

KENTWOOD™ PRO-TIPS

HELP & HINTS FOR FLOORING PROFESSIONALS



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Topic: Oil vs Polyurethane

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Last year we introduced a new line of products into the Couture Collection which are finished with Natural Oil.

These products are starting to get some real traction in the market which is leading to questions about the Natural Oil finish and how it differs from our other products. Here's a brief overview:

Most wood floors – including nearly all Kentwood products - are finished with polyurethane (often called lacquer by European manufacturers). These finishes may be applied in the factory or on site. Sometimes they are strengthened with additives like ceramic or aluminum oxide particles, and the finishing process usually involves applications of several layers. What they all have in common is that they provide a tough, durable **coating** to the surface of the floor, basically sealing it and armoring it against moisture and damage.

Oil finishes work very differently, and are based around the fact that wood is an organic material that interacts with its environment. At a cellular level, wood is similar to human skin; with time and wear, skin dries out and requires moisturization. Regular moisturization replenishes it and keeps it healthy.

Natural oil does much the same for wood. Rather than coating the wood, it penetrates into the fibers of the wood and keeps them nourished and healthy. An added benefit is that over time, repeated applications of oil actually harden and strengthen the wood fibers, in addition to keeping them looking good.

The big attraction of polyurethane finishes is that they last a long time with little need for upkeep. Finish formulations are constantly being improved and their long term wear performance is steadily improving. (Many products carry residential wear warranties of 50 years.)

The big drawback of polyurethane is that if the finish gets damaged in some way, it cannot be repaired or touched up; either the affected

boards must be replaced, or the entire floor must be stripped and refinished. (Some polyurethane finishes may also be subject to flaking, blistering or peeling but that is usually the sign of a defective or inferior finish. These problems seldom occur with premium prefinished products.)

The great benefit to an oil finish is that it will last as long as the floor does, provided it's properly maintained. To be sure, the initial treatment requires a bit of time and effort, but from that point on oil finishes don't need a lot of attention and when they do, it can be done by anyone – you don't need to hire professional refinishers. The other great benefit to oil finished floors is that spot damage can be easily repaired, again without needing to call in professional help.

When it comes to regular cleaning, there's not a lot of difference between the two types of finish. The products and procedures are different, to be sure, but they're comparable in terms of effort and time required.

(Just to throw a small curve into the mix: Kentwood also produces some products which are finished with UV Cured Oil, which is cleaned like a polyurethane finish but can be touched up and refinished like an oil one.)

Here's one way to look at it: refinishing a polyurethane floor is something you might do once in a generation and is a big task requiring professional tools and help. Refinishing an oiled floor is something you do every two or three years, using your own elbow grease, and then only in the areas where it's needed.

One area of difference that does bear consideration is appearance. Oiled floors are generally considered to have a softer, more natural appearance than polyurethane finished ones, but this is less the case nowadays. Many low luster polyurethane finishes do a very good job of mimicking a natural oil finish. They can often be hard to tell apart.

Tip of the Month: Take a few minutes with your showroom staff to view the online video demonstrating the Natural Oil maintenance program. It will give them a good sense of what's involved and make it easier for them to describe the process to prospective customers. It's in the Literature section at kentwoodfloors.com. 

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