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MAY/JUNE 2016

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WFCA University Launches

with Regional Training

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Leadership's Unspoken Requirement

By Scott Humphrey, CEO, World Floor Covering Association

I have been writing about leadership for over 15 years. Though I have no advanced degree, if I did, it would be focused on leadership. My desire to understand it and live it in my own life often consumes me, and I am not alone. It seems to fascinate many who desire the title of leader (leadership) attached to their name. There are more seminars on this topic than any other on any given day. Bookstores and libraries are bursting at the seams with a vast array of books on the subject.

If only reading about leadership could make one a great leader, then our world would be filled with an abundance of

great leaders in business who could solve our economic woes. We would also have great political leaders who would work together to bring about world peace. We would have academic and scientific leaders stepping up to assure quality education and find cures to major illnesses, such as cancer and diabetes. In reality, the lack of leadership is not based on a lack of understanding, but an unwillingness to do what is required.

Let me take a moment to speak to leaders. It is vital that you understand the determination of whether you are a leader or not is not based on your name, your title, or the amount of money you make. Leadership, at its core, is about influence. In my career, I have seen countless people in positions of leadership that did not lead. Please note I did not say they could not lead, but that they did not lead. They desired the accolades of leadership along with the power and money that often accompany it, but were woefully lacking when it came to influencing others. Many, had they heard the conversations going on behind their backs, would have been surprised to discover that those who reported to them were in no way loyal to them. These "leaders" were often viewed as selfish, self-centered, egomaniacs – persons put into positions because of who they were, but not because of their ability to lead.

So, what separates those who wear the title of leadership (leader) from those who truly lead? In a word, SACRIFICE. *Miriam Webster* defines "sacrifice" as, "**The act of giving up something that you want to keep especially in order to get or do something else or to help someone.**" True leaders make decisions not solely on what is best for them. Their focus is outward. They evaluate the cost of their decisions and will often take one for the team. They understand the cost of preparation and the need to put others first. They would never do a good deed when some payback is expected. Truth be known, the best leaders never even let others know of their sacrifice.

Now, I am very much aware that we rarely hear the word **sacrifice** alongside the word **leadership**, but it is indeed what separates the wannabes from the real thing. Leadership guru Steven Brown once noted that being a leader means, "there will be times when you will not be able to play clown." He goes on to tell the story of a time he missed the opportunity to be the clown at his daughter's birthday party. There was a business deal that impacted the employment of a great number of people, and the deal was going to fall through if not finalized immediately. He intended to fly over, sign the deal and make it back in time to "play clown," but that didn't happen. For multiple reasons, he was delayed. He arrived home late to an angry wife, a disappointed daughter, and a group of employees that had no idea what he had done to protect their livelihood.



It can be said leadership that costs nothing is worth nothing. Battles are not won or lost on the battlefield, but in the preparation. The question I pose to you as business leaders: What have you sacrificed for your business?

There were no thank you's, no parties, no pats on the back when he returned to the office, but there was the internal knowledge that he had done the right thing. He went on to say there were other times he sacrificed for the sake of his family. You see, for true leaders, sacrifice becomes a way of life – it is as natural as taking their next breath. Many of us can relate to men like my father who worked endlessly in his business, never complaining, to provide a better way of life for our family.

Why the focus on sacrifice? I'm glad you asked. I have just returned from a place that exemplifies sacrifice. I have just walked into my hotel room after returning from Arlington National Cemetery. Not only are the men and women buried there heroes, they were leaders in their own right who sacrificed for a cause greater than themselves. Though some were buried in this prestigious location many years after their battles and wars, they all selflessly faced the enemy knowing what the potential ultimate cost could be to secure freedom for others. Still they went. Though some were five-star generals and presidents, the majority were everyday soldiers. In fact, some tombstones were marked "Unknown," while others had no writing at all. Yet, all lead through their example-through their sacrifice.

It can be said leadership that costs nothing is worth nothing. Battles are not won or lost on the battlefield, but in the preparation. The question I pose to you as business leaders: What have you sacrificed for your business? Better yet...What have you sacrificed for your people? If you desire loyalty that can't be bought by your competitor, then make a sacrifice for your team. In doing so, you set the example for them to follow.

Work with each member of your team to understand the sacrifice that needs to be made in customer service to meet the needs of each and every customer. I challenge you to put leadership into action. Let your leadership be your legacy by following the example of so many true leaders who have willingly sacrificed for a cause greater than themselves. I promise you, in the end, true leadership creates a loyalty that impacts and serves as a magnet to those who desire success. ○



Scott Humphrey
Scott Humphrey
 CEO, WFCA

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It's Rarely the Product that Matters Most

By Tom Jennings, World Floor Covering Association, VP of Professional Development

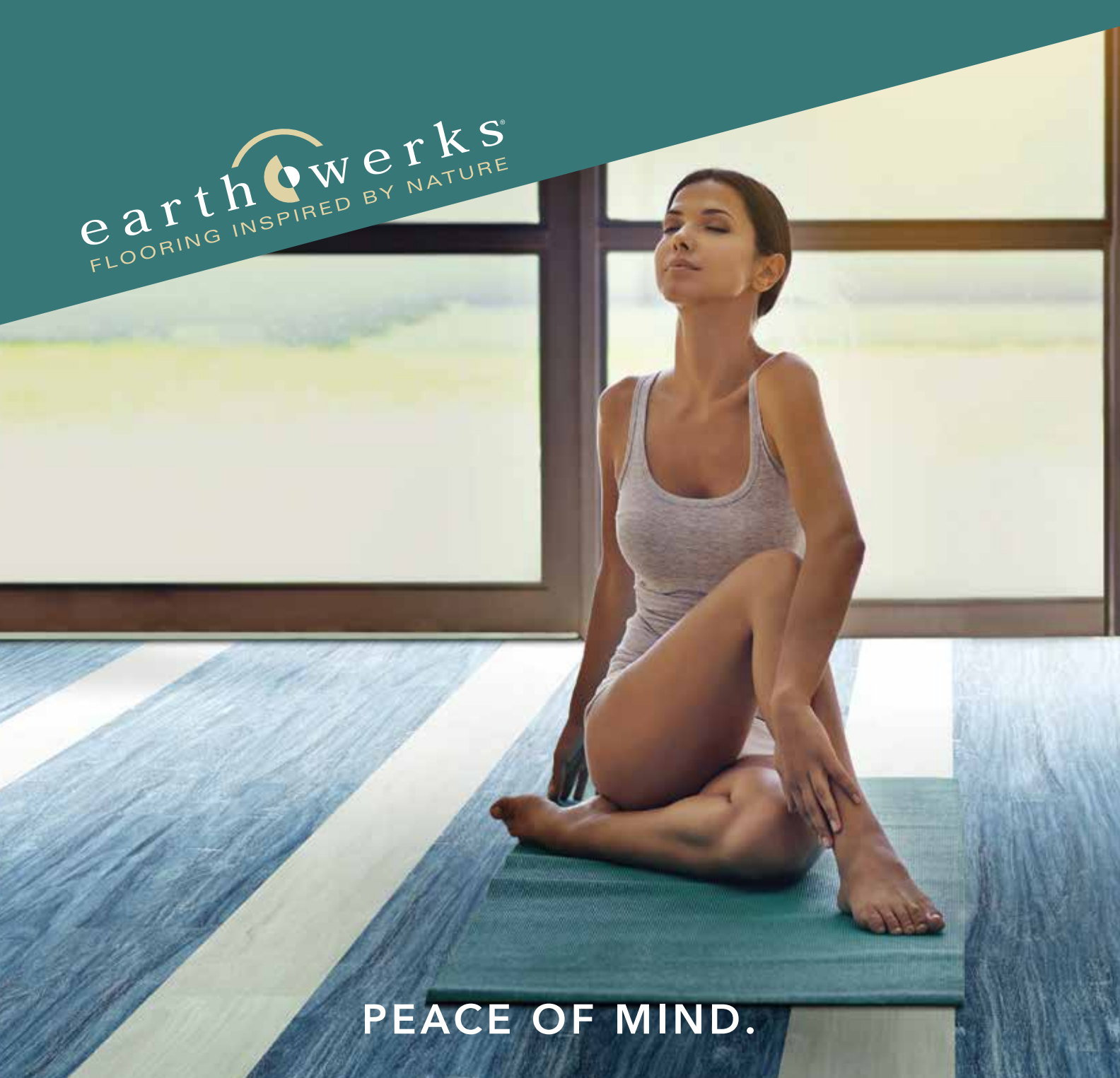
Those who have followed my writings, viewed WFC's *Selling More Than the Floor* video series, or attended my training presentations will attest to my observance of how we cannot be good customer service providers until we first become good customer service receivers. This simply means: we need to constantly pay attention to the quality of service we receive when we are spending our paychecks. To illustrate my point, allow me to share this logic as observed when I was the customer. Some are good, some are bad and some are just plain ugly!

