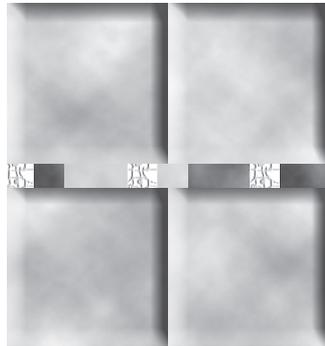


TILE FILES



When it comes to selling consumers ceramic tile floors, retailers have two options—they can sell all the pieces and setting materials and focus on the price, or they can sell an installed floor and focus on peace of mind. History has shown that retailers who do the latter are much more successful. By selling a complete package that includes top notch installation, they add value to the project. The customer can feel confident that the job will be done professionally and the job will go smoothly. That focus also has the side benefit of resulting in more referrals.

Seasoned showroom designers and salespeople are those who help a customer narrow an overwhelming array of sizes, colors, textures and patterns down to an obvious final selection. The best salespeople take that a step further to minimize trepidation and confusion in the installation process as well. To make customers feel confident purchasing from you, they need assurance that the design, the product, and ultimately the installation of the materials will meet their expectations.

Because shoppers can find similar tile products at the home centers, on the Internet or at many other places, aggressively selling quality installation can be the key to potential customers buying from you instead of from the shop across the street. This also lets you sell job quality instead of product price and speaks directly to the customer's needs. Following through and satisfying customers' expectations for a painless installation will bring them back for their next project and have them sending friends and family your way.

If you are a flooring retailer, it's really not an option to just sell material. Even distributors and dealers who don't install have to provide some guidance for customers who haven't already found a tile contractor.

A showroom can't leave customers stranded after selection if it wants to be trusted and perceived as the go-to place for tile projects, says James Dean, a regional sales manager for Virginia Tile Company, a ceramic tile and stone distributor with showrooms in Illinois, Ohio and Michigan. "We know who the

better contractors in our area are, and because of the Virginia Tile name, our customers feel secure with the list of about 30 contractors we give them."

To further help the customer secure a professional installer, Virginia Tile has been heavily involved in the Ceramic Tile Education Foundation's installer certification program, a national testing and evaluation service that gives consumers a basis of reference for selecting a tile contractor. Virginia Tile refers customers to the foundation's website to learn what they should be asking prospective contractors.

At the other end of the spectrum is Welch Tile and Marble, a Grand Rapids, Michigan retailer that directly employs installers. "For residential projects where the installer will interact with the homeowner, we match their skills and their personalities," says President Dan Welch. He advises making a point of soliciting feedback on installers because they can make or break your reputation.

"The higher end the customer and the more complicated the installation, the more it matters," Welch says. For example, choose an installer with unwavering attention to detail when the job requires a lot of cutting and fitting.

It's obvious even in the showroom that Welch's installers are top notch. Professionally designed banners and posters promote the company's apprenticeship training and installation awards, and one wall is dedicated to displaying the ever increasing number of certified installer certificates held by Welch employees.

Welch said his showroom designer can also speak authoritatively about the installers' qualifications and why that's important. "We sell ourselves on the fact that our installers specialize in tile and we can take you through the whole process," says Welch. "Showroom customers just need to be made aware of all the nuances of tile installation to know that they need to come to us because of our installers...our designer is very good at bringing that into the conversation, so we can sell anyone that walks in."

To increase company exposure, Welch exhibited at the Cottage and Lakefront Living Home Show in Grand Rapids in April. Although samples were displayed, the majority of the booth showcased Welch installers. Throughout the show, attendees could stroll through the booth to watch eight installers as they tiled intricately designed vignettes. Show visitors returned periodically to check on their progress and to bring others by. "We encouraged them to interact with the installers when they had questions," says Welch. "Our installers' work was on display and their personalities were, too."

Not far away from Welch headquarters is Migala Carpet One, which has a similar approach. Owner Lori Ruimveld invited the foundation to Kalamazoo, Michigan, to evaluate the area subcontractors that her shop uses. Of the 16 installers tested, nine earned certification. After seeing their work side by side, Migala made significant changes to the types of projects the various subcontractors would be assigned in the future.

For now, Migala Carpet One is the only shop in Kalamazoo that offers certified installers, a strong selling point. In addition, Ruimveld's shop can now better match a project to an installer to avoid customer dissatisfaction.

Welch says shops have to be diligent about soliciting feedback from customers. "There are a lot of little things a guy might do that the customer isn't necessarily going to call you about," he says. "But if you ask them point blank if your crew showed up on time every day or if they are 100% satisfied with the installation, you will get valuable, honest feedback." The key to effective feedback is asking specific questions, he says, and this can be done in person or over the phone. The feedback can then be used for training or establishing guidelines, so that the shop can begin promoting positive factors.

Another powerful selling tool is testimonials, so it's worth the effort to gather them and make sure they're in a place where the customer will stumble across

them. They definitely belong on your website. Some dealers have mini portfolios of installers' work available for reviewing, and this would be an appropriate place for testimonials to be compiled.

The magic of selling your installers in these ways is rooted in their ability to deliver what you promise and what the customer wants. Seek out and build sales relationships with the quality contractors and installers in your area, whether they're contractors or work for you directly. Good installers will be most open to working with the shops that focus on quality rather than price. In this fashion, the showroom and installer partner together to make every job unique, delivering a finished job that satisfies the customer. ■



● **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.

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