



Dr Paul Lemon The Slips Doctor

New series

Can I rely on national standard tests?

LAST year I wrote a series of articles in **CFJ** on floor surface slipperiness. Now, I'm starting a regular 'question & answer' column. Don't suffer in silence ... the answers to your questions are waiting!

Q: I'm specifying and installing a ceramic floor in a nursing home kitchen; the supplier has told me that the product I intend to use has passed a German slipperiness standard. So it should be slip resistant, right?

A: Well, it has passed a national standard test, so you could rightly hope that it is slip resistant for the particular conditions the test looks at.

It is possible to specify floors correctly based on information from Standards, but decisions should be made very carefully as there are several points to consider, in particular whether the standards apply to the relevant conditions – kitchens in your case.

The German standard test is one of two. The DIN 51097 test assesses how a floor behaves when it is contaminated with soapy water and used by barefoot



pedestrians. The DIN 51130 test is similar, but uses motor oil contamination and heavy work boots.

I've been involved in a number of cases where people have slipped in nursing home kitchens (one where slipping caused a death). In all my experience, I have never seen anyone barefoot in such a kitchen, or wearing heavy work boots! It's far more likely that people using the floor will be wearing sensible, flat-soled, closed-toe footwear.

As a result, the readings from either of the German Standards won't tell you what you need to

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know for kitchen environments. They will tell you, however, whether or not you can use the floor in a walk-in shower area, or in a MOT test station!

A way forward is to have a sample of the floor installed as normal, including any grouting and finishing necessarily before the floor is used. The pendulum test should then be used on the sample. This should give you an accurate idea of how slippery the surface will be during use.

The tester (who should ideally be a member of the UK Slip Resistance Group) should use the contaminants you'd normally expect to find.

These could include clean water, dishwashing solution and cooking oils. Of course, you wouldn't expect to have tests undertaken for every floor you install, so the manufacturers or suppliers should have access to this information for each type of flooring available.

The advantage of this approach is that you'll make accidents less likely by following good practice.

Also, you'll know that if someone does slip on the floor you'll be able to demonstrate you followed good practice. Indeed when HSE does investigate slip accidents, one of our team of HSL scientists is often involved – in order to use the pendulum test in line with the UK Slip Resistance Group guidelines.

Generating accurate data sooner rather than later makes a lot of sense. It's far better to find out that you need to install a more slip resistant product before, rather than after someone slips. **CFJ**

Dr Paul Lemon is a senior scientist at HSL, HSE's in-house laboratory, and has specialised in floor surface slipperiness for over a decade. He is currently leading the largest ever HSE research project into flooring slipperiness.



Martin Cummins on questionable product claims

Small print can give the big answers

THE flooring industry, like other sectors, has been hit by the 'credit crunch'. So, in order to win projects and retain reasonable profitability, you may be tempted to cut corners. Don't! Otherwise you'll be building up to a crunch of your own.

What got me thinking about this was not a cynical view of the flooring contractor, but rather how he could be easily misled into cutting corners.

I was reviewing some datasheets out there (life in technical is never dull!) and looking at the headline boasts and claims that surround many products; some are extremely impressive and tempting.

Often we get a call from one of our sales managers extolling the claimed benefits of a new product from J Bloggs, who claims that it

does everything bar mix itself (there's a thought!!).

They usually conclude with the request 'can we have one in our range?' But the trouble is they have only read the glossy advert or the large bullet points.

Marketing 1: Technical 0

So just as these marketing headlines catch the eye with the lure of potentially savings of many pounds per sq m or time on-site savings; my question is what are the possible consequences of following these product claims?

I recently saw one datasheet that opened with a page of major bullet points. Topping the list of benefits and features was a statement 'No need to prime.'

Further down the document there was the small print which, let's be fair, few of us take the

time and trouble to wade through after we've honed in on the answer we need.

Anyway, the small print contained the contradictory statement 'may need to prime.' So what is the real situation?

The thing is, possibly with this particular product and with others such as the high solid content latexes or the high polymer content water mixes, they may perform adequately well in some circumstances, when you can get away without priming (and there are situations when the benefits of priming are not significant). But do you know when these situations are?

What about those projects where priming is imperative and failure to prime will cause short or long term problems?

Clearly the manufacturer is

rightly protecting itself and its products with the small print and correctly throwing the responsibility at the contractor.

