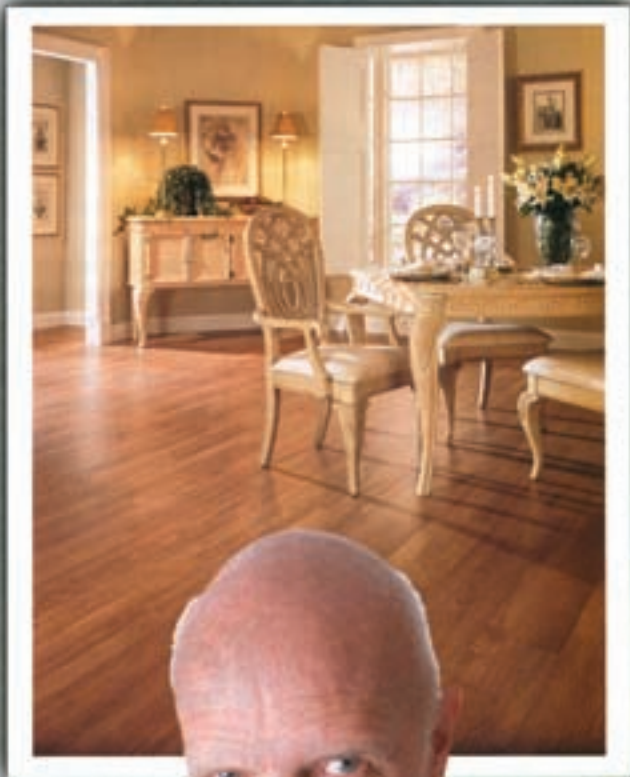


Special Report...

Modern Choices For Today's Flooring Sales



The hard floor market has shown considerable growth over the last few years. Ease of installation and maintenance as well as health and environmental issues are some of the driving factors. Natural-looking products are in fashion and hard floors offer a wide variety of looks – both natural and engineered – and price points.

Consumers today turn to their local home improvement retailers to solve their personal flooring needs instead of relying on specialty stores, especially since many retailers now offer installed sales.

As the popularity of hard surfaces continues to surge, home improvement retailers are gaining market share in the flooring industry. Although specialty retailers still have the biggest market share, home improvement retailers



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and building centres are gaining ground. Home centres and building materials dealers accounted for about 17.3 per cent of U.S. retail floor covering sales in 2000, compared to 12.1 per cent in 1992. Big boxes have become the leading flooring retailers in terms of sales. And, with the new formats they are introducing, that number will undoubtedly continue to grow.

Opportunity For Profit And Growth

As a matter of fact, big boxes have expanded the market by offering wide varieties of flooring products at affordable prices. Yet, the large retailers still have challenges to overcome. Smaller retailers have triumphed when it comes to installed sales



of flooring products, offering better and more dependable service. Consistent, quality service is hard to achieve for retailers as large as the big boxes. Small retailers also have the edge on personal service, with the ability to build a relationship with the customer, which includes follow-up service and advice. There is still room in the market for independent retailers to take hold and develop a niche to attract flooring customers.

New Products And Innovation

Traditionally, hard surface flooring has been the choice in new construction and in situations where the substrate permits.

Conventional basement flooring choices fell to carpet or vinyl tile because of ease of installation and cost effectiveness. It was simply too much work and too expensive to install a subfloor for hardwood flooring.

Today, there is a cost-effective alternative that is easy to install, secure, and is as strong as a subfloor. A new two-by-two foot square tongue and groove OSB surface with a laminated, dimpled polyethylene base creates a thermal break that acts as an insulator and a barrier to dampness. The product is light and can be carried down stairs and into tight locations. It can be cut to size with a table

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saw and interlocks together with a rubber mallet and a block of wood. It is half the height of usual basement subfloors.

