

Laminates, Linoleum Get a New Look

By Linda Lombardi
The Associated Press

When Jeannette Noyes chose laminate countertops for the remodeled kitchen in her 1915 Indianapolis home, it was about more than cost.

"I didn't want to take the kitchen to a level that was way beyond the rest of the house," says Noyes. The new kitchen, she says, fits the house and "doesn't overpower it."



AP Photo/Michael Conroy

Jeannette Noyes poses in her newly remodeled kitchen in her Indianapolis home, Saturday, April 4, 2009. The kitchen, designed by Sandi Perlman of Blue Ridge Design features Formica-type countertops.

HOME DESIGN STORIES

Of course, the savings didn't hurt. The estimate she got for granite counters was about \$4,000, compared to \$800-\$900 for Formica.

Given the price difference, even homeowners who want a totally modern look are now thinking twice about laminate countertops, as are some new home builders, says Mark Karas of Adams Kitchens in Stoneham, Mass. For a long time, granite was a

given in new construction "no matter what the price point," he says.

"Now we're going back to basics."

In flooring as well, traditional materials such as linoleum, which had fallen out of fashion, are boasting updated looks, improved quality and lower cost.

These materials have come a long way, says Daniel Dietz of D.J. Dietz Designs in Reedsburg, Wis. As his company's Web site says, "It's not your grandma's counter any more."

You can choose laminate countertops in hundreds of colors and patterns, from several brands.

"The colors are always being updated to match the trend in colors," says Karas. Some patterns replicate stone more closely than ever before with textured finishes; others are abstract patterns that just do their own thing without copying a natural model.

Laminate also is longer lasting and wears better than it used to. And with material coming in 12-foot lengths, just a little planning eliminates the need for most seams.

It's also possible to have the undermounted sink that's typical of granite countertops — that clean look without an overlapping lip.

"A huge benefit of the granite or solid surface was the undermounted sink. Now we can get that look at one-third or one-fourth of the price," says Dietz.

If you don't like the look of those dark seams where the material meets along the edges, the easiest solution is to choose a medium to dark color, so there isn't as much contrast with the core. Some lines of laminate have also introduced "solid-core," where the color goes all the way through.

There are also installation techniques that eliminate the line, including beveling the edge and inserting a thin stripe of the material facing out, and "rolled edge," in which the sheet of laminate is bent over the edge of the countertop.

If you have your heart set on stone, Karas says some suppliers are coming down in price at the lower end. However, the price can only drop so far because the process of shaping stone is more labor-intensive, and there may be fewer choices; his firm currently offers five stone colors comparable in price with the highest-end laminate.

As for flooring, Dietz says, "I think traditional vinyl floors are very underrated. The looks are better than ever, and so is the wearability."

An even more traditional choice is linoleum — and there's a modern reason to pick it, too.

"Because it is made of sustainable materials — primarily linseed oil — the popularity of linoleum has skyrocketed," says kitchen designer Sandi Perlman of Indianapolis, who oversaw Noyes' remodeling.

"You can get linoleum in just about any color imaginable these days," says Perlman.

And both vinyls and linoleum wear better than before, with the color and pattern now going all the way through the material, not just lying on the surface where it can wear off.

Karas cautions that new flooring can cost more depending on what's already underneath. If you have several layers of old flooring, it can be a bad idea to add another layer of linoleum or vinyl on top, but stripping those layers adds to the labor cost. A more expensive flooring material that can be installed over the top might end up costing less in labor.

Or, if you're lucky, what's under all those layers might be good news.

"Another thing people often don't consider in older homes: There might be hardwood that you can refinish," says Dietz.

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Cultivating a Customer Service Mindset

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As long as they are happy, the majority of people will continue doing business with companies that provide good service. While many customers may not come right out and say anything complimentary, they will reward good service through continued business. If the service is spectacular, then people will talk, and word-of-

mouth will reinforce their level of satisfaction to friends, colleagues etc. and may result in new business. According to NOP World, a leading global marketing company, 90 percent of customers identify word-of-mouth as the best, most reliable, and trustworthy source about ideas and information on products and services.

Conversely, when people receive poor service, often they will vote, not with their voices, but with their feet — they will just leave. This can be particularly damaging to companies because they do not know the reason why people discontinue

the relationship, and therefore, cannot take corrective action to ensure they do not lose business.

Encourage your customers to complain. While most people do not like to receive complaints of any type, if handled correctly, they can prove to be an excellent source of feedback to help improve products and services. When customers do complain, it is because, for a multitude of different reasons, their expectations were not met when purchasing a product or service.

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How will you know when your customers are not satisfied? Ask them! Implement a structured process to proactively solicit feedback from the customer at various stages during the project, say at 30 percent, 60 percent, and 90 percent completion. This will give you a chance to learn about and correct problems before they escalate and become expensive to fix. This will also force you to communicate with the customer and may even present opportunities for additional scope of work.

PROVIDING A POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUR PEOPLE IS AT THE CORE OF THE LONG-TERM SUCCESS OF YOUR BUSINESS.

