

# When You Don't Know What You Don't Know

It's interesting when we see reports written on product complaints and claims and the responses from manufacturers when the claim is denied. Increasingly, it's never the products fault but some other factor, whether acclimation, moisture, adhesive used or its application or any other excuse, sensible or not, for the product not being at fault. This is certainly not to say that an installation failure may not be the fault of one of those issues, or just the result of a bad installation. Most often however, what we're seeing around the country is a product issue. And if you don't think this is the case then, you don't know what you don't know.

Statements made by sales representatives that the product can't keep and the wrong product or system in the wrong place are some of the biggest causes for flooring products failing to perform as expected. Pretty flooring is not always practical. Looking at, analyzing and evaluating flooring and ancillary products being used requires knowing the products and understanding what they're doing where they are installed. You must know what to know. What should be and what isn't constitutes the basis of a complaint. The party making the complaint had expectations that weren't met when they believed they would be. This could be the fault of whoever sold them the product, what the architect specified or the general contractor deciding whether to accept or not a product or condition, despite being faced with not the best of circumstances, to short cut the job, and save money or time. When the shit hits the fan with a failure, everyone wants to blame the flooring contractor and installer. They touched the product last so it must be their fault – right?

When dealing with a flooring complaint you can't just look at the product or what's happened, you must look into it. Every situation is different and rarely are two exactly the same, unless there is a trend in a product or material that fails the same way throughout the country and that does happen. It could be the same product doing the same thing or an adhesive or a component causing the same reaction. In these cases, the common denominator will stand out. Telling is if the problematic flooring product is pulled off the market. In today's flooring world most of the hard surface products, be they vinyl plank and tile, are not made in the US but elsewhere and the quality can be questionable. And how they're being made, what is being used to make them, the processes being employed in the manufacture of them, how they are annealed, and if there is recycled content and how the quality is checked, all vary. Do you think the people selling these products know this or care, or those handling the claims know it? They don't because no one knows what they don't know and what they think they know, they don't.

Worse is that knowing is not at the top of the list of importance for selling the product or honoring a claim. As far as claims are concerned, the manufacturer will know if a product is a claims nightmare, but they don't want you to know and they certainly not going to admit it. So, you're not going to know what they know.

Let's put some clarity on this.

Take the particular case of a vinyl plank product distorting on the floor, typically doming, and usually a 5 mm product not made in the US. The first indication of it being a product problem is the doming. Since installation, the wrong adhesive, or the environment can't cause this, the guilty finger points to the product itself. Further, pulling some affected planks off the substrate will reveal a slimy adhesive, a discoloration of the backing (if it is a lighter color) and a distinct odor that smells most often like a new plastic shower curtain or sometimes like Play Do. This is plasticizer migration, a defect in the product – easy enough to detect and irrefutable. Now if there is a moisture and alkalinity component from the concrete substrate, plasticizer migration is exacerbated and now you have plasticizer hydrolysis. There are hundreds of types of plasticizers in use, the flooring industry, worldwide uses fewer. Phthalate based plasticizers are being replaced by other types of plasticizers due to health concerns. Then there may be blends of plasticizers used, and we don't know what effect the alternative plasticizers will have on the products. Nobody knows that yet because this is an evolving situation. The evidence exhibited from a product suffering from plasticizer migration is obvious, if you know what you're seeing and understand what's happening. Do you think people selling these products, most of whom aren't making them but sourcing them, understand the chemical makeup of them? No. Because they don't know what they don't know.

In a claim where a vinyl plank product shrinkage is uniform all the way around each plank. The person sent to look at the complaint measured the gaps at 1/32nd inch or 0.031. The ASTM test for dimensional stability lists 0.020 as maximum. Based on the shrinkage at the installation site, the tiles exceed that and would be considered defective. Regardless of what a lab test may reveal, the flooring at the installation site is what's revealing the dimensional instability of the product. Remember, it must be noted that the samples sent in for testing represent a small portion of the overall product installed at the job site. They may or may not reflect the specific attributes of the concern conditions being exhibited. Further, testing is conducted according to ASTM or specific test protocols, in a



### THE COMMERCIAL FLOORING REPORT

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limited time frame and does not replicate job site conditions or time. And the testing only employs three or fewer samples of the uninstalled product from an installation of hundreds or thousands of pieces. The tested samples may not be afflicted with the malady.