- When calling a major airline recently with an inquiry, I was greeted with a recording that stated "due to overwhelming call volume your call will not be answered." Honest! They may as well have said, "We are busy – you're not important – don't bother us!" And the airline industry wonders why the public generally views them with disdain!
 - When approaching an obviously bored clerk at an airport rental car counter, I showed her my reservation confirmation. After reviewing it, she advised me that "the kiosk machine could have done this for you." I replied, "I'm sure that it could have, but then I wouldn't have gotten to meet you." She wasn't even bright enough to detect my cynicism. Aren't there any standards as to who companies are placing at points of customer contact anymore? A low-paid, poorly trained *service representative* is the most expensive employee that any business can have long-term. I don't remember what brand of car that I drove that day, but I sure remember her attitude. Next time, I'll know to use the machine!
 - When calling another rental car company several weeks ago regarding their customer loyalty program, I was advised that "this department is now closed for the day. Please leave your number and we will return your call within three business days." I'm still waiting. I have rented four cars in the timeframe since that call – none from them. As far as I am concerned they have not "earned" my repeat business!
- Not long ago, I was having a late lunch at an In-N-Out Burger in Sacramento. For those who have not experienced In-N-Out, they are a West Coast-based company that prides itself on such basics as fast, fresh, friendly, reasonably priced, clean, etc. You know – the same things that most fast food chains promise, but so few deliver. They have a limited menu and enjoy a terrifically loyal customer base. It's not at all unusual to see cars lined around the building at lunch hour. Apparently, they consider rush hour to end at 2 pm. At that time, the shift leader loudly announced, "We did it – give ourselves a hand!" They then proceeded to high-five and sing a chorus of "We Are Family." They have obviously built a great sense of teamwork into a very diverse group of team members. A great lunch and a smile on my face for under \$7 – a heck of a deal!
 - Over the holidays, I went to an O'Reilly Auto Parts store to buy a gift card for a family member. A few minutes later, the clerk advised me they were out of gift cards. Most clerks would have stopped right there. Then he surprised me by asking if I needed the card immediately. He advised he had checked with another location and that if I would pay him he would deliver it to me on the next outbound truck. Wow! Someone who gets it. He not only got that sale – but he'll get the next one as well.
 - Recently, I boarded a Southwest Airlines flight – sitting in the third row. I observed an elderly gentleman in the front row asking what food was being served on the flight. He was frail and apparently hadn't flown since the majority of airlines decided to discontinue full meal service. Most flight attendants would have proceeded to explain company policy, but this lady was different. She questioned how hungry he was – more than peanuts? She learned he was diabetic and hadn't taken time to eat in the terminal thinking he would do so onboard. Hearing this, she asked him what kind of sandwich he liked, then got her purse and headed up the jet way. A couple of minutes later she returned with a roast beef sandwich. She made no fuss about her efforts. Her only comment was suggesting he wait until after takeoff to begin eating. I'm not even sure the gentleman knew the scope of what she had done for him. But remember, there was someone (me) in the third row quietly watching her

It's rarely the product that affects your feelings toward any company...it's the service provider's attitude that means everything in the end.

Continued

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Publication Staff

*Jeff Golden, Editor/Co-Publisher
Dan Lipman, Sales Manager/Co-Publisher
Arpi Nalbandian, Associate Editor
Tony King, Art Director*

Editorial and Advertising Offices

*JG Media Group LLC
4607 Lakeview Canyon Rd. Ste. 560
Westlake Village, CA 91361, (877) 742-6467
jeff@pfrmagazine.com; dan@pfrmagazine.com
www.pfrmagazine.com*

WFCA

*Scott Humphrey, Chief Executive Officer
Steve Abernathy, Chief Financial Officer
Tom Jennings, Vice President, professional development
Freida Staten, Vice President, sales and marketing
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Phil Zolan, Executive Director - fcB2B
Jenny Ostad, Manager, affiliate and affinity programs
Gena Basenback, Manager, member services
Renee Day, Manager of FCIF
Ashley Welch, Administrative Assistant*

Office

*855 Abutment Road, Suite 1, Dalton, GA 30721
(855) 330-1183 or (800) 624-6880
E-mail: wfca@wfca.org*

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Selling & Installation

It's Rarely the Product, Continued

great attitude at work. What a joy she was! And look at how many people I just related a positive Southwest story to.

- Finally, I was sitting in the Seattle airport quite early one morning waiting to fly home. Having a few minutes to spare, I sat down in a restaurant for breakfast. When approached by a pleasant waitress I ordered "coffee black – no sugar or cream." She responded, "We don't have cream. Would no milk be ok?" (Think about it!) When I realized she was serious, I agreed that no milk would be just fine. My first reaction was "where did they find her?" Then I remembered how sincere she was. When I was finished eating, I left her a nice tip. She was at work at six a.m. doing her best. It's easy to help someone that's trying to help herself. Besides, I still grin when recalling the moment.

The moral of these stories? It's rarely the product that affects your feelings toward any company. Both airlines got me safely to my destination but left me with very different impressions. All rental car companies are offering the same sedans. The elderly gentleman's sandwich and my black coffee were just airport fare – nothing special there. So where do the memories come from? It's the service provider's attitude that means everything in the end. I don't think that it's a coincidence the companies I mentioned positively by name have grown their market share consistently in a tough economy. They are being rewarded for always thinking of the customer first.

Pay close attention to the service you receive as you spend your paycheck. Make it a regular exercise during your staff meetings to ask for personal stories that team members wish to share. By doing so, all involved will learn some great lessons in how to help your customer's spend their hard earned money with you. ○



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Jennings is a lifelong member of the flooring business. Since selling his family's retail business in 2006, he has served the industry as an educator and speaker. He is a past-board chairman of the WFCA and is currently the board chairman of WFCA Services, Inc. and WFCA vice president of professional development. He may be reached at tjennings@wfca.org.

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Q & A: Piet Dossche – CEO, USFloors

By Jeff Golden, Editor/Co-Publisher



Piet Dossche, CEO/President of USFloors

Now in his 35th year in the flooring industry, Piet Dossche began his career in Belgium with the Beaulieu International Group. After a few years there which included a promotion to oversee a manufacturing plant in the U.K., Piet left to start his own European company, Image Flooring.

He came to the United States to join Beaulieu of America in 1990 and rose to president of the residential business segment. Piet left after the company purchased LD Brinkman. Piet started USFloors in 2001 and later added bamboo and cork products to the company's offerings. He is married to Sabine Bouckaert and they have four children. Piet's oldest son Julian and spouse Rachel run the Shanghai QC and logistic office.

Explain the new USFloors COREtec technology?

As the name clearly spells out, the essence of the COREtec technology is the composite core used in its construction, which is clearly different from the solid LVT products in the market. This composite core is an extruded, waterproof, rigid plank, consisting primarily of virgin vinyl mixed with calcium carbonate. The core can also contain a percentage of wood and bamboo dust. An LVT veneer with a durable wearlayer is permanently bonded to the top side of this composite plank, while a cork underlayment is attached to the bottom, creating a comfortable attached cushion. The plank of tile receives a click profile for easy, glueless installation.