The air-gap in the dimples allows the concrete to breathe and dry, producing a healthier living environment in the basement, as well as protecting the floor covering. Small leaks can also flow freely through the dimpled polyethylene with no damage to the panels or finishes applied overtop. Polyethylene is a high-density plastic that is non-allergenic and does not promote the growth of mould or mildew because it is impermeable to air or water. Not only will mould not grow on this plastic, it creates a barrier between any mould or mildew on the damp concrete and the room. The air-gap also acts as insulation to keep floors and rooms warm.

Due to the spreading of the dimples, these floors can support more than 6,000 pounds per square foot – much stronger than the normal requirements of use within a home.

This product creates an easy sell-in for future sales in laminate flooring and carpet, as well as higher end products, such as hardwood, for the basement. Consumers can easily install this product themselves, eliminating the cost of installed sales service. Leveling kits will ensure an even floor, free of minor irregularities.

Underlayment

The manufacturing sector has responded to the increased interest in the flooring industry with new underlayment products. Until now, most consumers have used products such as plywood and luan plywood as underlayment. These products are inexpensive as underlayment but, because they were not designed as such, have some drawbacks

when used for this purpose.

Because plywood is layered, it has knots, corevoids (little gaps in the wood), checks, and splits. These can be problematic with certain floor coverings such as vinyl. If someone steps on the gap with a high heel, or moves a chair leg over the weak spot, it may go right through or leave an indentation and damage the flooring.

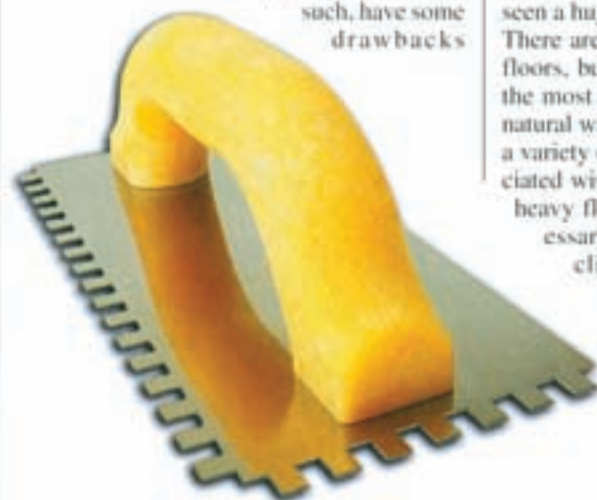
Luan plywood is more uniform, yet it has its shortcomings too. Luan was originally designed as panelling, but somewhere along the line, someone discovered it would work as flooring backing. However, luan has natural elements that may cause bleed-through in the floor covering.

When upgrading a home with expensive floor coverings, it only makes sense to use an appropriate underlayment product that was intended for that purpose. There are different products available including boards made from wood, wood fibre, recycled newsprint, and gypsum.

These varieties come in different quality levels and prices to suit all budgets. The wood and newsprint underlayments are manufactured from hardwood veneers and have an exterior phenolic adhesive to produce a panel with a tough three-ply construction and a solid core. These panels are available in a four-by-four foot size to make it easier for the DIYer to transport and manipulate. The gypsum board underlayment is very user friendly for DIYers, since it can be scored and snapped to size.

Floating Floors

Although floating floors (also known as glueless laminate flooring) have been around for decades, their popularity has seen a huge increase over the last few years. There are many different styles of floating floors, but the hardwood look seems to be the most popular. Floating floors offer the natural warmth and look of wood or cork or a variety of styles, without the hassles associated with typical flooring installation. No heavy flooring adhesives or nails are necessary with most varieties – they just click into place (some do require glue). Floating floors can be laid on top of existing floors and provide a healthy environment because they don't trap dust or other allergens. This type of flooring offers the look of a more expensive flooring, at a much lower cost. They sell any-



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where from .85 cents to \$6 per square foot.

Up-sells include matching mouldings and poly foam underlayment pads.

Laminate

Laminate flooring provides the realistic look of wood, tile, and stone, but often at a lower cost.

