

CFR The Commercial Flooring Report

For the Commercial Floor Covering Industry

Volume 177 - June 2023

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What Product Innovation and Evolution Mean to You

Just like technology today, the flooring industry is experiencing rapid and innovative product changes. Most of the new product innovations involve hard surface flooring, particularly vinyl tile and plank but carpet, especially carpet tile, is also included. Broadloom carpet is also involved with new fiber renditions, polyester making more inroads into the commercial market, and the ability, through new and advanced tufting technology, to create any visuals and designs one could imagine. The broadloom carpet market is far from dead.

Changes in hard surface product material make up, finishes, cores, wear layers, direct digital printing (for applying any type visual to the coreboard) continue to evolve at a dizzying pace. The challenge, particularly in the commercial hard surface market, will be getting the innovations and hybrid materials to deliver the expected performance without compromising the integrity of the product. And with a hybrid flooring material – a hybrid being a flooring material that is a combination of different elements – you may not know what you're going to get, and what may be lurking within, until the product gets installed someplace and either works or doesn't.

Remember what we've said here before about new product development and innovation in the flooring industry, that the product comes to market by the "shoot, ready, aim" principle. No manufacturer can predict the conditions on any one job, and the product placed in the market may not be able to deliver performance, or it may have an inherent flaw or characteristic that can cause a structural or performance failure. Sales reps get really excited about new products and can tend to oversell or overpromise when the product may very well underdeliver. Here's a really scary point about all of this innovation and hybridization, there are no standards for these products, especially for a proprietary product. With no standards, there are no standard test procedures, with no standard test procedures there is the chance and risk that if you have a problem with one of these products, that you'll be swinging in the wind if there's a failure that you may be blamed you for that you didn't create, since there's not a test or standard to gauge from. And the manufacturers or suppliers of these products may not know much more about them than you do. Fear not, that's why you have us. We have to stay up on all the new innovations, which we constantly do, and we have the ability to test the products for performance and integrity regardless of what they are. There may not be an established standard or testing protocol for these new products, but there are common and standard guidelines that any flooring product must comply with. If the product does hinky things out of the box or on the floor after it's installed, that's a tell tale sign something ain't right with it, regardless of what it is.

Back to hard surface flooring innovations, you'll be dealing with PVC Free iterations, varying cores, varying thermo plastics, backings, engagement systems, methods of installation, recycled content, new materials such as polyurethane, do you acclimate or not and why, stress in the materials, inherent imbalances and unknown characteristics. All of these factors are what you'll encounter with new flooring materials.

PVC free vinyl is alternative plastics which include ethylene vinyl acetate (EVA), polyesters, various polyolefins, elastomers and certain polyurethanes which don't contain a plasticizer. The main PVC alternatives are PP (polypropylene) PET (polyethylene terephthalate) and polyester. With the majority of these products coming from so many different locations and manufacturing facilities around the globe, you and those entities selling these products, may have no clue as to what they'll actually do when they get installed. That's not to say that the products won't get vetted, especially by the big guys, but that's not likely to happen with everyone who sells the products. And even when they do get vetted and tested, there's only so much real life testing that gets done, and none of it is going to replicate every situation that actually exists on your jobs. This unfortunately will create unforeseen circumstances that will put you in the cross hairs of a problem that the flooring contractor and installer will initially get blamed for. The go to excuse is always that the problem on the job is installation because it's the low hanging fruit. However, as we've said here many times, if the product is altering its physical state on the floor, that's not something that installation can or does cause. The installers touch the product to install it. They can't change it physically by installing it.

Here's an example we can all relate to and one that you may not be aware of and that's the FDA – the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA doesn't necessarily figure into the flooring industry unless it's with cleaners or products like them used on flooring. But it's a general overall conversation for many products. How does the FDA figure into the flooring industry and with what type of regulations? We were discussing this comparison and how difficult it is to maintain labeling on a flooring product when FDA regulations are ever changing and change at a pace too fast to keep up with.



THE COMMERCIAL FLOORING REPORT

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The FDA is responsible for protecting the public health by ensuring the safety, efficacy, and security of human and veterinary drugs and biological products.

By the time you test and label the products the regulations may have changed, and you have a bunch of bottles with improper labels, and you need to test again. Such can be the case with new hybrid and innovative flooring products, adhesives and ancillary products used for a variety of purposes in the flooring industry. And if you're unaware or unfamiliar with what these products may do when they're installed or used, you'll be the first ones to catch the brunt of the accusations and finger pointing.

Here are points to ponder with new product innovations or hybrid product. Believing a standard exists for these new products. You can't write a standard for a "one of" product. If everybody is coming up with a new iteration of a product you can't develop a standard or a test around that. On any test you have to know if there is a pass/fail, on most of them there is not. Even if the product does not exceed a minimum standard in a test, it can still be reacting and how are you supposed to interpret that? We can and do. And after the product is tested, by retrieving the tested samples, we can and do re-evaluate them because very often they react further.

Vital Information Repeated as to why you should never use vinyl flooring over a crumb rubber underlayment:

When vinyl is made, the resin and plasticizer are held together through electromotive forces as a solid solution. Over time, the plasticizer chemical in the vinyl migrates out and is absorbed into surrounding compounds, and rubber is of the most common materials that causes plasticizer migration.

If you have questions or concerns on any flooring product, material, or substrate issues, and need help with a question, contact us. We can always help you with anything anywhere, and we always have an answer.

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