How did you introduce COREtec? When?

Research and design on this product began in 2010 and was perfected in 2011. It was first introduced to a few key customers

as part of a soft launch at the end of 2012. We showed it for the first time as a major new product introduction during Surfaces 2013. Retailers embraced it right away, despite the fact that most of our competitors, traditional LVT manufacturers, were quick to shoot holes in it and downplay it as an inferior product. Little did they know how wrong they were going to be and how big this product would become in a very short period of time.

Can you share new COREtec products to be released in the future?

Our COREtec patent covers not only the bonding of LVT veneers to an extruded core, but also many other types of veneers. We are working hard on developing an entire collection of unique products based on our COREtec technology. Stay tuned for new introductions.

Discuss the benefits of WPC products?

The main benefits of WPC (wood plastic composite) products

Continued



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Piet Dossche, Continued

are the waterproof construction and the rigidity of the board. These benefits eliminate the shortfalls of traditional LVT in regards to stability, ease of installation and the need for subfloor leveling and repair as the solid core stops the telegraphing of imperfections or grout lines through the surface.

What is the future outlook for WPC products?

Only the tip of the iceberg has been revealed so far! The upside and growth potential for WPC or composite core products is simply enormous. I have no doubt it will surpass everyone's expectations. When you offer a great looking, durable, waterproof flooring rigid enough to be installed directly over imperfect subfloors or ceramic tile grout lines and eliminate expensive floor prep with an easy click installation at a competitive price, you offer the consumer a real value she will fully embrace, making this clearly a champion flooring product!

My prediction is that within the next three years (by 2020), the vast majority, if not all, of the click floating LVT Flooring, will be WPC or composite core products. Sales will grow to exceed 100 million square meters.

How do the WPC products affect other flooring categories like laminate and engineered wood?

The rapid growth of WPC products is taking market share from many different flooring categories – laminate and engineered wood are no exception. However, I believe WPC will drive innovation and creativity in these products forward which internally will make them better and more appealing to retailers and consumers. Our industry needs more product innovation to whet the consumer's appetite to change her floors more often and spend her disposable income on the beautiful floors we create.

How would you define WPC?

Without a doubt, WPC is a new flooring category, just like laminate floor was in the early 90s. This new, waterproof composite core construction had never been introduced to the market until USFloors launched its COREtec. Since then, millions of dollars have been invested in the manufacturing, marketing and sales of various collections, fueling the rapid growth of this new flooring category. WPC has been embraced strongly by both the retailer and the consumer and has firmly planted itself as a viable, fast-growing flooring solution with



the potential to become the dominant hard surface product, with the exception of ceramic tile.

How do WPC products expand selling opportunities for retailers?

Every time a new product enters a market, with the same enthusiasm and overwhelming demand as COREtec and WPC, the entire industry gets a lift. Retailers and their salespeople are getting excited by the reaction of the consumer to the new products. They see their sales increasing, margins improving and smiles returning! More advertising dollars are being spent promoting this new product, which brings more focus and attention from the consumer to our flooring category and brings them into the stores. ○



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The Benefits of Belonging to a Buying Group

By Arpi Nalbandian, Associate Editor

For many years flooring retailers have been aligning themselves with buying groups to strengthen not only their respective inventories, but also their bottom line and visibility.

Similar to how customers flock to Costco and other discount clubs for bulk items, flooring retailers affiliated with buying groups receive the same benefit of savings with the added bonus of showroom support, marketing and sales tools, access to an expansive product catalog, and most importantly, multiple networking opportunities with peers.



Deb DeGraaf
Owner, DeGraaf Interiors

As part of the National Floorcovering Alliance (NFA), **Deb DeGraaf, owner of DeGraaf Interiors**, has four Michigan-based retail locations with combined sales in excess of \$18 million. Deb takes great pride in assisting homeowners with their floorcovering needs and obtains many insights into manufacturing styles, product development, quality control aspects and

general business management through her buying group affiliation as well as serving on several advisory boards including Stainmaster, Shaw, and Mohawk.

“The National Floorcovering Alliance is the largest group of independent floor covering retailers in the United States and Canada. Fewer, than one tenth of one percent of all flooring dealers meet the criteria required for consideration for membership in our organization,” says DeGraaf.

According to the NFA, “Members enjoy uniquely advantageous agreements from many of the world’s leading manufacturers of floor covering products. The sharing of best practices and the special opportunities for exclusive products and purchasing opportunities are among the principal benefits that NFA member companies enjoy.”

DeGraaf mentions several benefits of belonging to the NFA, including, “networking among the best retailers in the country, the ability to have structured meetings and interaction with upper management twice a year, benefitting from additional rebates from manufacturers, and the growing friendships made with fellow members.”

Established in 1991, the NFA currently serves 43 retail members who gather several times a year to share their expertise. There

are many opportunities, says DeGraaf, for learning from each other. “Retail members get together during the NFA’s two annual meetings, at Surfaces, as well as by email and phone. When the opportunity arises, all members are very open to having other members visit their stores to assist in any way,” she adds.



Scott Walker
President, Walkers Carpet One and Home

Scott K. Walker, president of Bellingham, WA-based Walkers Carpet One Floor & Home,

says his company chose to join the Carpet One division of the cooperative now known as CCA Global Partners, Inc. in 1996 “as a consequence of market conditions created by Shaw’s decision to enter the retail market in direct competition with its customers.

He continued, “Prior to doing so, we evaluated the costs and benefits of other affiliation options present in 1996, as well as the option of remaining unaffiliated.”

With one location generating nearly \$10 million in 2015, Walker says the benefits of membership are many and varied. He continued, “the perks covering virtually all of the areas of operation of a specialty floor covering dealer involve merchandising, marketing, sales and management training and operations. The overriding goal of the cooperative has always been to provide its members with tools to differentiate the members from their competitors by offering unique programs and products which provide value to their customers beyond those available to competitors, including box stores.”

CCA Global Partners was formed in 1985 by Alan Greenberg and Howard Brodsky, then owners of their own retail operations in St. Louis, MO, and Manchester, NH. With 12 original members, Carpet One has grown to nearly 1,000 today, encompassing virtually all marketing areas in the U. S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Further accentuating the benefits of membership in a cooperative “is the opportunity to engage with peers,” says Walker. “A decision was made in 1996 by all of the other Carpet One dealers in Western Washington to begin meeting face-to-face once each month to discuss matters of common interest. We found the value of our group discussions to be so great that we have continued that practice ever since. It was such a good idea that regional network groups for all members were formed in 2005. This has become one of the core strengths of the group,” he concludes.

So, how does one become a member of CCA Global? “Size does matter,” says Walker. “A company can be too small to afford the cost of admission, to be able to show enough of the products required and/or to be able to benefit from most of the programs available. What that size is varies, but minimum showroom size has been established as having minimum financial thresholds. On the upper end, the clout of a very large dealer in its market area may diminish some of the benefits available to it as a member of the cooperative, but there are some very large Carpet One dealers by volume. While it may be the case that negotiating power with suppliers is not affected tremendously, the other benefits likely outweigh the advantages of independence.”



Boasting more than 2,000 members, The Shaw Flooring Network (SFN) was built for retailers, by retailers, says **Aaron John, Director of Shaw Flooring Network and Retail Programs**. “We are dedicated to a partnership mentality because when our retailers are successful, Shaw is successful.”

Established in 1996, retailers who join SFN are able to work directly with the manufacturer who makes and supplies the products sold, giving retailers a direct voice and influence.

“Shaw has invested tremendously and worked continuously for almost two decades to ensure its aligned retailers have the best field and brand support in the business,” says John. “Not to mention superior products, merchandising, training, vendor partners, financial benchmarking and the most robust and comprehensive set of marketing solutions in the industry, including lucrative co-op advertising support, website development and hosting, exclusive consumer financing options and exclusive consumer promotions only extended to SFN retailers.” Further, says John, “the SFN is the only aligned program with dedicated field marketing specialists in every region providing localized, custom business plan development instead of a one size fits all approach. The entire purpose of this dedicated team is to elevate the presence of our membership in their local markets through true consultative services.”

