

THE COMMERCIAL FLOORING REPORT

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WHAT ARE WE LACKING IN THE FLOORING INDUSTRY?

For all of the wonderful products and technologies the flooring industry has developed over the last several years and for all the new technology coming down the pike, how can one ask what the industry is lacking? Don't we have beautiful products in both hard and soft surfaces and don't we continue to introduce even more wonderful materials and designs? How can anything be lacking?

For all the design capability and talent that exists there are some very bland looking products. One can understand the perception that commercial flooring need be functional and traditional in the corporate market and not so trendy as to be obsolete in a short period of time but we're talking about an industry that has to focus more on style and fashion. Even heavy construction equipment manufacturers have found style, fashion and color can be differentiators in a market dominated by men in work clothes and boots working in the dirt. In fact every product we buy today is influenced by color, style fashion and uniqueness. Flooring should make a statement and wow us off our feet.

Design: For all the marvelously beautiful flooring products on the market, particularly carpet, there remain a majority of fairly bland products. That's not to say everything has to be eye popping but a search of flooring manufacturer's websites reveals more dull than extraordinary. There are a couple of exceptions and the stand out is Atlas Carpet Mills, recently acquired by the Dixie Group. Not only does Atlas have the most highly styled, fashion oriented textile floor covering material but they have the best understanding of what style, fashion, color and texture mean and should be. You can almost walk into a facility that has an installation of Atlas carpet and tell it's theirs. And lest you think this is a paid endorsement of Atlas, they have no idea I'm writing about them. Just visit their website and then competitors and you'll see what I mean. And speaking of websites, which we will next, theirs has the best photos and clarity and ease of use. J & J has some good looking product as well, as does Mannington and a smattering of style from a few other manufacturers. It seems the bigger the manufacturer the less exciting the product is.



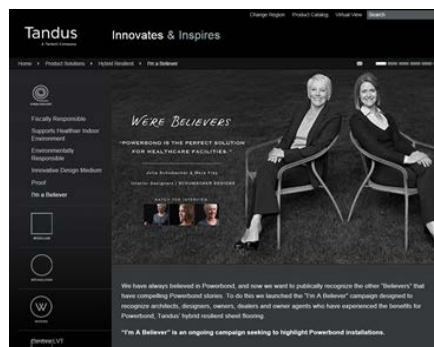
Atlas Carpet – Style: Soliloquy



Mannington – Style: Elemental Brights II

Website searches for commercial flooring products reveal sites that are difficult to navigate, to busy, don't display the product in an appealing manner, photos that are grainy or unclear and small that give no perspective on the product or how it will look in a space. Most of the photos are thumbnails and the bigger the manufacturer the worse the website seems to be. Sites are cluttered and confusing making one have to search for what they may be looking for. The sites should be easy to use, display the products offered in large format and easy to maneuver through. The websites should make it simple to contact someone to talk to and provide a telephone number and address. Why do companies insist on not providing that information? More flooring websites make you frustrated than eager to use them. If the website is not simple, easy to use and displays the product and give you easy access to information, it will not be effective. Like the old saying, "Keep It Simple Stupid" (the KISS principle) this should be the mantra of a flooring website.

Marketing is nearly non-existent in the flooring industry. This is not to be confused with sales. Marketing is the process of communicating the value of a product or service to customers, for the purpose of selling that product or service. What do customers really want? How can we gain new customers and keep existing customers satisfied? Should we focus customers' needs before developing the product or develop the product and push it into the market? Marketing is not advertising though it is part of the equation. Advertising is promoting a product in the marketplace to a target audience. And selling is not marketing; selling is pushing a product to a buyer. All three work together but each has a separate function. Marketing must identify the target audience; who is my customer and what business am I in as described by Peter F. Drucker in his book Tasks, Responsibilities and Practices. He also states that "marketing is still rhetoric than reality in far too many companies" and that's true of the flooring industry. The flooring industry thinks it can market but it's actually selling. In reality, the flooring industry is more focused on the selling price than on the features and benefits of their products and how one can best serve the purpose of the intended use. One unique marketer in the industry is Tandus with their Powerbond products, one of the most indestructible carpet products on the market. The product and the way it is marketed is unique as are the features and benefits. This is a rarity in the industry. The floor covering industry can innovate making product and it is a magnificent manufacturing industry, maybe the best of any industry but it is also a me too industry. Everyone follows everyone and there are few stand outs. As for knowing how to market the products they make they fall woefully short.



