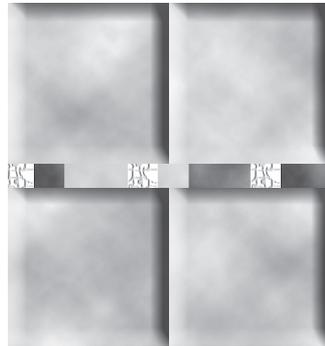


## TILE FILES



**W**hen customers walk into your retail showroom, they're looking for more than just tile. They're looking for their new kitchen or bathroom, or the way their long-awaited Florida room will look after the contractor puts the house back together when the addition is finally complete.

Before showing any material, find out the status of the project. If you're lucky, they're visiting you early in the game, before they've allocated the extra dollars in the budget for cabinetry, lighting, plumbing, or other must-have fixtures or accoutrements that are almost, but not quite, out of their financial reach. When you can influence the project in the early stages, you have the most influence over the design and budget allocation. In short, this is the ideal time to convince the customer that tile upgrades are worth the investment—especially when you factor in the moderate incremental cost relative to the scope of the overall project.

Your goal? This customer should feel that your showroom is their final flooring destination, and that the selection of other finish materials will be centered on the tile design and, more importantly, the tile budget. To avoid having the perfect shower head or prep sink trumping your rectified porcelain tile, the trick is to turn your extras into must-haves. Make sure the customer is in love with something before leaving, something they're so convinced they have to have that they'll make their compromises in other material choices.

The most obvious place to increase per-customer revenue is on the tile itself, and the use of picture books that show off your most beautiful installations can inspire a customer's imagination throughout the sales process. But that's not enough. With residential and commercial customers spending more carefully, it has become increasingly important to justify higher priced material, even as they're dreaming about the perfect room. The good news is, tile is not brand-centered, which means the well versed sales associate has a better opportunity to sell performance and quality of manufacture, the most logical and compelling reasons to buy something more expensive. Intimate knowledge about characteristics like surface abrasion, water

absorption and tile strength can help sell a product that will last longer and justify a higher price.

Other characteristics you may want to point out are facial dimensions and curvature, particularly if the customer wants large tile and small grout joints. Tile comes in three categories, based on the amount of size variation and warpage allowed: natural, calibrated, and rectified. In particular, the customer who's seeking an ultra-modern look should consider spending extra money on rectified tile, which is tile that has been perfected after firing and is allowed minimal variation in size and a negligible amount of warpage (curvature). Because of the precision sizing, rectified tile allows the narrowest possible grout joint; and because it has very little warpage, rectified tile will result in the flattest installation possible. Make sure the customer thoroughly understands that even the most skilled installer cannot produce the same visual results with non-rectified tile as with rectified. This makes the added expense of rectified tile reasonable.

Another upgrade that is worth the investment is porcelain versus standard ceramic tile. When the consumer selects a tile that is certified by the Porcelain Tile Certification Agency (PTCA), they know they are getting the densest, most impervious body of any tile. To help sales associates understand and sell porcelain, the PTCA offers a consumer brochure that describes porcelain characteristics.

There are also opportunities to potentially increase the quantity of tile a customer will purchase. When looking at the project plans, see if there is additional square footage that could be tiled. When making your suggestion, try phrasing it in a way that avoids a possible response of "no." For example, it's better to ask intriguingly: "Do you know what would look really good?" than to ask: "Have you thought about tiling a wainscot too?"

Additional footage options can be practical—the shower and tub walls need not terminate just above the shower head. Suggest that they go all the way up and tile the ceiling, too. Is there an opportunity to use a wallpaper tile to create an accent wall? Also, always check if a customer is considering having any other areas tiled. Although they may want to focus on one area before thinking about another, they could be motivated by the idea that having multiple rooms tiled at the same time will almost always save money on labor.

The point is, never let the customer's initial plan limit your ideas or suggestions. As the experienced professional, you should instinctively think of things the customer wouldn't. Conveying complete confidence is what sells your ideas, whether the challenge is working a decorative accent into a plain backsplash, or making a customer feel at ease spending a large dollar amount on an ambitious or edgy design.

The most practical up-sell in the tile showroom is epoxy grout. Everyone has heard the complaints about dirty grout or how hard it is to keep grout clean. Unlike cementitious grout, epoxy grout is impervious. So whatever dirt and grime gets into the house cleans more easily off epoxy grout. Additionally, many cleaners that are being used by homeowners and commercial property owners are highly acidic or are not diluted enough to the proper concentration. This can cause cementitious grout to fade or become blotchy, and high acids also "eat" cementitious grout, making it weaker and more prone to deeper staining. Epoxy can thus be sold as the grout solution that doesn't stain as easily and can be cleaned regularly with more aggressive chemical cleaners. You may want to let them know that if they don't opt for the epoxy, your shop will recommend sealing the grout—another up-sell—which has some maintenance associated with it over time.

Waterproofing is another great extra. There is no industry or code requirement for tub or shower areas to be completely waterproofed. Instead, wet areas are required only to employ a water-management system, which is essentially a requirement that the backing material is not easily damaged by water, and there is a means of keeping the water within the wet area. Waterproofing protects the building materials behind and under the tile installation, and is like added insurance. It appeals to those who want a Cadillac installation and also to those who know their lifestyle requires it. Ask a couple how much water

ends up on the floor after they use their tub or shower. Then ask them if it's the same after their kids use it.

When selling installation systems like waterproofing or in-floor radiant heat, both of which can be done a myriad of ways, the ability to make the sale again lies in product knowledge and the ability to answer questions. Don't be shy about asking suppliers to conduct product training. Every sales associate should understand the functionality and be able to explain the features and benefits. If they can't, the shop is very likely losing sales due to lack of enthusiasm and confidence. Customers will assume that these systems aren't commonly purchased and therefore aren't necessary. This is very different from the savvy salesperson who casually mentions just how many people are getting heated floors these days.

And don't overlook professional installation as another way to close sales and add revenues. Stress to your customer that a top quality installation requires years of knowledge and experience and that a shoddy job often won't be evident for months or years. Make sure your customer knows that you'll stand behind your installation work, even if you are using sub-contracted labor.

While you can't pitch every up-sell to every customer, you have to keep your eyes open for opportunities. To be effective, you'll have to engage in open dialogue and seek out the inspiration for their project. Why are they doing the bathroom? Did the customer say it was old and they never felt like they could get it clean? Or did they mention it's just so dated that they can't stand it any longer? Zero in on their motivation and you'll

be more successful in selling extras and higher-end products that are suited to their objectives. ■



#### ● THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Samulski is project manager for the Tile Council of North America. TCNA is a trade association representing manufacturers of ceramic tile, installation materials, equipment, raw materials, and other tile-related products. The association's focus is on developing North American and international industry standards.

Find out why nearly 10,000 people start their day with us.



[www.FloorDaily.net](http://www.FloorDaily.net)

Subscribe to our e-newsletter today for free!