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RUBBER UNDERLAY BOUNCES BACK



Steve Woodhead

Interfloor have reported a sustained improvement in sales that began in the summer of 2010 and which has been maintained into the first three months of 2011. The sales growth has been achieved in both underlay and accessories and, interestingly, this includes rubber underlay.

“We’ve been very pleased with our PU underlay sales since the introduction of our new production line last year,” says Steve Woodhead, Interfloor’s marketing director. “Our Tredaire Seventh Heaven PU range has consistently broken both sales and production records as retailers, wholesalers and contractors have switched from competitor brands. However we’re also pleased at how well sales of rubber underlay have held up, especially premium rubber underlays. It’s not unusual to see 50% plus growth rates on our higher specification sponge and crumb rubber underlays. It appears that many retailers are now adopting a portfolio approach to their underlay purchases by combining sponge, crumb and PU.”

So why is this? Interfloor aren’t the first company to comment on this change in buying behaviour. Part of the answer seems to lie in consumer attitudes. “Consumer knowledge of underlay is generally quite low,” says Woodhead, “but many people do recognise what they have bought or used previously. In the vast majority of cases this will be rubber. It’s what consumers are used to. We’ve run consumer focus groups and shown them different types of underlay but we’ve always got the same result – 80% prefer rubber. When you ask them why there are three main reasons. They prefer rubber because it’s what they’re used to, because they think it looks more substantial and, finally, because they think it will last longer.”

Based on these findings Interfloor launched their innovative, and highly successful, Campaign For Real Underlay in 2010. “We wanted to re-focus attention on the considerable benefits of sponge and crumb rubber underlays, says Woodhead. “

We're the only manufacturer that produces all three types of underlay so we think it puts us in a good position to recommend what we think is most appropriate for any domestic or contract application. The campaign features Mr Rubber and we've had a lot of fun with him. It's provided a platform to talk about rubber underlay in a different way – from adverts to sales tools and a web site – www.realunderlay.com. We've been delighted in the response from the trade to this campaign – we've now got more customers buying rubber underlay and we've seen excellent growth from our top of the range products."



Campaign for Real Underlay website

"We even developed a new style of sales presenter so that customers can see the range of rubber underlays available and how these meet the consumers' varying needs around the home. Unlike PU, where the primary variable is thickness, sponge rubber can be more easily "ranged" due to the variety of colours, textures, designs, thicknesses and densities. It's been fascinating how many retailers, who continue to purchase PU, are also happy to place top quality rubber underlays alongside them in their range. "

Interfloor have seen rubber underlay growth in four product segments: luxury sponge underlays (such as Tredaire Colours Red, Colours Green and New Supreme); hard wearing crumb underlays (such as Duralay System 10 and Treadmore); specialist underlays (like Duralay Heatflow for underfloor heating and Timbermate Excel for wood and laminate floors); and, contract quality crumb underlays such as the Duralay Durafit range. "In each of these segments we have market leading products which offer performance benefits that competitor products can't match. Customers value that."



Sales Presenter



Press advertising

So why would this trend emerge now? Woodhead explains, “I think we’ve learned an important lesson about communication. We’ve increased our trade marketing communications activity significantly in the last 12 months, including advertising, direct mail, sales tools and sales promotions. In particular we’ve worked hard at developing a proposition that helps retailers to sell. This applies to all product segments but for rubber underlay it’s about leveraging its innate advantages. Consumers prefer rubber underlay, the best products outperform everything else and it’s easier to up-sell them. The results speak for themselves. We now have more customers buying rubber underlay and we’re getting outstanding sales growth from the best rubber products.”

In the future Interfloor expects more customers to adopt a portfolio approach combining sponge, crumb and PU underlay. “Our policy is to provide whatever type of underlay the trade need. However although there has been a noticeable trend towards PU this is by no means the end of the road for rubber. Quite the opposite,” says Woodhead. “It reminds me of Mark Twain’s comments, upon hearing that his obituary had been published – “reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated!” How true.”