky, founder of Floor Covering Installer, gave the column the name "Let's Talk Resilient" some time after that and away we went. It's amazing how the time has flown by. I could write an entire column about the changes I have gone through in that time but I won't bore you. Let's just say that major career changes, multiple sclerosis, a crazy economy and turning 50 are not slowing me down and I am still here. Thanks to the support of John Moore, Jeff Golden, Phil Johnson and everyone else here at FCI, we are still coming up with topics to write about. Those of you who read this column continue to flatter me by writing or calling on a regular basis

and offering kind words and encouragement at trade shows and when I visit you in your offices. I truly appreciate it and ask that you continue to send me your ideas and encouragement.

The topic of tools seems to be coming up a lot with me lately. The Flooring Contractors Association, FCICA, recently did a version of their quarterly communication The Flooring Contractor all about floor covering tools – and it's not just the knives and such. There are a lot of tools available to us in our industry that can make us better at what we do.

When John Moore asked me to do a column on tools, I



At every point in his or her career, a true professional is open to learning about new techniques, new business practices and new tools at events such as local training seminars, manufacturer installation schools or the annual FCICA Convention, shown here. (Photo by Christopher Capobianco)



thought back to the 1970s when I was a teenager and working as a helper for various floor covering installers. I started on the carpet side and I remember when I started working with a resilient installer that I marveled at the really interesting tools they used. We were a residential dealer and the majority of the resilient flooring we installed was 6-foot-wide "inlaid" sheet vinyl that was stiff and heavy and a lot tougher to work with than the more flexible wide width products that are out there now. We had to do a lot of scribing back then – if a wall was not straight you used a wall scriber to scratch a line in the shape of the wall on to the face of the material and then cut along the line so the material fit snug to the wall. When we seamed this material, we used an edge trimmer to cut a smooth clean edge on one piece of material and then after overlapping the other piece on top of that one, used a recess scribing tool to trace the line from one edge onto the edge of the other piece so there was a tight seam. These procedures are still used today on a lot of commercial products like homogeneous sheet vinyl and sheet linoleum but most residential sheet vinyl today is flexible enough to cut in free hand and "double cut" on the seams.



If you are doing calcium chloride testing per ASTM F 1869 and you are NOT grinding the slab first, you are not doing the test correctly, and your test results may turn out to be lower than the actual vapor emission rate. (Photo courtesy of George Donnelly)

By the mid 1980s I was working with a lot of the same material but in a different role as a resilient installation instructor with a lot of help from a great video instruction program and a lot of guest instructors from most of the major flooring manufacturers. My students and I learned a lot of techniques together and I was blessed to witness a lot of "light bulb" moments when the students mastered a particular skill. Pattern scribing was one technique we did a lot of by laying sheets of white felt into a small room, usually a bathroom with a toilet in it. Using a compass, we traced the pattern of the wall, pipes, toilet and whatever else was into the room onto the felt. Then, we lifted the felt, took it out of the room and laid it onto the pieces of sheet goods. We then traced the line from the felt onto the flooring material and cut the material along the lines. When it was done correctly the material fit perfectly into the room, even with all of the nooks and crannies.



In the early 1990s I started work as a sales and technical representative for a sheet vinyl manufacturer and started learning about the commercial business and tools and

ASTM F 2170, the "In Situ Relative Humidity" concrete moisture test is being phased in to our industry because it is more accurate and easier to repeat than the calcium chloride test. (Photo by Christopher Capobianco)

techniques related to heat welding and flash coving. As we discussed in last month's column, seaming techniques require a lot of finesse and heat welding is no exception. If you don't have the right tools the job can be a total disaster such as when someone uses a 5mm tip on their heat welding gun to weld a seam using a 3.5mm welding rod. The result is burnt sheet vinyl and a job that can't be fixed. I learned the importance of one of the simplest of installation tools – the adhesive trowel. This was a classic example of "more is not better". I saw a large number of complaints related to too much adhesive such as when installers use a 1/16" trowel notch on a job where the adhesive and the floor covering call for a 1/32" notch. The result is too much adhesive under the

floor which means the adhesive often does not dry properly or provides a soft bed under the product that can lead to indentations, ripples and other marks in the floor when it is exposed to rolling traffic.