In another case the person sent to look at the complaint used a moisture meter that was incorrect, it was not for testing concrete or gypsum. Based on the onsite test results the claim was denied due to high moisture supposedly affecting the dimensional stability of the vinyl plank flooring.

Not only that but the manufacturer's denial of the claim was based on moisture in the substrate. Flexible vinyl does not absorb moisture, so moisture will not create dimensional changes in the material – shrinkage or expansion. And every plank installed shrank the same. If you understand moisture in concrete, you'd know that it is not uniform; it will vary throughout the slab. In fact, every truckload of concrete will vary. But the vinyl tiles shrank uniformly. So, if the moisture varies, so should the gapping but the gaps are perfectly uniform, which indicates a product issue. Consider this, think of a weather map with Isobars showing areas of high and low pressure. The same is true of concrete, there are areas of higher and lower concentrations of moisture. If moisture was supposed to have caused the vinyl planks to shrink, it would not have occurred in a uniform fashion but would mirror the moisture content in

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uniform fashion but would mirror the moisture content in the slab. Moisture and alkalinity, which go hand in hand and are inseparable, would affect the adhesive first. In addition, great effort had to be exerted to get the shrinking tiles off the substrate. As strong as the adhesive bond was, the lateral stress in the flooring material was stronger. Another case of not knowing what you don't know. Which brings us to another one of our sayings, words do not change the laws of science, chemistry or physics. Or to put it bluntly, most of the responses to a flooring failure are bullshit – one of my favorite technical terms.

The manufacturer in this case did offer new material which makes you think, why, if they denied the claim and didn't think there was a problem. That's an easy and cheap way out. The biggest expense is the labor to remove the affected flooring, re-prep the slab and install the new flooring and pray the replacement isn't defective. And don't forget the downtime for business interruption that they'll want to ding you for.

A recent article in one of the trade publications, and you should read them to know what's going on in the industry, stated that the threat of a product failure is enough to make end users wary. Worse is if the end user is not aware of the dangers of selecting the wrong product for an application that may be destined to fail, either due to the known quality issues with a particular product or type of product, resulting in the wrong product being used in the wrong place. With concerns like this it is imperative that you know what flooring product will work and, most importantly, that you can trust it to do so without compromise. This should be the objective of the designer, architect, general contractor and flooring contractor. And if the flooring contractor, who should know the most about what products work and which don't, sees that the flooring product specified raises a red flag, say something or risk getting blamed for a failure.

At LGM it is imperative that we know, and we do know. We eat, sleep and breathe this stuff. All of us here have been in the flooring industry all our lives and we are headquartered in the hub of the flooring industry. Where it's easier to know because we engage with and interact with people who know. If you have questions, or need help with knowing where to get answers, contact us. We do what we do so we can help you.

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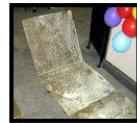
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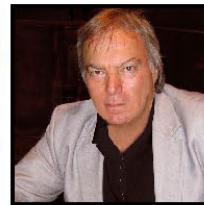
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Osmotic Blisters

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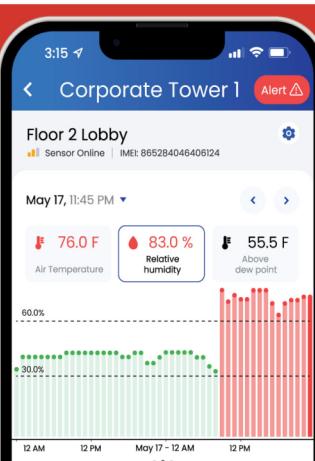
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As professional industry consultants we are hired by clients to provide expert advice and guidance to solve specific flooring problems, prevent them or improve performance.

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If you need help, have a question, aren't sure of a situation you're in, want to avoid a problem, or need guidance on a project or product, contact us. We always have the answers, always. It's what we do, from the substrate to what goes on it.

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