Technical Assistance Research Programs, an Arlington, Va.,-based research and consulting firm specializing in customer service management and measurement, offers the following statistics regarding customer satisfaction:

- About 50 percent of the time, customers who have a problem with a product or service are not likely to tell the company about it
- Between 50 percent and 90 percent of these “silent critics” will probably take their future business to a competitor
- Dissatisfied customers typically tell between eight to 16 other people when they have had an unsatisfactory experience with a company
- Negative information has twice the impact of positive information on purchasing decisions
- It costs between two and 20 times as much to win a new customer as it does to retain an existing one, albeit with a complaint.

CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING

Everything that customers experience is part of the total impression they have about your organization. Attention to detail and consistently providing quality products and services are keys to success. Providing your employees with excellent customer service skills and competencies through training is a large part of this.



Consider the following when creating training to instill a customer-service oriented culture:

- Establish a broad-based initiative that will result in customer satisfaction, permeating your company's culture rather than just holding a single event.
- Offer continuous customer service training for your staff. Once they are providing good service, continue to reinforce the implementation of the concepts in everyday interaction with customers. Without comprehensive support and reinforcement, the benefits of customer service seminars will be forgotten quickly and lack long-term impact.
- Use role-play situations during training to assist your staff in recognizing and experiencing

both easy and difficult service opportunities. If employees have a level of comfort with a difficult situation, they will be better able to handle it.

- Cross-train your entire staff to be able to assist a customer regardless of their department. Customers do not want to be shuffled between employees that are not empowered or enabled to assist them.
- Even if the problem can't be solved immediately, teach your staff the process so they can at least start by gathering information and assure the customer that something will be done.
- Use orientation sessions for new hires to introduce the values and behaviors of the company customer service philosophy.

HANDLING CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

Let's face it: no one is perfect, and problems will arise from time to time. In most cases, it is much better to receive a complaint that you can act upon instead of having an unhappy customer simply sever relations with your company without telling you why. A customer's determination as to whether he or she will continue to do repeat business all comes down to how quickly and honestly the complaints are acknowledged and resolved. There are a number of steps a company can take to resolve customer complaints:

Listen Carefully: Now's the time to put active listening skills to use. Listen intently to your customers; do not interrupt them. Then, paraphrase what they say to confirm that they really have been heard and that you truly understand the nature of their problem.

Thank Them: Feedback is a gift, whether positive or negative. Thank your customers for bringing any problems to your attention. You cannot resolve a problem if you do not know that it exists.

Express Regret for the Situation: A sincere apology goes a long way to move a customer to start working with you on an acceptable solution to the problem. This is not the time for justifying the problem or placing blame elsewhere.

Investigate: Research what went wrong, and gather as many facts as quickly as possible. Focus on those facts and not on personalities. Don't become defensive. Give customers a timeframe on how long it will take to get back to them with an explanation of why the problem occurred.

Formulate a Solution: Solutions should adhere to your company's established customer relation policies as well as your ability to deliver on the solution. Make sure that your response to the customer is respectful and fair. Take into consideration what it will cost if the customer is not satisfied. Put yourself in their place, and offer a choice between several options.

Reach Agreement: Here's where negotiation training can be helpful. If you have not determined exactly what the customers are looking for in terms of resolving the problem, consider asking them. They may surprise you and ask for less than you were originally prepared to give!

Deliver Resolutions Quickly: The sooner, the better. Customers will react more positively if they realize you are moving as fast as you can to help them resolve their problems.

Follow-up: Ensure customers are satisfied. This is as simple as a phone call, and it reinforces to your customers that you do care about them, and goes a long way to help re-establish goodwill.

Ask About Your Service: The best way to find out if you are satisfying customers is simply to ask them. Use a combination of methods, such as formal surveys, suggestion cards, interviews, or informal conversations. This reinforces to



customers that you care about your business relationship with them, and you may learn how you can improve your services in the future. When complaints are not handled to the customer's satisfaction, the results can be devastating.

CHECKLIST FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS

- Do all employees clearly understand complaint-handling procedures?
- Do these procedures represent the best interests of the organization as well as its customers?
- Are interactions with customers conducted in a helpful and courteous manner, and can you ensure prompt, complete, and accurate answers to customer questions?
- Are there clear, written procedures for screening, recording, investigating, acknowledging, resolving, responding to, and following-up on complaints?
- Is there a person specifically designated to supervise complaint-handling activity?
- Is there a known procedure for referring unsettled complaints to a third party dispute resolution mechanism?
- Are there management controls to ensure that complaints are processed according to policy and procedures, within a reasonable period?
- Has management analyzed past complaints to identify patterns, trends, and causes?

Companies need to build a comprehensive commitment to customer satisfaction across their entire organization. The ultimate result will be to increase the everyday focus of everyone in the company on building long-term client satisfaction. The challenge is to accomplish this objective without having the initiative appear to be just another fad or flavor of the month. When a customer makes a choice between two or more suppliers of a good or service, that choice is often made based on what is expected in the way of product quality or the expectation of treatment. If these expectations are not met, the customer will go elsewhere.

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