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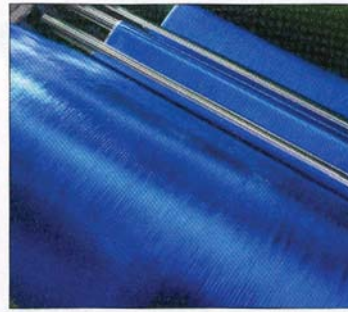
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QuietWalk by MP Global has recycled content.



Fritz's premium underlayment



Starline's Silent Blue underlayment



USG's DUROCK cement board

Underlayment add-ons make dollars and sense

By Emily J. Cappiello

Retailers looking for a way to boost profit margins have been turning to underlayments to add to their bottom line. "Upgrades are always the key to both increasing margins and providing the end user with a better sounding and more sustainable finished product," said Ray Rodriguez, president, Starline. "The retailer can sell upgrade underlayment's at substantial margins, while keeping the percentage of total dollar increase relatively low for the consumer. Greater enjoyment by the end user, combined with increased margins for the retailer, is the only combination that makes sense because both parties involved win," he added.

Choosing the right underlayment for a job makes the end result look better and sound better as well as protects the value of the customer's flooring purchase. "Some of the underlayments are absolute necessities, namely the surface preparation products," explained Art Mintie, director of technical services for Laticrete. "[They] are required to correct substrates that may not meet industry standards for surface flatness. If this critical step is omitted, the finish cladding/flooring just won't look right. The other underlayment's, such as sound control, crack isolation and waterproofing, make sense where protection of various elements is required."

Jeff Johnson, Mapei's product manager for floor covering installation systems, also explained that surface preparation products are a necessity. "The best foundation for any floor covering installation is a properly prepared substrate, including self-leveling underlayments, moisture barriers and skim coatings," he said. "Flatness, smoothness and dryness create a much more aesthetic installation as well as produce profit opportunities for the retailer."

As for products, Drew Holland,

marketing manager at Healthier Choice, told FCW that upgrading carpet padding will extend the life and appearance of the carpet. "A premium cushion will significantly extend the life and appearance of the carpet and some products will actually extend the warranty of the carpet," he said. "upgrading to these products provides antimicrobial protection against mold, mildew and bacteria. Upgraded underlayments also offer moisture barriers that protect subfloors from liquid spills."

In terms of hard surface flooring, Jack Boesch, MP Global Products, said "the primary benefit of upgrading underlayments is to deaden sound within the room and also to help prevent sounds to rooms below, especially in condominiums and apartment buildings," he said.

John Blanton, Fritz's national sales manager, added that although upgrading underlayments make the floor covering look better and last longer, the benefits of a green story also help close the sale. Fritz makes underlayment that uses fly ash, which is a recycled product derived from burning coal. "Using the fly ash changes the story for the retailer [to tell]," he explained.

High Quality vs. "sticker shock"

"The world is full of price-point-type products that are not designed with performance in mind," said Len Gould, president, QEP. "A lot of times consumers make a decision on price. Retailers need to explain why this hidden feature is so critical to the performance of the floor. There is a lot of non-high-quality product in the marketplace. If the goal is simply to beat the competition on price, I could sell on price all day. But [dealers] need to explain to someone why it will step up not only on moisture and noise, but on the overall performance of the floor." Healthier Choice's Holland explains doing the math with customers may help them see the light. "When Customers look at the square-foot price of upgraded

underlayments they sometimes have sticker shock. But when you do the math, the extra cost added to the total installed price is nominal, especially compared to the extra value gained. All it takes is spending a few extra minutes with the customer explaining the features and benefits of the upgrade," he said.

Keep consumers (and yourself) in the loop

Steve Rausch from the substrates and specialty products division of USG stressed the importance of suggesting upgrade underlayments to customers. "Selling a quality underlayment not only increases the success and long-term sustainability of the installation, it adds to the profit margins on both the labor and materials side," he said.

In addition to explaining the advantages of purchasing the right underlayment, Todd Hall, VP / Product Development Director of Cal-Flor Accessory Systems said "retailers must also have extensive product knowledge because consumers are starting to ask for upgraded underlayment almost as often as retailers recommend it. Customers are directing the retailers. Consumers do a lot of investigation; they go to the websites and know about different types of underlayment's," he said.

Knowing what else is on the market is a helpful selling tool, enabling retailers to still gain margin even if they do not have the product. "If a consumer comes in and says 'I want this' but you don't have that, you will be able to lead her to something you carry that performs as well," Hall said.

Hall also suggests explaining the benefits of upgraded underlayments to DIY customers. "DIYers need all the help they can get, although they have an amazingly high degree of success. They are also researching underlayment and they seem to be asking for it," he said.

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