Moreover, the size of the retailer’s operations is not a concern with SFN. “With SFN specifically, the size of a retailer’s business is not a key indicator of success,” John continued. “In fact, today our program is home to businesses of all sizes and situations.

We are less concerned with meeting certain size requirements and more concerned with finding the right partnership fit.”

“Further, engaging and serving its members well with various sales, support and marketing tools is at the top of SFN’s list. In addition, Shaw conducts annual business analysis reviews for every aligned account, giving each retailer an in-depth, comprehensive view into the current state of their business,” says John.

Additionally John stated, “The reviews pinpoint areas of success as well as areas of mutual improvement. From this analysis, a laser-focused strategy is then created to help take the business to the next level. Retailer feedback from these custom reviews is glowing, with some stating they are the single most helpful business tool they receive each year.”

For more information about the groups mentioned in this article, as well as additional buying groups/alliances within the industry, please visit the websites below:

Abbey Carpet/Floors to Go
www.abbeycarpet.com

American Home Surfaces Group
www.americanhomesurfaces.com

Big Bob’s Flooring Outlet
www.bigbobsflooring.com

CCA Global Partners
www.ccaglobalpartners.com

Carpet One
www.carpetone.com

CarpetsPlus/Color Tile
www.carpetsplusbuyinggroup.com

FCA Network
www.fcainc.com

Floor Covering Associates
www.fcainc.com

Floor Expo
www.feigroup.net

Flooring America
www.flooringamerica.com

Floor to Ceiling/Preferred Brands
www.preferredbrandscorp.com

Fuse Alliance
www.fusecommercialflooring.info

Mohawk Color Center Select/Floorscapes
www.mohawkflooring.com

National Floor Covering Alliance
www.nationalflooringalliance.com

Shaw Flooring Network
www.shawadvantage.com

Starnet
www.starnetflooring.com

Preparing for Effective Interviews and Hiring Success

By David Romano, Founder and Owner, Benchmarkinc

Fact: Twenty-nine percent of candidates declined a job offer because of the interview process. That means that at least 29% of the time interviewers make such a poor impression that qualified candidates would rather stay unemployed than work for them. The truth is that few interviewers are trained to conduct excellent interviews and many hiring managers think they can just wing it during interviews, not investing the time, energy or concentration that effective job interviewing requires.

We're all busy, so finding the time to prepare to conduct a job interview can be tough. But if you spend a little bit of time getting prepared, you'll add a lot more value to the hiring process and make better decisions.

Let's start with the three basic issues that must be addressed in every interview:

- **First, can they do the job?** Since you asked them to interview, the assumption is that they have what it takes. Resumes can be falsified, so make sure you ask a few questions to confirm or elaborate on their experience.
- **Second, will they do the job?** This may seem to be a foolish question, but too often, highly qualified employees do not show initiative, enthusiasm, or creativity when faced with problems to solve or even routine tasks. Ask about examples of their past experience and see if they come alive and demonstrate that they take pride in their work and will take responsibility to increase quality levels, ensure customer satisfaction or meet deadlines, etc.
- **Finally, will they fit in?** This question is critical to the successful outcome of any hire for any position. No matter how technically qualified they may be for a position, "fitting in" is even more important. Many employers will take a chance on a less qualified candidate (can you do the job) if the person demonstrates enthusiasm for learning (will you do the job) and if the person appears to fit in.

Now, let's talk about the six most common mistakes made every day by hiring managers, and the steps you can take to avoid them.

- 1. Fail to define a clear picture of the job requirements**
If you don't see a target clearly, chances are you will miss it. Do you have a clear picture in your mind of the performance you want to see from the position you are filling? Are you and the other people interviewing

candidates in agreement on what you are looking for in the person you hire? Make sure to get everyone involved in the hiring process together in a room. Agree on the priorities of the job and the kind of accomplishments that make a candidate a top contender. You might be surprised at how rarely this happens in some companies.

2. Fail to create a scorecard for the interview

Before the first interview takes place, create an interview scorecard that lists the key accomplishments and skills you want in the person you hire. You might have seven criteria (sales skills, organizational skills, leadership abilities, etc.) for which each interviewer scores the candidate from 1-5. This helps you to grade every candidate objectively against criteria that are important for the job.

3. Fail to ask open-ended, accomplishment-oriented questions

If you had to walk into an interview right now, with zero preparation, could you ask good interview questions and learn everything necessary to make a judgment about the candidate? Unless you are a professional interviewer who hires hundreds of candidates a year, the answer is likely no. Having open-ended probing questions prepared in advance is paramount to a good interview. Of course, with more preparation you can ask more focused questions. Open-ended follow-up questions allow the candidate to describe what he or she has accomplished in life and the opportunity to provide details that prove their expertise.



Continued



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Preparing for Effective Interviews, Continued

4. Fail to listen

When you conduct an interview, what percentage of time do you spend talking? In most interviews, if the percentage exceeds 25%, you're talking too much. Here's how to fix that problem:

You should be asking questions, listening, asking a follow-up question, listening, and then repeating the process. Stop telling, and start asking and listening during the interview process. Your hiring decisions will improve.

5. Fail to do a post-game debrief

Optimally, you should have multiple people interview a candidate. If you don't, you should as you will garner the collective impressions of many vs. one. Immediately after everyone has interviewed the candidate, or as quickly as possible thereafter, do a post-game debriefing to discuss your impressions. You'll be amazed at what other people catch that you miss and vice versa.

6. Take way too long to make a decision

Three rounds of interviews, a working interview, and three weeks to get through the interview process is unappealing to candidates. Unless this is a highly sought after job or the candidate is extremely desperate, you will lose a large majority of qualified employees due to your laborious procedure. Offers need to be prepared and presented by the second interview, with the hiring process not taking more than four days.

To avoid a prolonged interview process, the following protocol will have you prepared with a set method in determining the best hire for your business.

Create an interview agenda

Build an outline for the entire interview. The interview should be no more than 45 minutes. Sketch out the framework, with a set length of time for each section, covering information about the company, the job scope, position requirements, compensation, time to find out about the candidate through probing questions, and leave a few minutes at the end for questions and answers.

Zero in on the candidate

Before asking the first interview question, review the job description, especially the hiring criteria, as well as everything the candidate has submitted: resume, cover letter, online profile, and any other pertinent materials. This preparation

is a significant part of the interview process because it allows you to hone in on what you're looking for in the job candidates you'll be speaking with. It should give you:

- Firsthand information about the candidate's background, work experience and skill level. It's your chance to clarify what you learned from the resume, profile or previous interviews;
- A general sense of the candidate's overall intelligence, aptitude, enthusiasm and attitudes, and whether he or she fits the job description; and
- Evaluation of the candidate's motivation to tackle job responsibilities, desire to join the company and ability to integrate into the current work team.

Decide what to ask

Prior to the actual interview, write down questions you intend to ask based on key areas of the candidate's background. While it's a good idea to have a core list of questions you ask every candidate, it's also helpful to jot down some targeted questions in which you wish to gain clarification. Stay focused: Keep your list of questions in front of you during the interview.

Here is an example of a good open-ended probing question:

- What do you consider to be the biggest accomplishments of your life and your career?
 - Why so?

Try these questions in your next interview; you will be surprised at how much you learn. You can also mix up the types of questions you ask, but ask more open-ended questions since they require more thought on the part of the interviewee and will help the candidate open up. Ask hypothetical questions — two or three at the most — that are framed in the context of an actual job situation. Feel free to ask an off-the-wall question to see how the candidate thinks on their feet.

Make every question count. Pay attention to the candidate's answers; don't rehearse your next question in your mind. Although you have your questions written down, don't hesitate to veer from those if you want to reword or follow up on something, or to eliminate questions that were covered in a candidate's response to another question.

Hire the best candidate

After you've given the candidate a chance to ask questions, close the interview by thanking them for their time, and tell them when to expect to hear from you.

