

covering **installation**

Effective communication prevents installation problems

Key to success: Sales

By Christopher Capobianco

For years we have heard from floor-covering dealers about a lack of qualified installers and shoddy installation jobs.

There are also a lot of cases where customers feel the floor covering they purchased is not what was promised. One of the problems is false expectations generated by the people that sell flooring materials, because they give out the wrong information, exclude information, or make promises the installers or the floor covering itself can't keep. It is usually not intentional, but is the result of a need for training and communication throughout our industry. People that sell the product need to learn more about installation and the limitations of the product.

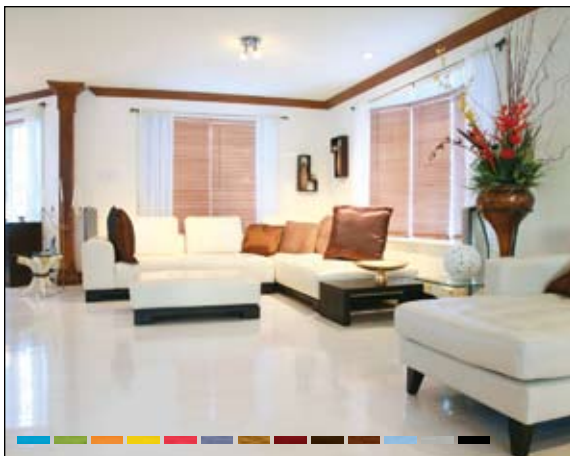
Simple misunderstandings can escalate into an unhappy customer when the purchaser doesn't know what's coming before a floor is done. "I didn't know I would have a seam;" "You didn't tell me I'd have to move my furniture;" "I didn't know I would have to stay off the floor after it was installed," and so on. Good communication is the key.

Bruce Newbrough of Ardex Engineered Cements in Aliquippa, Penn., shared one of these examples. "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 colours and effects that can be achieved, and the owner placed the order.

After paying big bucks for this unique floor, the owner then saw there are 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 the owner was trying to make. What's even worse is when these expansion joints aren't honoured up into the topping, the floor looks spectacular for a few days, and then hairline cracks begin to form that gradually widen into an aesthetic nightmare. Not honouring the joints at all leaves a worse result than you'd get by telling the owner about the need to honour joints in the existing slab and doing the right thing."

Seams are probably where I have seen the most disappointment among consumers in all types of floor covering products. A retail salesperson describes a carpet as "seam hiding," an architectural rep makes the same claim about heat-welding rods, or someone claims that tile (carpet, vinyl, rubber) are cut so well that the floor will look "seamless." Statements such as these put a lot of pressure on the installer, when in fact, the product itself, even with the best installer working with it, may not be able to deliver on these promises. Every carpet shows seams to a certain degree, and even "camouflage" heat weld rods are noticeable. In both cases, the light shining into a room may have an impact such that the seam is not noticeable from one



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angle and may be more noticeable from another. As far as tile seams, they may look great on a new floor, but as time goes on and the floor is cleaned, chances are they will start to show after a while, especially in light colours.

Honesty about product specifications is another area where customers are disappointed. Claims are being made in product-marketing materials about what products will or won't do, especially in commercial products, with test methods being modified from their original intention. For example, ASTM F 970, Standard Test method for Static Load Limit is a test for a resilient floor covering's ability to recover from a heavy load. The test has been proven precise up to 113 kg (250 pounds), but many manufacturers are publishing much higher numbers, which can be misleading. The test is product test only, so it does not measure the load on an entire floor covering system, including adhesive and substrate. It just tests the product by itself on a steel plate, for a 24 hour period, which can't simulate a piece of furniture being on a plywood floor with latex adhesive the floor for a long period. The pass/fail for the test in most cases is an indentation of 0.13mm (0.005 inch), which does not sound like much, but is a visible indentation, especially on a glossy floor in a bright room.

Here is an example of how this particular problem is escalating in the real world. A popular sheet vinyl product that is often used in health care environments has a published static load limit of 177 kg/sq cm (2,500 psi). A hospital bed with a patient in it weighs less than half that much, and the weight is spread out over four wheels. On paper, it would seem that the floor can handle it, right? Wrong, because the adhesive compressed a little and the resulting indentation was noticeable, even though the product itself

could pass the test at the very high weight load.

In reality this floor could perform better with a hard-setting epoxy adhesive under the floor instead of a latex acrylic adhesive, but the fact is that under a heavy load all flooring will indent to a certain degree, so claims about "high psi" flooring materials are not to be taken seriously.

People that sell floor covering products could use a little help knowing the limitations of the products they sell so they can be honest with the end user. Estimators or the people who measure jobs can help this situation, also, because 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 and The World Floor Covering Association. However, many of these organizations have the common complaint that attendance at educational events is never what it could be. The flooring trade needs to make training more of a priority so our customers get the product and the installation they expect, and not just empty promises. ●

*A fourth-generation floor-covering specialist, with experience in retail, architectural sales and technical support, a consultant, writer, educator and activist, **Christopher Capobianco** is owner of Christopher Collaborative Inc. Capobianco volunteers with FCICA, ASTM Committee F.06 on Resilient Flooring and II CRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification).*

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