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UP CLOSE: FLOOR CARE

Applying European Trends To Floor Care

By Cynthia Kincaid

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In the United States, many facilities typically have high-gloss, wet-looking floors. While the look can be dazzling, the achievement of this desired result can be time-consuming, labor intensive and costly.

Alternatively, floor care in Europe is just the opposite, with most European facilities preferring a non-wet look. There can be many advantages to the non-shiny look, and jan/san distributors may want to think about promoting this floor care approach here in the U.S.

Market-Driven Flooring

"Twenty-five years ago, the big manufacturers took the approach of inventing the wet look and marketing it heavily to the consumer as being clean," says Russell Kendzior, founder and president for the

National Floor Safety Institute (NFSI) in Southlake, Texas. "Shiny and high gloss to Americans means clean, but Europeans don't have that notion. Americans think a shiny surface is a clean surface, and floors

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are simply an extension of that marketing approach."

Stefano Grosso, board member for his family-owned jan/san business, **ISC S.r.l.** in Turin, Italy, sees European flooring, especially in Italy, tending more to the natural, non-wet look for both aesthetic and monetary reasons.

"In Italy, we are not as focused on wet-look floors as in the U.S.," he says. "In shopping malls, we find floors that can be treated to have a wet look, like marble, but it's not often done because building owners rarely dedicate a budget to that."

Supermarkets, he says, also tend toward the non-wet look, as do airports and railway stations, which usually have hardwood flooring.

"They normally use floors that don't need to be burnished, stripped or refinished; they don't care about the wet look," Grosso says.

European hospitals, Grosso adds, tend to run on tight public budgets, which often dictate the kind of floor material and how it's maintained.

"They care more about safety, sanitation and bacteria control, rather than the image of the floor," he says.

For The Love Of A Shiny Floor

To effectively sell the non-shiny look, distributors will have to convince customers that non-wet-looking floors can be just as attractive, but with less cost and labor. Europeans do this by focusing on cleanliness, rather than polishing.

"Americans want to clean that highly polished floor, not because it's dirty, but because it's dull," says Kendzior. "In Europe they clean floors, not because they're dull, but because they're dirty."

Convincing Americans to opt for the less than glossy look, however, will take some effort.

"I like to go into a store that's clean and shiny and screams out that we are clean and taking care of things," says Roger Parrott, Jr., president of **Rovic Inc.**, Manchester, Conn. "The floor says, 'We respect what we are walking on, we respect our customers, and we want to give them a comfortable environment.' In America, shiny floors give you that feeling."

While fewer chemicals and less labor will be needed to achieve non-wet look floors, distributors need to be careful avoiding the perception that a less shiny floor needs less maintenance. Regular cleaning programs still need to be maintained on these floors.



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"If you have a non-shiny surface, and it encourages people to do less maintenance and takes less dirt off the floor, I think that's a pretty bad strategy," Parrott says. "Non-shiny shouldn't mean being lax in their maintenance."

Stressing Safety

Distributors selling a non-wet look floor may also want to concentrate on safety concerns, emphasizing the need for fewer chemicals and polishes.

"When you polish a floor, or make it shiny, you oftentimes make it less safe," says Kendzior. "We did a study on the top 20 household floor cleaners and found that 13 of the products used to clean and make the floors shiny, did so at the expense of safety."

Kendzior stresses that many cleaning products, regardless of whether they are residential or commercial, leave slippery residues.

"Unless floors are being properly rinsed, those residues can create a slippery surface, whether it be at home or in the commercial environment," he says. "And there is probably a bigger problem on the commercial side with misusing cleaning products because the soil levels are so much heavier than they would be in a house."

However, the age-old argument that shiny floors equal slippery surfaces is still controversial.

"I think that's a misnomer, and we get bad press as an industry because of that," says Parrott. "We've done slip tests to counter that perception."

Still, Kendzior believes that commercial floor cleaners that are not thoroughly rinsed leave behind a film that can create safety issues.

"Those films may make the floor look good, but they may also be trading off the floor's safety for appearance," he says.

Distributors can also stress the difficulty of spotting moisture on a wet-look floor, especially if it reflects light shining down from above.

"How do you see a spot of water on a floor that already looks like water?" Kendzior asks. "If you're walking on a brightly colored, highly polished floor that has water on it, oftentimes, it's difficult to see the hazards, which can contribute to slips and falls."

Seeing water or other moisture hazards on a wet-look floor can be difficult, but it is especially hard for many elderly people. And with an

aging population, this could be a growing concern that distributors can use as a strong selling point for non-wet looking flooring.

"The elderly are likely to miss seeing water on a wet-look floor and seriously injure themselves in a slip or fall," Kendzior says. "Given that they are going to be the most likely victim of a fall, it's going to be imperative that retailers and property owners provide safer walking surfaces, or see their liability insurance coverage continue to rise. They're going to have to migrate away from these high-gloss floors or suffer the consequences."

The National Floor Safety Institute certifies many products for slip resistance. And the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) is also proposing a new national standard (ANSI B101.5) to provide voluntary labeling from product manufacturers for the safety of floor products.

"The standard will identify what effect that product will have on safety," Kendzior says. "It asks whether the cleaning chemical or floor polish makes walking conditions less safe, safer or neutral. That standard is still being developed."

The Movement Into Green

Americans already may be slowly moving towards an appreciation of non-glossy floors thanks to the green movement. Facilities are starting to install more natural flooring, such as bamboo hardwoods, natural stone, unpolished granite and slate.

"There are so many dull surfaces that are very popular, and they're beautiful," says Kendzior. "The green movement is going to overtake the notion that high gloss is number one."

Rita McCauley, CEO of [Grosvenor Building Services](#), also sees a trend toward using more natural flooring surfaces in the U.S.

"We're seeing non-waxed floors coming from the factory already sealed," she says. "All you have to do is scrub them or keep them buffed, and they never need stripping. [The surfaces] are a natural-looking stone, or they're coming in with a factory seal on them, and it's definitely a trend."

In addition, end user customers are increasingly buying green floor care chemicals, which offer a clean looking appearance, but are not extremely glossy, says Kendzior.

But even with the green movement, it will take significant time for the

majority of America to give up its shiny floors.

"If you go into a grocery store and the floor is dull, we think the store must be dirty," says Kendzior. "And if you go into a hotel room, and the floor in the bathroom is shiny, we think it must be clean."

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