Focus on your business needs during your interview process, and **you'll find the best new hire** time after time.

As soon as the candidate leaves from the interview, collect your thoughts and write down your impressions and a summary of your notes. Collect feedback from other interviewers while the interview is fresh in everyone's mind.

Selecting the right person for a position in your business isn't easy. If you find yourself second-guessing your decision, let the hiring criteria serve as your guide. Make sure any changes you make to your hiring criteria are because of a workplace need and not because you're enamored with a particular candidate for subjective reasons. Focus on your business needs during your interview process, and you'll find the best new hire time after time.

Great candidates are very hard to find. Current data reveals that there are three times as many companies looking to hire as those wanting a job in the market at any given time. Thus, further proving the importance of having solid interviewing techniques. If you adopt the above outlined principles, then your chance of losing your next incredible employee is greatly reduced. Best of all, you can spend more time increasing sales in your company instead of conducting an excessive amount of interviews. ○



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Romano is founder and owner of Benchmarkinc and its predecessor, Romano Consulting Group. David's professional career spans nearly 20 years of management experience in the retail, restaurant and consulting industries. His companies have been providing consulting, benchmarking, and recruiting services for nearly a decade exclusively for the flooring and restoration industries.



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Are Safety Incentive Awards Illegal?

By Jeffrey King, General Counsel for the WFCA

Years ago when I worked as a tool and die apprentice, the company gave out awards each quarter if there were no accidents or employee injuries. The idea was to recognize safe practices and to provide an incentive to follow safety standards. Each department worked for and took pride in being recognized for its on the job safety. Today, such a practice would not be considered an incentive to comply with safety standards, but an improper incentive not to report accidents and injuries.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recently reiterated its policy against safety reward programs and, significantly, and has taken enforcement actions against companies that have programs that reward on the job safety. OSHA claims such programs may discourage reporting of reportable injuries and illnesses. Specifically, OSHA has stated:



While you cannot give awards for on job safety, you can recognize the efforts made and the safety records of employees and departments.

Some employers establish programs that unintentionally or intentionally provide employees an incentive to not report injuries. For example, an employer might enter all employees who have not been injured in the previous year in a drawing to win a prize, or a team of employees might be awarded a bonus if no one from the team is injured over some period of time. Such programs might be well-intentioned efforts by employers to encourage their workers to use safe practices. However, there are better ways to encourage safe work practices, such as incentives that promote worker participation in safety-related activities, such as identifying hazards or participating in investigations of injuries, incidents or “near misses.” OSHA’s VPP Guidance materials refer to a number of positive incentives, including providing tee-shirts to workers serving on safety and health committees; offering modest rewards for suggesting ways to strengthen safety and health; or throwing a recognition party at the successful completion of company-wide safety and health training.

This does not mean a flooring dealer cannot recognize employees and departments that exercise good safety practices. In fact, OSHA encourages such recognition. Rather, OSHA is concerned with awards that encourage non-reporting of injuries.

To minimize risks, every flooring dealer should have a safety program. The program should cover retail space, its backroom and storage facilities and any warehouse. The program should include:

- Posting OSHA Workplace Guidelines along with your policy on worker safety and health where all employees can see it.
- Meeting with employees to communicate your safety and health policy, and discuss your objectives for safety and health.
- Training all employees in good safety and health practices.
- Developing and enforcing safety and health rules and requiring that employees cooperate with these rules as a condition of employment.
- Providing necessary personal protective equipment and instructions for its use and care.
- Investigating, promptly and thoroughly, every accident to find out what caused it and to correct any problem(s).

- Making clear assignments of responsibility for every part of your safety and health program, and make sure everyone understands them.
- Reviewing the safety program and the results at least once a year.
- Instituting an accountability system where all personnel will be held responsible for not following work rules designed to promote workplace safety and health.
- Having competent legal counsel annually review your policy.
- Posting periodic reports of outstanding safety service or performance.
- Filing all required reports of accidents to OSHA.

While you cannot give awards for on job safety, you can recognize the efforts made and the safety records of employees and departments. The key is to have a safety program and encourage compliance. OSHA consistently considers whether

there is a safety program that is actively implemented when determining what action to take if it finds a violation

Notice: *The information contained is abridged from legislation, court decisions, and administrative rulings and should not be construed as legal advice or opinion, and is not a substitute for the advice of counsel.* ○



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey King has more than 35 years' experience in complex litigation with a focus on contracts, employment, construction, antitrust, intellectual property and health care. He

serves as general counsel for WFCA and other trade associations, and is a LEED Accredited Professional. For more information, contact him at (561) 278-0035 or jeffw@jkingesq.com.



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CORRECTION:

In the January/February issue of *Premier Flooring Retailer*, the article entitled "Asbestos and Lead Paint is Still Around: Ignore at Your Own Risk" it was stated that, "flooring tiles and glues may legally contain small amounts of asbestos."

It has been brought to my attention by a number of adhesive manufacturers that their adhesives do not contain any asbestos and the problem with asbestos in recently installed flooring is unlikely to be a result of the adhesives. Flooring retailers, contractors and installers should still take the precautions suggested in the article as asbestos has been reported in flooring installed after the mid-1990s.

Ceramic, Porcelain Tiles Take Center Stage

By Annette M. Callari, Allied ASID; Chair Holder Color Marketing Group

Floor covering trade shows are like birthday parties for new flooring introductions. There is much fanfare and press coverage to announce the coming of new products. As exciting as that is, I take a few months to report all of this to you—on purpose. These new babies are in the pipeline, but there is always an interim before you actually see them at retail. Manufacturers scramble to produce samples and inventory for the roll-out. At that point, these newcomers become viable options for purchase. So this article is dedicated to the stand-outs you need to meet.

American Olean

June is the anticipated date for the launch of American Olean's **Bricktown**. Brick is always relevant and timeless, and how ingenious of AO to capture the look in tiles suitable for wall or floor applications. Choose 2" x 8" or 4" x 8" tiles (in six colors) that range from traditional brick looks to surprising, colorful variations.

Crossville

Inspiration from nature continues to be a major influence in porcelain tile. To that end, you can look forward to Crossville launching their new **Oceanaire** porcelain stone. Picture the rhythmic, striated etching of smooth rocks on the ocean floor. This is the sea-swept look Crossville is promising. Five colors and a full range of sizes bring versatility to the design possibilities.

Daltile

Have you already heard that marble is resurging in popularity? Consumers want the rich veining and classic look of marble, but they are not fond of the extreme care you must take to avoid scratching and etching from contact with acidic substances. The solution is coming in June: Daltile is introducing **Marble Attache**, a collection capturing images of extremely unique marble slabs. Marble has been translated into porcelain for years, but finally, something different is on the horizon. The sizes add to the glam: 12"x48", 24"x48", 12"x24" and 24"x24". These are design building blocks that can produce very individualized floors.

Emser Tile

Rural chic is a major design trend, and Emser Tile's **Barn Glazed Porcelain** series brings to market rustic, painted wood-look planks (6"x36") to underscore rural designs. The weathered, time-worn look of these planks is something the flooring market was missing in glazed porcelain. This new entry is a winning (and welcome) addition to their line.

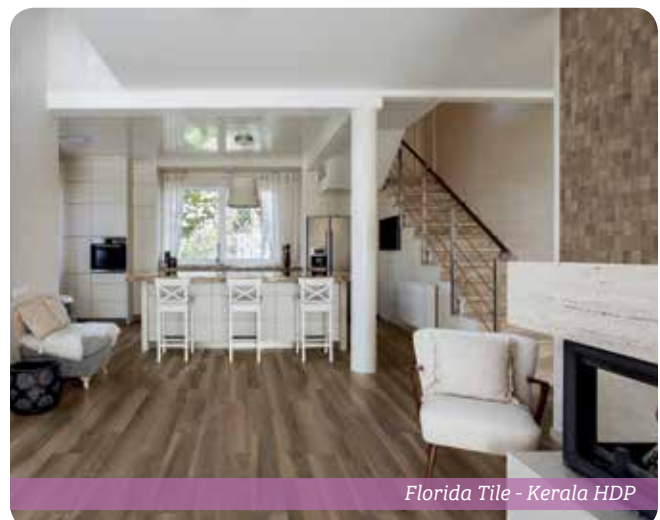


Emser - Barn Glazed Porcelain

In direct contrast to the rural style highlighted above, Emser introduced the **Chemistry** series to capture a contemporary metal look in porcelain. Sizes include 12"x24" as well as 2"x2". Gray, taupe, brown and white in simulated oxidized metal are the colors that define this collection. Interesting without being overbearing—Chemistry is something to see.