It comes in strips, planks, or squares and almost any wood, tile, or stone look is available. Plus, unusual or 'ultra-dramatic' looks – such as teak, bamboo, and apple wood which are typically out of most homeowners' budget range – are easy to achieve and more affordable.

Laminate floors are extremely durable. They are highly resistant to scratches, dents and dings, as well as to moisture and stains. Although not waterproof, they are more resistant to water damage than traditional wood floors. Most manufacturers guarantee the surface will not fade or wear through.

Standard glue system laminate floors should be installed professionally.

Bamboo And Cork

There is a new interest surging in bamboo and cork floors. Bamboo has been used in construction for thousands of years. Botanically, it is actually a grass, not a wood. However, it is attractive as a building material because it is very hard, strong, and dimensionally stable.

As well, it has real environmental advantages over wood. It matures in three years, regenerates without need for replanting, and requires minimal fertilization or pesticides.

As a building material, it also provides for a healthy indoor environment since it is free of volatile organic compounds and urea-formaldehyde.

For bamboo flooring, the hollow round shoots are sliced into strips, which are boiled to remove the starch. The strips are then dried and laminated into solid boards, which are then milled into standard strip flooring profiles.

Basically, it comes in two colours, light and dark amber.

It can be installed using typical tools or techniques and is generally guaranteed for up to 25 years.

Cork flooring is used in some of the world's most distinguished buildings, where silence and dignity must be preserved. The British Parliament, the U.S. Senate Office Building, the Library of Congress, and the Mayo Clinic all have cork floors. In France, building codes require a layer of cork under all apartment house floors to absorb noise and shock transmission.

Cork is the outer bark of the cork oak tree grown in Spain, Portugal, Morocco, and France.

Natural cork flooring is available in various colours, densities, and finishes and provides a surface rich in texture and colour. As well, its natural resilience – provided by the more than two million air filled cells in every cubic inch of cork – makes it an extremely comfortable floor.

Since cork does not rot, these floors may last many decades in any climatic conditions.

It is also resistant to the transfer of heat.

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It feels warm in winter because it reflects back body heat to the feet of the person walking on it and in summer it remains cool because it does not store summer heat.

As well, it does not absorb dust and thus cannot become a home for dust that can cause allergies.

Wood Tiles

There is an alternative to ceramic tiles that is easy for DIYers to install. No need for a wetsaw and tiles won't be wasted by chipping or breaking. Also, the final product feels much warmer than ceramic and has the same look!



Consumers and buyers are showing great interest in wood tiles. The product has appeared at tradeshow and in magazines, and distributors say that requests are mounting fast.

Wood tiles are made from 100 per cent hardwood using Lignasil, a trademarked technology that produces an ultra-high density engineered composite material from wood. This environmentally responsible product is installed with an adhesive instead of mortar, and can be cut with a jigsaw or tablesaw. The tiles have a strong urethane coating and can be finished with regular sand grout in the same manner as ceramic tiles.

Vinyl

Vinyl is the most versatile flooring option available.

With hundreds of styles and colours, it is also priced to suit any budget.

The majority of vinyl floors have a photographic image that is printed on the material and is protected by a wear layer. There is another type which is built from the backing up and involves the layering of vinyl colour granules through hand-cut stencils. The result is a handcrafted look.

Advantages of vinyl floors include ease of care and cleaning and wear-resistance which makes them appropriate for any room in a home. As well, they're resilient. They 'give' when you walk on them, creating a soft, comfortable feel underfoot.

Vinyl tiles have an advantage over the sheets in that they can be replaced easily if damaged.

The downsides of vinyl are that it can tear or dent and, depending on the quality of product, wear over time.

In terms of installation, tile is simple to install, especially the peel-and-stick variety. With a tape measure, pencil, chalk line, ruler, and utility knife, handy homeowners can save money by tackling their tile job themselves.

Those who are handy around the home may consider installing sheet vinyl floors themselves. Some manufacturers offer guaranteed installation kits. If a do-it-yourselfer makes a mistake in sizing or cutting, they can return the flooring to

the retailer and receive replacements free of charge.