These days the tools I find myself explaining to installers and others in and out of our industry involve concrete moisture testing. I have discussed it many times here in "Let's Talk Resilient" over the past five years and continue to do so. I have been asked to write about and speak about this topic in many different publications and different locations. I now am teaching two IICRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification) inspectors certification courses (Introduction to Substrate/Subfloor Inspection and Resilient Floor Inspector) course and we talk a lot about moisture testing in both classes. I find it's not just inspectors taking the classes, either - it's inspectors and others in the industry who want to learn all about subfloor systems and how to test concrete.

Our industry is in universal agreement that concrete testing should be done by independent agencies, as we stated in 2001 in the Floor Covering Industry White Paper Position Statement on Moisture Emission Testing. However, we are a long way away from this being the standard practice in the construction industry so installers need to know what this



The first step in the ASTM F 2170 relative humidity test is drilling a hole to the proper depth of the concrete. Training in how to do moisture testing is offered in the IICRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification) Introduction to Substrate/Subfloor Inspection course. (Photo by Christopher Capobianco)

testing is all about and how to use the tools that are required to test. You can't just put a moisture meter down on the floor and expect to know if the slab is ready to receive a new floor. Methods like Calcium Chloride (ASTM Test method F 1869) are specified by the manufacturers. Even though this method is being replaced by the more accurate Relative Humidity test (ASTM F 2170), a lot of companies are still requiring F 2169, so if you don't know how to do it you are behind the times. For example, if you are not using a hand held grinder first so the slab is clean when the kits go down, you are not doing it correctly. You also need a scale, thermometer and a number of other tools to do the test right.



The use of scribing tools can help an installer in the process of fitting and seaming heavy duty materials such as the natural linoleum floor shown here. A wall scribe or recess scribe makes a mark in the surface of the flooring material that becomes a guide for an accurate fit at a wall or a seam. (Photo courtesy of Tarkett)

Installers also need to get to know the F 2170 test because the process of phasing this method in has already begun. Before you know it this will be the industry standard for moisture testing. The test starts with a drill than can create a two-inch-deep hole in a concrete slab and there is a lot of sophisticated equipment required to do this test the right way. Again, it's all about the proper tools.

Finally, there are a lot of tools that are needed to survive in the business world, even if you think your business is installing floors. The most financially successful installers I have known over the past 35 years have been those that did not loose sight of the business side of things. Since I have owned my own company over the past four years, I can appreciate this more than I ever did before. I have learned the importance of communicating via fax machines, computers, internet connections, and most recently a hand held that is a phone, address book, datebook and e-mail device. As a solo businessman I'd have increased my productivity and profitability using this technology as a valuable tool. Some of the other tools any business needs are

a bit more old fashioned, like a good accountant who keeps me focused on the bottom line and maximizes my ability to minimize my expenses and taxes. I also take advantage of the insurance people in my life who make sure I am covered if I make a mistake, crash my car or get sick. These tools are a necessary evil that I sometimes hate paying for but which give me some peace of mind.

There is one more tool that some people think is going out of fashion, but I

could not disagree more. Whether you are a dealer, an installer, a salesperson or a wholesale rep there is an incredible value in networking. That is, getting together with people in your business and sharing ideas, horror stories, tricks of the trade and personal experiences. I have been lucky enough to have been involved in my local floor covering association for many years, and took it one step further to get deeply involved in a national association, FCICA (the Flooring Contractors Association). Other organizations like CFI (Certified Florocovering Installers), WFCA (World floor Covering Association), your local Chamber of Commerce, and many others offer such opportunities. Sure, these groups provide educational events and seminars, discounted insurance and a lot of other tangible benefits but the part of the experience that is hard to put a price on is the fine art of networking – communicating with other people that have a similar interest or profession and learning from each other.

We have covered a lot of tools here this month – some of them made of metal or plastic that can make your job easier and more professional and others that are made of smart people who can help you be better at what you do through what they know and are willing to share. When times get tough, its time to take advantage of all of these tools to improve your business. Then when things get better, and they always do, you'll be ready to compete and proper, no matter what your profession.

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