Florida Tile

Sean Cilona, Marketing and Product Development Director for Florida Tile, issued an important press release about their new wood-look HD porcelain—**Kerala HDP**. Natural hardwoods provided the inspiration for the new collection, according to



Florida Tile - Kerala HDP

“ Natural materials are the core inspiration, but artistic minds have brought porcelain interpretations to the level of fine art. ”

Cilona, with a “focus on dynamic grains, vivid textures and unique colors.”

In addition, these striking porcelain tiles (available in 6"x24" and 8"x36" planks) have a satin finish and are warm to the touch. One dynamic addition to the collection is a complementary basket-weave mosaic that coordinates with each of the three colors: Russet, Nut Brown and Warm Honey.

Florim USA

Florim is introducing **Magnum Oversize**. This collection gives new meaning to “go big or go home.” Ceramic slabs in nine XL sizes (and five different styles) are in the works from Florim. The 6mm thickness lends itself to both floor and wall installations. Look forward to this large format collection that fits transitional (traditional or contemporary) designs.

Marazzi Tile

This company had a big year in 2015 bringing new styles to market. Especially noteworthy is **Middleton Square**, a British-themed glazed ceramic wall tile suitable for residential or commercial use. The size of these rectangular tiles (4 1/4"x12 7/8") provides a tailored, classic look for vertical surfaces. Colors offered are Windsor Cream, Oxford White, Latte, Urban Mist, Steeple Gray and Black Bean. Bullnose finish pieces also available.

NeolithTile

Neolith is not technically a porcelain or ceramic tile. Though in a category all its own, Neolith deserves to be represented in this column. Daniel Sanchez, the principal of The Size (producer of Neolith) explained: “Neolith’s format and properties are very similar to those of thin porcelain tile (TPT)...but Neolith is not a ceramic or porcelain, but a new type of surface. The brand is the outcome of the latest research and development processes in the industry and is incredibly durable. Neolith comes in several thicknesses — including 3mm (1/8"), 6mm (3/16") and 12 mm (1/2").”

Neolith is actually made from all-natural materials, including clays, feldspar, silica and mineral oxides, and is produced by

a high-pressure, high-temperature kilning process that forms the product. Suitable for indoor or exterior applications, it is lightweight and easy to install for both wall cladding and countertops. Neolith’s newest collection, **Strata Argentum**, brings natural marble designs to interiors.



Shaw

Without doubt, Shaw has made an impressive showing with new introductions in the porcelain tile category since the first of the year. Wood-look ceramic is a particularly hot commodity, and **Dodge City** is Shaw’s contribution to that look. Resembling reclaimed hardwood, the 7"x24" planks come in a palette of four colors, perfectly suited for rustic designs. In keeping with the wood-look trend, Shaw’s glazed porcelain tile, **Independence**, makes a strong design statement with its exotic hardwood visual and high-character graining. 6"x24" and 6"x36" plank sizes are available.

Newcomers **Senate** and **Glacier** both capture distinct features of marble, highlighting subtle veining on neutral backgrounds. Contemporary décor gravitates to more simplified wood grains, and Shaw’s **Voyage** answers that call in an easy-to-live-with, low maintenance wood-visual tile. Bonus: it’s made in the USA.

The range of creativity presented by manufacturers via this year’s tile introductions has surpassed all expectations. Natural materials are the core inspiration, but artistic minds have brought porcelain interpretations to the level of fine art. ●



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annette Callari is an interior design expert with over 20 years of residential and commercial design experience. An allied member of the American Society of Interior Designers and a Chair Holder of the Color Marketing Group International, she is the Southern California commercial sales specialist for Karndean Design Flooring.

WFCA University Starts Regional Training



The World Floor Covering Association (WFCA) has begun a new retailer education program with five courses. The two- to three-day training classes including: *Business Owner Training*, *Sales Management Training*, *Hunter Training*, and *Inside Sales Training* will be conducted throughout the nation. A one-day course, *Installation for Sales People*, will be presented by WFCA vice president professional development Tom Jennings. The courses are open to all industry retailers.

The *Business Owner Training* classes will be conducted by David Romano, founder and owner of Benchmarkinc. *The Sales Management*, *Hunter* and *Inside Sales Training* courses will be presented by industry professionals using proven business methodologies with rock-solid track records all developed by Benchmarkinc.

“Our training platforms were established over nearly two decades to address a broad array of business needs,” said Romano. “What makes them unique is they were inspired by and created by professionals within the flooring industry. Our groundbreaking processes and curriculum includes findings and learnings from over 1,500 retailer and supplier clients,” said Romano. “There is other training out there but you will not find the caliber and content of what we teach anywhere else. It is fresh, tested, comprehensive, all encompassing, easily implemented, and highly effective,” he added.

The participants will learn from those who have “been there/ done that.” Each instructor, who is highly specialized in the topic they will present, offer real-world experiences from not only their full-time jobs in the flooring industry, but also from the handful of camps they teach throughout the year. “We read hundreds of business strategy books and attend many workshops to ensure our teaching methods are right up there with highly regarded business strategists,” Romano said.

Participants leave with a detailed plan of what needs to be done, who needs to do it, and when it needs to be done. “Philosophy without a plan is just noise, and we don’t subscribe to that methodology,” Romano added. “We provide a set of tools that when properly implemented produce staggering results, Romano concluded.

Here’s a brief description of the topics covered during each class.

Business Owner Training

This is a two-day camp for owners. Covered will be the best methods for budgeting, inventory control, sales tracking, setting realistic employee expectations, operational efficiencies, marketing efforts, and driving traffic through organic channels. We even complete a financial comparison exercise to

“The big box stores are eating the lunch of independent retailers so **these camps** couldn't come at a better time. They **teach you** not only **how to compete** with them, but **how to outsell** and outmaneuver.”

teach important metrics that should be part of every flooring owner's arsenal and to determine any deficiencies. Participants will learn what it takes to amp up and grow their business to full potential. What you leave with is a serious strategy for implementation and a game plan of what, when, who, and how.

Dates: Annapolis, August 16-17; Miami, December 6-7

Cost: \$2,500

Sales Management Training

For sales managers and company leaders, this two-day program is designed to take your stellar manager and give them their ultimate strategy to bring you more in net sales using proven industry methods. “We have seen growth of an average of 77% more in sales utilizing these methods,” said Romano. “These skills are based on developing and utilizing constant training. Sales managers are coaches who consistently improve your team's performance. If your managers aren't growing, then neither is your team. Your new sales management strategy will increase sales, boost margins and create systems for sustained growth. Consider these numbers: 3.2% increase in gross profit; 28.6% increase in close rates; \$54,933 more in sales for each sales associate per year.”

Dates: Spokane, June 14-15; Houston, July 7-8;
Raleigh, August 23-24; Phoenix, September 20-21;
Denver, October 4-5; St. Louis, November 9-10

Cost: \$1,295

Hunter Training

A two-day camp for outside sales, a hunter will increase your profits by 126% by bringing the business to you. Learn the 52 segments in your marketplace for the taking; make an irresistible proposal and then close the deal. The camp will show you what works and we'll assist in implementing the hunter system, said Romano. “Our research has shown a hunter increases volume levels nearly 2.5 times while owners earn an additional \$68,805 per year. The premise of this camp is quite simple...in order to get new business you need to have a highly trained professional to go and get it. And when that happens hold on because the ride to increased sales is going to be a very fast one,” he added.