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Technical Services seem to be going the way of the covered wagon. Manufacturers have cut tech services positions repeatedly until they are only a skeleton of what they used to be. This is a position that manufacturer's think is an expense rather than a savings which is misguided as tech services people are the ones capable of going into the field and resolving issues with their products on major situations. Tech services people also serve as customer liaisons and good will ambassadors and can spot problem areas in the marketplace that could very well save a manufacturer millions in claims. Not having technical services people is like an automobile manufacturer not having service departments for their products; it makes no sense. This responsibility will fall to a rep or sales executive who, with all due respect, has neither the technical knowledge nor expertise to handle a problem in the field. Most of the highly seasoned technical people are retiring or close to retiring and they are not being replaced. Since this group has not been tapped to train replacements, there won't be the people skilled enough to handle problems in the field by the vast majority of manufacturer's. It's hard to understand how any flooring manufacturer cannot think they need technical people who can assist their customers and strengthen their business; everyone doesn't have to be selling. Furthermore, the claims departments are relegated the responsibility of handling complex situations from a desk and they aren't technical people either, so if you have a major problem you might find yourself in a quandary to get help fast. The handful of technical people that remain have more work than they can handle and epitomize the description of what a frequent flyer is. These overworked folks can't be everywhere at one time and the chances of an immediate and pressing problem being handled quickly may not happen. Many of the old guard have become consultants and a few have joined LGM, so all is not lost if you need help.

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Installation assistance goes hand in hand with Technical Services. This is the area the tech services individuals shine in and where their services are needed most. There are more types of flooring materials being installed with a variety of methods ranging from various adhesives, to click or mechanical installation systems and adhesive free systems. There is extraordinary technology available for the installation of flooring materials in compromising conditions that will insure the products can be installed without a problem. Moisture in substrates is the biggest issue plaguing the flooring industry. These unique installation technologies are not being developed by flooring or adhesive manufacturers but by innovative, independent companies in the flooring industry. The flooring manufacturer's suffer from what we call the "not invented here syndrome." If they didn't invent the technology then they generally don't accept it as being a viable system and won't endorse it or, worse yet, they'll try to develop their own similar technology that most often doesn't work well or at all. We're in the middle of where all of this happens and we're often the firm that evaluates these outside installation technologies and innovations and bring them to the manufacturers, so we know what we're talking about here. There are a number of excellent installation systems particularly for eliminating failures of flooring materials on moisture laden concrete substrates. EnviroSTIX by Base King is one method that works with sheet vinyl, vinyl tile and other types of hard backed flooring products and, in conjunction with Base King's EnviroSTIX, is the System 3 moisture mitigation method for carpet tile that allows for the proven installation of carpet tile over wet slabs without substrate mitigation, saving both time and money, all without disruption to the work place.

Environmental concerns with flooring products are not an issue; the environment in which they are installed is. What is misunderstood is that the flooring products have to live under the same conditions as people in the spaces they occupy. Most flooring materials are governed by the laws of physics in that their characteristics can change with environmental changes in the installation space.

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Changes in the flooring material and substrates can occur when the temperature and humidity fluctuate in the space. People seem to not want to believe this fact especially with moisture in concrete and wood. Everyone wants to blame the installer or the flooring contractor for these issues. What's lacking here is the understanding that neither of them controls nature or science. So, blaming the flooring guys for what's going on in a space that they have no control over is ludicrous. Remember this, either you control the environment or the environment controls you and if you can't control it expect to have issues with the flooring material.

Maintenance of the flooring material is imperative. If you don't take care of anything you own, including yourself, you're going to have problems. Flooring must be maintained in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions and guidelines. When manufacturers give specific guidelines for maintaining the flooring material it's for two reasons. The first is to keep the material performing as you expect it to. The second is to keep someone from ruining the material so it not only fails to perform and live a long, useful life but also so that it maintains its integrity on the floor. That means it stays put and in the configuration it's made to keep.

Information, education and not puffery; tying in with what we are lacking and maybe most important is the lack of legitimate information and education in the flooring industry. I've given presentations and educational programs all over the country for many years. The last few years the number of people attending those programs has swelled. I wondered why until it dawned on me when looking into the audience to see a mass of young, eager faces in attendance. I was oblivious to the obvious. People new to the industry don't have access to the depth of knowledgeable people we had years ago. Today you may only get what amounts to a sales pitch with no real technical information being conveyed, which goes back to the lack of technical people in the industry. In addition, the amount of dis-information is astounding so much so that trusting what amounts to an uninformed opinion can do much more damage than good. And don't believe everything you read on a website or search engine. Case in point is a list of how to take care of carpet on a home page posted by a major network where the so called expert was touting the use of hydrogen peroxide to clean certain stains out of a carpet. Hydrogen peroxide is an oxidizer; a bleaching agent that will strip color out of carpet and it should never be used near a carpet. But scores of people will see this information, take it as gospel, ruin their carpets and then try to blame the manufacturer. Unless you are truly dealing with an expert who has the knowledge and answers for your questions, take what you hear with a grain of salt. Don't trust what you hear to be fact because most of the time it's not. The information may get you in the right church but you'll likely be a long way from the correct pew.

If you need help or guidance with a situation, a solution to a problem or want an answer to a question, contact us. That's what we're here for.