

GREEN

The growing trend of eco-friendly flooring options for retail stores.

BY STEVE HEARON

On the Upswing

Remember those heady days before the “Great Recession?” Green was all the rage. Yet, as the recession began to take hold of our collective psyches, green initiatives seemed to fall to the back burner. So it’s not surprising that as the economy starts to tick upward again, that green talk is coming back into fashion.

In years past, much of the “green” talk centered around painting: greener products, greener processes, greener disposal, and the like. Although that continues, we’re also seeing more and more eco-friendly initiatives in the world of *flooring*.

“In the residential [flooring] world, a customer wants to go green... until they find out what styles are available and the costs. Then they care a little less. They want a certain look and the echo theme fades as they become enamored with the more visually pleasing option,” says Steve Duke of Floor Coverings International. “The commercial world is a little different. There may be ‘directives’ to ‘go green.’ In the commercial sector, we’re seeing a lot of luxury vinyl right now — both plank and tile.”

Luxury vinyl has advantages. It can be commercially rated, handle the foot traffic volume in many commercial spaces and look brand new much longer. The technology in the last 3 or 4 years has improved to help the products hold up better. Even hand scraped vinyl can appear like real wood. Steve told me a story about a flood at his own house, and the vinyl flooring actually fooled the restoration company — someone who’d been in the business 20 years thought it was hardwood and was checking it for water absorption. As you can imagine, his meter kept reading “zero.”

A lot of major retailers, especially big box stores, are using vinyl versions of “hardwood” in their kiosks and clothing aisles because it looks nicer, and appears warmer than VCT industrial tile in the other areas. It is PVC-based flooring and thus it’s totally synthetic — virtually indestructible. It has a great look and feel, a great price point, but it is not recyclable. When the Armageddon comes, there will be cockroaches and PVC that remain. The only “eco-friendly” element of these is that they won’t have to be replaced for a long, long time and thus they won’t end up in the landfill for a long, long time.

Then there is vinyl plank. From a maintenance and longevity standpoint, this is the best product option. It provides retailers with the ability to replace singular damaged planks as opposed to the whole floor, thus providing cost efficiency and ensures the floor will look good long term.

On the flip side, carpet tile has been getting more and more popular. The benefits of carpet tile? It provides a softer feel underfoot and requires less maintenance. It gives retailers the ability to replace singular damaged carpet tiles as opposed to the whole floor, thus

providing cost efficiency and ensures the floor will look good long term. Both plank options (carpet tile and vinyl plank) provide long term cost savings and mitigate the amount of waste that is sent to the landfill.

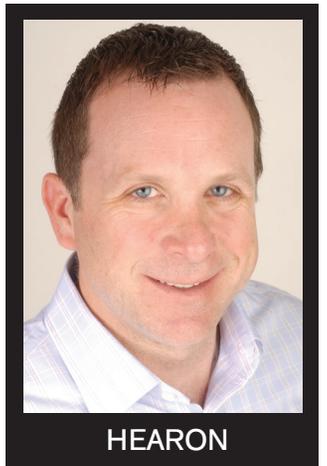
One of the pioneers in the world of “green” flooring products is Shaw Industries. They have an eco-friendly product called Eco Worx. It comes with a nylon fiber (the most durable there is in carpet). It’s the first fully sustainable carpet — “cradle to cradle” certification. In “cradle to grave” production, products contain recycled materials, but in “cradle to cradle,” they use recycled products but then can also be recycled themselves. It has up to 40% recycled content, and then it’s fully recyclable after disposal. Rather than going to the landfill, it can be sent to a recycling facility to be fully incorporated into new carpet materials. This prevents millions of pounds of flooring from sitting in landfills. In the past, PVC was used to back carpeting, to give it stability. They now use a thermo plastic as an alternative to the PVC for the backing. Not only does it weigh less (a huge benefit for shipping cost) but it gives it its recyclability. It also has lower a VOC results.

The styling has also improved dramatically in the last 5 years. It used to be very mundane colors, blacks and greys mostly. Now they can do patterns, they can quarter turn them, you can mix and match in a retail or office space with the same product. Linear looks, checkerboard looks — a designer has some options.

Shaw will also take back 500 or more yards of any Eco Worx material for free, so they can recycle it. Even the water from the dying systems is filtered back and reused so that tons of gallons of water per day is put back into the production cycle.

It will be interesting to see if the residential trend catches on commercially. According to Duke, Floor Coverings International is seeing more and more carpet inlay with hardwood. They are also seeing cork being used as an alternative to hardwood. This only requires shaving trees every 7 years or so, as opposed to chopping them down. It remains to be seen how cork would hold up in a retail environment, but it’s worth mentioning nonetheless.

I, for one, sincerely hope this green talk continues to get louder and louder...it may be the best indication yet that the economy is finally conducive to investment in our commercial spaces once again, and that is good news for all of us! **RFB**



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