Dates: Denver, May 31 – June 1; Chicago, July 20-21;
Baltimore, August 9-10; Atlanta, September 6-7;
Portland, October 18-19; Los Angeles, November 15-16;
Dallas, November 29-30

Cost: \$1,295

Inside Sales Training

This three-day camp for sales associates will transform your best sales representatives into true consultants. It is great for new hires as well as veteran sales associates that need a bit more coaching to get them to the next level. “This is an all-sales camp without time fillers for product knowledge. Leave that stuff to your reps where it is provided free of charge. In three days, we teach the fundamentals of our complete selling system that spikes close rates, average tickets, and brings a bunch of additional revenue to the store. This camp will take your team to the next level so you are green and growing rather than ripe and rotten,” said Romano.

Following the training program, individual sales associate earnings increased 8%; owners reported a sales increase of over 14%; and average tickets increased 3.5%.

Dates: Philadelphia, May 17-19; Los Angeles, June 21-23;
Sacramento, July 26-28; Indianapolis, August 16-18;
Seattle, September 13-15; Orlando, October 11-13;
Charlotte, November 8-10; Dallas, December 13-15


Cost: \$1,295

Installation for Sales People

The Installation for Sales People one-day class will be held as a stand-alone session or an addition to the Inside Sales Training Camp. Designed for store owners, managers and sales professionals, the class will explain great installation begins at the front door of your store. A better trained staff means fewer costly mistakes, fewer disappointed customers, greater profit opportunities, higher close rates, greater accuracy resulting in fewer lost commissions and increased customer referrals. Better training will result in better relationships with the installation department, fewer misunderstandings and delays with the customer, and fewer call backs. “The class will pay for itself immediately. The cost is truly minimal when compared to the cost of eliminating even one mistake or missing an opportunity to an up sell,” said Jennings.

Dates: Anaheim, June 24; Sacramento, July 25;
Indianapolis, August 19; Seattle, September 12;
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Online Marketing: Why Pay-Per-Click Brings More Customers to Your Front Door

By Josh McGinnis, Owner, Unlock Your Biz

Pay-per-click marketing affects everyone – whether we know it or not. If you use it well, your business will grow. Also, customers see more relevant search results because of pay-per-click (PPC). It's such a native part of search engines that people often don't notice they're clicking on ads. In this article, I'll show you what PPC marketing is, why you need it, what to look for, and what to avoid.

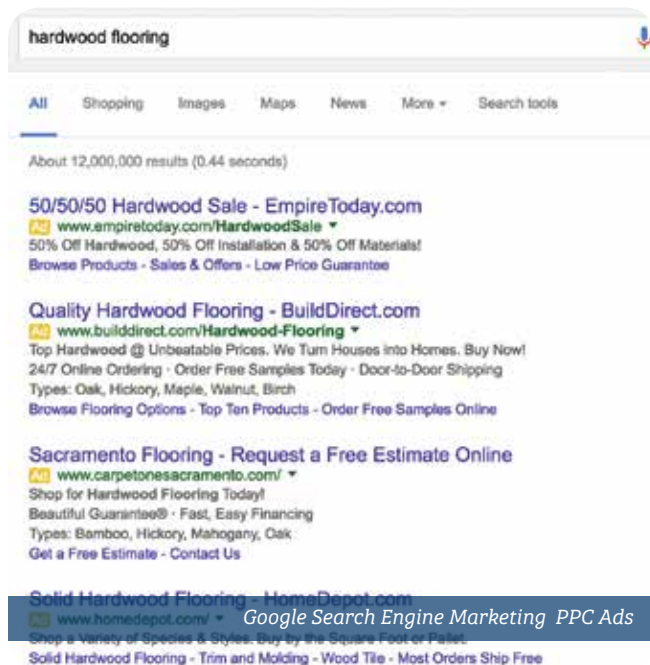
What is PPC?

PPC marketing is advertising within search engine results. For instance, if a customer searches for *hardwood flooring* in Google, they'll see results leading to flooring companies in their area. Some of those results will be ads, as shown in the image below.

Searchers click on paid search ads more than any other form of internet advertising.

Those ads are generated through Google's AdWords PPC program. Each ad is created to appeal specifically to someone who searches for hardwood flooring – a keyword for the flooring industry. Growing retailers spend time and money to gain such high placement. Each company can either monitor their own ad campaigns or pay a service provider to do it for them.

Companies allocate resources to this kind of advertising for one reason. **It works. Here are the steps to get started:**



1. **Create ads** for the services and products you offer.
2. **Set up a campaign** for each keyword you want to compete for. AdWords has great tools to help you find good keywords for your customer base.
3. **Set a monthly budget** for each campaign. Your ads will show as long as there's money left in the budget. If your budget runs out before the end of the month, then that's a good thing! It means your ads reached lots of potential customers.
4. **Start your campaigns** and get ready for an increase in visitors to your site.

There's a catch. Like any ad campaign, you pay for it. However, PPC has one huge advantage over traditional advertising. You have to pay for most ads, such as TV and radio spots, before they run – regardless of how well they perform for you. AdWords, on the other hand, is pay-per-click; meaning, you only pay when someone visits your site by clicking on the ad. Then, and only then, do you pay Google a small fee.

When your PPC campaign is well thought out and running well, clicks become more valuable to you than what you pay for them. For example: if you pay \$1.75 per click, and every 10 clicks (\$17.50) leads to a \$2,500 flooring sale, using PPC is an easy choice.

Using search engine advertising to bring users to your website is the fastest, most predictable way to increase traffic. Your other option is Search Engine Optimization (SEO). SEO is a necessary part of your marketing plan – but it takes more time to bear fruit. Your best call is to combine PPC with SEO. That way, when shoppers click on your ads, they'll arrive at a website full of useful content. If you are able to draw visitors and meet their need for information, you'll gain customers fast.

So, that's what PPC is and what it does for you. If you're ready to add it to your marketing plan, but don't have the time or expertise to manage your campaigns, then you need to look for a service provider. Make sure your service provider is:

1. Google Partner Certified

Find a provider who is a Google Partner (www.google.com/partners/).



They'll carry a Google partner logo somewhere on their website.

If your **website isn't helpful to visitors**, they'll leave the site fast. **Don't devote your money to PPC** until your site is worth driving traffic to.

2. Provides Testimonials and Concrete Budget Estimates

Anyone you're considering to manage your PPC campaigns should have true-to-life testimonials. You can even ask to see examples of campaigns that started out poorly and then made up ground. Additionally, budget estimates are part of your research. You'll be able to tell if your provider understands how to use a budget well.

3. Works on Behalf of their Clients

Make sure your provider grabs the PPC low-hanging fruit keywords that are searched but not over-advertised in your area. Note: include long-tail keywords for the best ROI (return on investment). Long-tails make up the majority of search-driven traffic. Through them, your ads get in front of people who are ready to buy.

Long-tail simply means that you're advertising to people who search for phrases rather than one or two words.

Keyword/Long-Tail Keyword Examples:

- o Flooring/Flooring Retailers in Chattanooga
- o Hardwood Flooring/Installing Hardwood Flooring
- o Tile Flooring/Tile Flooring Installers Chattanooga

Three Things to Avoid

- 1. Budget Black Holes.** Some companies that sell phone book ads also manage PPC campaigns. They often take a 30% commission on PPC where other companies take 15%. Then, they outsource to a subcontractor that manages the campaigns, and the subcontractor takes another 30%. \$100 becomes \$70 becomes \$49 and you only get half of what you paid for. Ask your provider if they manage your campaigns in-house. If they're doing the work, they'll show you how much of your budget is applied to AdWords.
- 2. Wasting Traffic.** If your website isn't helpful to visitors, they'll leave the site fast. Don't devote your money to PPC until your site is worth driving traffic to. First, bring your site up to speed – or find a provider who can help with that. Then you'll be ready to advertise.
- 3. Mismanagement.** Leaving underperforming ads in place is easy. All you have to do is set your campaigns up and forget about them. But weekly – if not daily – adjustment will bring better results. AdWords has tools that can help you see which campaigns are doing well

and which ones are wasting resources. Don't allow your provider to "set it and forget it."

