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### In 2008, the winds of change will continue to swirl

by Christopher Capobianco

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Last year, I returned to a world I had known for most of the '90s—but left around 2000. In 2007 I began calling on architects, designers, end users, dealers and flooring contractors. I was representing a variety of products for commercial interior finishes, including several flooring products. What I have found has been enlightening, encouraging—and occasionally disappointing. It's not just how new flooring products are brought to market these days but also the specific requests being made by designers and other decision makers.

A little background: When I started as a commercial sales rep in 1992, nobody was using cell phones and there were no e-mails because there was no Internet to speak of. By 2000, when I made the switch to technical specialist, these new ways to communicate started to emerge, although the Internet was nowhere near what it is today. Fast forward to 2007: My cell phone is now a lifeline to my professional world, a tremendous amount of business communication is done by e-mail and I cannot imagine not having at least one website (I have two) to let people know what I am all about. I'm amazed at how many floor covering dealers still do not have a website. In the commercial sector, interior designers are researching products on the Internet and then placing sample requests. The number of leads from websites continues to grow.

On the residential side, consumers are doing their homework online before they go out to shop, as evidenced by the success of the World Floor Covering Association's (WFCA) consumer website wfca.org. I never cease to be amazed at the number of people who are finding me through the Internet—and I am just a very small business with one full-time and two part-time employees, not some big "mega" organization. My operation may be small but the Internet really generates business for me. I have heard dealers use the excuse "nobody buys floor covering over the Internet, so I don't need a website." This may be true, but believe me, many people do research on the web. If you are not there, they won't find you.

Another big factor today compared to a half dozen years ago: everyone is asking about "green." It's a big factor when discussing cork, bamboo, linoleum, recycled rubber and other hard surface products. People are also asking for "certified" hardwoods and other products with a "green story." The US Green Building Council (USGBC) and "LEED" (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) continue to drive demand for "environmentally friendly" products even as the definition of what "green" truly means is still being written. You can expect that demand for "natural" or "recycled" flooring products to continue, so progressive flooring dealers, manufacturers and even independent reps like me will do well to have these products available.

During the '90s I was pioneering a relatively new flooring category now known officially as "printed film solid vinyl floor tile" (it's usually called "luxury vinyl tile"). Back then many designers were seeing it for the first time. It became a popular product for commercial flooring, especially for retail and health care jobs. Today it is a well-known and generally accepted product.

But in today's climate, I am finding architectural firms that don't even want to look at vinyl because they are focusing on "green" design. There has been some negative press on PVC (the main ingredient in vinyl flooring), so a growing number of designers are shying away from vinyl flooring. It makes me chuckle because they will look at "non-PVC" flooring products that look just like solid vinyl – wood look plank for example – and they somehow believe they are being more "green" by doing so. Several manufacturers competing in this area are even marketing them as

The more things change... The flooring installed in this children's health care facility illustrates how far we've come in terms of creativity. Designers are showing far more interest in design innovation while also demanding environmentally responsible products. Through it all, the fundamentals of our business remain constant. Pictured is commercial flooring from Tarkett installed in Winnipeg Canada by Artex Western, a member of the StarNet Commercial Flooring Coop. (Photo courtesy of StarNet)

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“green” when in fact they are plastic made from petrochemicals—just like vinyl.

I saw the other side of the coin in a July 10 article in the UK publication The Vinyl News Service. In a segment “What’s new in building,” it reported that vinyl flooring has superior “green” credentials to most alternatives, including so-called natural flooring. There is a lot of interesting reading at their website ([www.vinylnewservice.net](http://www.vinylnewservice.net)), making the case for vinyl.

In addition, the USGBC has twice declined to give credit for not using PVC in a building. This effectively makes vinyl a “neutral” product as far as so-called “green” buildings are concerned. The fact is, vinyl still has its place, but the momentum is moving away from this product and into other areas, so the industry needs to gear up. I’m looking for an argument about vinyl’s “green credentials” here, but it is clear there is increasing demand for “green” flooring products, especially on the commercial side. My point is this: the question “What is green?” will continue to be the subject of much debate.



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