For those customers who are not sure of their ability to do the job, it is better to recommend that a professional handle the installation.

Linoleum

Genuine linoleum is the original sheet flooring material. It was first patented by Englishman Frederick Walton in 1863.

Although some people still call all sheet floors 'linoleum,' the real thing is different from the vinyl floors that gradu-

ally replaced them a century later. Its name derives from the main ingredient, linseed oil. The oil is boiled, mixed with melted resins, and combined with powdered cork, wood flour, resins, ground limestone, and other natural materials. Mineral pigments provide the colour. This mixture is formed into a sheet by applying heat and pressure.

Today, genuine linoleum is manufactured only in Europe and is imported into North America.

Recently, it has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity among homeowners because of its natural look and physical properties. Genuine linoleum is quiet and comfortable underfoot and contains no synthetic chemicals. The anti-static surface rejects dust and makes it ideal for rooms with electronic equipment.

Genuine linoleum is extremely long-wearing and some have observed that it actually gets stronger with age as the linseed oil oxidizes.

However, it does require more care than vinyl. The linoleum surface is more porous



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ranging from popular species such as oak and maple to the more exotic cherry, merbau, pecan, and other specialty woods. Most are available in several grades in a wide range of prices. Woods styles come in strips, planks, or parquet tiles with square, micro, and beveled edges. A wide range of stains are available and the finish can be urethane or wax.

Hardwood floors can be made of 'Solid' wood, which is milled from one piece of wood. Or, it can be 'Engineered' wood which consists of three or more layers in a cross-ply construction. Solid wood is

so it must be protected with a high-quality polish to prevent spills or dirt from penetrating and staining the surface.

As well, customers should be warned that linoleum floors 'bloom,' when exposed to light they turn to their true colour. Conversely, floor areas which are not exposed to light may have a yellowish cast due to the oxidation of the linseed oil. But, this condition is only temporary. Once exposed to light, the yellowing disappears and the floor 'blooms' again.

In the '30s and '40s, linoleum came in a great variety of designs; many embossed to resemble other types of floorings such as ceramic, slate, and marble. Today's linoleum visuals offer overall effects that provide a more neutral background for decorating.

Professional installation is recommended for all linoleum floors. As well, linoleum should not be installed over concrete floors below grade and is not recommended for use in bathrooms.

Hardwood

Advancements in style, durability, care, and maintenance have made hardwood floors usable throughout the home, with the exception of the bathroom due to potential moisture problems.

And, the fact remains, hardwood floors are the most popular flooring material, partly because they can add value to a home.

As a result, there are hundreds of choices in style and colour with today's options

generally used when installing over a wood subfloor while engineered wood is used when the floor is installed in basements or over slab concrete where the hardwood floor needs to adhere to the subfloor.

Modern protective finishes have helped make wood flooring more practical than ever. Urethane finishes are the most popular today because their ultraviolet light-cured finish allows for easier maintenance and longevity.

Still, because of the nature of the material, wood is susceptible to scratches, dents, and dings from high heels and household accidents.

Depending on the type of wood floor, the size of the job, and how handy the homeowner is, they may be able to do the job themselves. A do-it-yourselfer can probably handle a factory-finished floor in a small to medium-sized room. For bigger, more involved projects, it would be worthwhile to leave it to a professional.

Some homeowners may be attracted to unfinished wood floors because they appear, depending on the grade and colour, to be less expensive to purchase. However, they often require a professional installer and the finish may not last as long and need to be recoated every five to seven years.

Much To Offer

Never before have retailers had so much to offer to their customers. There are flooring products to fit every budget and every taste.

And even those who are environmentally conscious, both for the sake of the planet or their own health, have flooring products to choose from.

The diversity of products even extends to the installation with floor materials that can be installed by those starting their own home improvement project for the first time.

It becomes absolutely important, therefore, that the retailer attempt to assess the needs of the individual customer in terms of what they want to spend, what they want to the floor to look like, and even the use of the room which is getting a new floor. ○