What's Next?

If you're ready to start driving more traffic to your website, it's time to find a good partner. Well-managed PPC campaigns can take your business from good to great. By getting in front of your customers online, you'll lead them to your front door. ○



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh McGinnis is in the top 5% of business coaches worldwide. He specializes in fixing marketing, sales, and people problems so his clients can maximize their growth

potential. His clients routinely outperform the national average for their individual industries. This is part of the reason he has doubled his own business by word of mouth and referrals each year for the last four years.

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5 Ways to Create Differentiation in Today's Marketplace

By Michael Vickers, Executive Director, Summit Learning Systems

Creating differentiation in a competitive marketplace can only be achieved by examining all aspects of your business and then creating a strategy aligned with your brand promise. Flooring retailers need to take a good look at the five areas where differentiation is possible and then focus on the ones where improvements can be made.

Here are five areas that should be examined.

- 1. Technology Differentiation** – Does your business use technology to set you apart from the competition? Are you employing customer management technologies to help you create personalized engagements that set you apart? Your technology should allow you to collect detailed customer intelligence (previous sales, email, etc.) and help you target your engagement through effective segmentation based on your customer's actions, behaviors, and tendencies.
- 2. Price/Quality Differentiation** – Are your products better than your competitors? (probably not, since most area retailers purchase from the same small number of manufacturers) Can you offer a price that is better than your competitors? There can only be one price leader in the marketplace and you can only achieve this through operational efficiencies and your buying power.
- 3. Product Differentiation** – You can achieve differentiation through your products, providing you have an “exclusive” in your territory or market area. If your competition can buy the same product from your suppliers, this probably isn't a good strategy for you.
- 4. Customer Service Differentiation** – This is an area where differentiation is possible, however it requires

you to examine all of your touch-points and determine how you can up-level each one. I would strongly suggest you look outside your industry to find the gems that will make a difference. Whenever you experience a unique customer service event or action with any company regardless of their industry, simply ask yourself if it could apply to your business.

- 5. Customer Experience Differentiation** – This one is critical if you want to differentiate yourself effectively, so let's spend a little more time on this point.

When consumers are spending their money with a brand, they want all touch points with that brand to be rewarding, convenient, and even fun. Brands need to make sure they have access to data and information needed to deliver on those expectations.

So what's the solution for store owners who want to achieve experience-based differentiation?

- Ensure that your customer service is aligned with the messages that you are communicating to your customers. Everything and everyone has to be consistent and in sync.
- Make sure to deliver on your brand promise every time. This is more challenging than you think, especially when the money is rolling in. This becomes more important in a recession or stagnant marketplace.
- Exceed customer expectations. Whenever I ask businesses what they do to exceed customer expectations, I get typical responses like: “We listen to our clients” or “We do what we say we are going to do.” These don't exceed expectations, they barely meet expectations. The rule here is simple. Whoever has the highest customer service in the marketplace just raised the bar for everyone. When I order a computer from Apple, then have it shipped by FedEx, and visit a Starbucks on my way to your store, I'm going to judge you by the same standards as these reputable companies. The mistake that many flooring retailers make is they assume their industry is different from anyone else. Trust me, if everyone else says “please and thank you” and you don't, I can't help but notice. If you want to exceed expectations, look at what the best companies are doing (not in the flooring industry) and model it in your company.



“Flooring retailers need to **take a good look at** the five areas **where differentiation is possible** and then focus on the ones where **improvements can be made.**”

- Create brand experiences that add value. The secret to creating value-adding brand experiences is to identify the stress of your customer, remove that stress better than your competition and then connect in a meaningful way. The stress your customer is experiencing could be coming from the state of the economy. Perhaps they suffered a loss from a flood or fire or they might have time-lines that must be met, such as family visiting for the holidays, etc. Solving their issues better than your competitor will give you an advantage.

In a market that is commoditized, differentiation based on an emotional bond with the customer is both powerful and difficult to do successfully. You will have loyal customers if you can build emotional connections.

The consumer experience must be consistent from touch point to touch point. Unless all departments are aligned with the promise, negative equity because of a failed promise can create customer backlash. On the other hand, the best customer experience creates customer advocacy or word-of-mouth, for which they will pay a premium for it. ○



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Vickers is executive director of Summit Learning Systems, a provider of customized in-house training and e-learning programs; and author of the best-selling book, *Becoming Preferred – How to Outsell Your Competition*. Contact Michael at: www.michaelvickers.com.

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Does Your Website Violate the Americans With Disabilities Act?

By Jeffrey King, General Counsel for the WFCA

You probably never thought that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may impact your company's website. As a retailer, you are well aware of the need for wheelchair ramps, accessible parking spaces, and enough room between aisles to allow customers to pass. But how does the ADA apply to a website? Within this past year, visually- and hearing-impaired individuals have successfully sued retailers under the ADA for failing to make their commercial websites accessible.

The Americans With Disabilities Act

The ADA requires places of "public accommodation" to ensure non-discriminatory accessibility to those individuals with disabilities. Commercial establishments such as restaurants, movie theaters, and retail stores are all considered public accommodations. As originally enacted in 1990, the ADA and its implementing regulations only considered physical places of public accommodation. Commercial internet service was just emerging and any need to accommodate the disabled was not considered.

As companies expanded their online presence, concerns were voiced that the websites were not available to hearing- or sight-impaired individuals. In 2010, the Department of Justice (DOJ), who oversees ADA compliance, issued the Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking. This Notice formalized the DOJ's position that a website is within the scope of the ADA so long as it provides goods and services and falls within one of the 12 categories of public accommodations listed in the ADA, such as a retail store. Although the formal rule creating accessibility standards for websites is not scheduled to be issued until 2018, there is in the meantime a serious risk if a retailer fails to make its website reasonably available to the disabled.

Current Lawsuits

There have been several recent lawsuits over website accessibility. This past March, a blind man in California successfully argued that a Colorado-based luggage retailer failed to make its commercial website accessible to the visually impaired in violation of the ADA and a California disability law. The court ordered the retailer "to take steps necessary to make [its website] readily accessible to and usable by visually impaired individuals or to terminate the website." (Emphasis added). Essentially, the retailer has to either find an accommodation or shut down its website.

A number of similar lawsuits have been filed in federal courts across the country. The courts are finding that websites are a "place of public accommodation" under the ADA, especially

where it offered each of its services or goods to the public through the internet.

The accommodations must be broad enough to allow the disabled access to the store's website. For example, in April 2015, edX Inc., a provider of online classes, reached a settlement with the DOJ over the alleged inaccessibility of its website. The agreement required edX to ensure its website had "accurate captioning for the deaf, oral navigation signals for the blind, and programming changes so those with dexterity disabilities can navigate content without struggling with a hand-operated mouse." The National Association for the Deaf brought a similar suit against Harvard and MIT regarding their online courses.

As companies expanded their online presence, concerns were voiced that the websites were not available to hearing- or sight-impaired individuals.

Employment Applications

The need to ensure the accessibility of websites can also impact employment practices. If an employer uses an online application, then the application must be accessible or the online application may be considered effectively to exclude individuals with disabilities from employment. Fortunately, the Department of Labor, through its Office of Disability Employment Policy, has created a free online tool to assist employers. The Talent Works tool provides general background on accessibility and practical tips for "making online job applications, digital interviews, pre-employment tests and resume upload programs accessible to people with disabilities."

Conclusion

Although the DOJ will not issue its "official" standards on accessibility until 2018, retailers should not wait to ensure their websites are reasonably accessible to the disabled. This is especially true if the customer can order items directly through the website. Recent litigation indicates that private businesses risk a lawsuit if such accommodations are not provided as the ADA expands into cyberspace.

Notice: *The information contained is abridged from legislation, court decisions, and administrative rulings and should not be construed as legal advice or opinion, and is not a substitute for the advice of counsel.* ○

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