You are the person on-site and know the job, so it is right that it should be your responsibility. However, it is all too easy to be complacent when the lure of the tender is dangling in front of you; it can be easy to choose the option which 'apparently' makes life easier and can make the job cost cheaper (or margins better).

From my experience on many sites where there has been a flooring failure there is usually something that has not been done in accordance with the datasheet.

Errors include applying the adhesive with the wrong trowel, late placement of the

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Sid Bourne on facing up to rogue customers

Four words to get paid: **See you in court!**

HERE's another tale from rogues' consumers gallery. I was called in on a matter concerning a wood floor; the customer was unhappy and refused to pay the invoice.

Arriving at the premises, I found a beautifully installed solid oak rustic grade 20mm x 180mm. This was a large newly built detached house, and the floor looked absolutely fabulous. But the consumer said she was not happy or did not intend to pay the full amount in the invoice.

Before my visit I questioned the flooring contractor. He said he had done everything possible to discuss and explain to the customer the nature of the material, even describing the grading. He had actually left a grading sheet with the customer, who was starting to sound like a 'rogue'.

This was a magnificent house, having new solid oak doors in every room. The flooring was a lacquered pre-finished oak. The customer was moaning about the colour variation and knots which were filled at the factory.

Speaking directly to the customer, I said: 'All this is fully explained in the grading sheet that the contractor gave you.'

To my surprise the customer denied having been given a grading sheet.

OK, I said, 'take a look at your solid oak doors; look at the colour variation; it's the same as your flooring. 'I can accept colour variation on the doors,' she replied, 'but not on the floor.'

I responded that the floor was exactly as it should be and I could see no reason for her not paying the invoice. 'Well,' she said, 'there are several knots which are larger than they should be.'

'How do you know that?'

'The grading sheet had dimensions on it.'

'Just a minute,' interrupted the customer. 'You just told that the contractor did not give you a grading sheet.'

'Oh, I forgot,' she blurted out.

I then proceeded to measure some of the knots and, yes, some were larger but by no more than a few mm. So I told her I would write a report and advise the contractor to take legal advice as I believe he has a very strong case.

I told the rogue customer: 'Should this matter not be resolved amicably, I believe the flooring contractor will win in court as he has all the evidence to prove his case'

'Should this matter not be resolved amicably,' I told her, 'I believe the flooring contractor will win in court as he has all the evidence to prove his case. Remember also that he spent over a week fitting the floor and also put on new oak skirting as well and at no time did you complain.'

'In conclusion, you don't have a leg to stand on.'

'Oh,' she responded, 'I don't think there is any need to go this far, I just want to negotiate. If I keep the flooring I want to be compensated for my inconvenience. I have also suffered stress over this matter.'

I made no comment at this stage, but I think the rogue customer realised full well that she was pushing her luck.

My follow-up advice to the flooring contractor, standing

outside the house, was to demand every penny he was owed. Back inside the contractor asked the rogue customer what compensation she expected.

'Well your invoice is for £8435, let's call it £5000 and I will be happy!'

I nearly choked and so did the contractor. And he wasn't going to argue. 'I'll see you in court,' he told her and left the house.

I duly wrote a report and a court date was set. However, 24 hours before facing the bench, the consumer paid in full.

The contractor involved did everything as he should have done with one exception, and I will keep on saying this until I am blue in the face: **Always get a signature from the customer!**

A signature on paperwork allows the assumption that the customer has read and understood

everything. You then have a great chance of winning in court. Without a signature the odds are stacked in favour of the customer.

However, in this case the contractor had done a beautiful installation. It would have been difficult for the customer to prove any sort of negligence, which is probably why she gave up and paid up.

As a footnote to this story, I later learned that the carpenter who had hung 14 solid oak doors in that house had never been paid. Apparently he gave up trying to get his money. The reason he was given was that the colour variation was not right and the gaps below the door were too large, which they were not.

I'm not going to reveal the name of this rogue customer, but you can find it on a new dedicated website, check it out! **CFJ**

■ www.roguecustomers.co.uk
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Small print can give big answers

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floorcovering or wrong choice of the adhesive. But more often than not, failure is down to poor preparation (the bit that won't be seen by the client at handover!!).

Staying with the priming example or specifically the lack of priming, this is all too often one of the main preparation reasons the flooring installation has failed.

And yes...you may have had many successful installations when you didn't prime, but when failures do occur the remedy cost (and reputation loss) will be far in excess of the original savings and an unwelcome future financial headache in these difficult times.

Remember that beyond the printed product highlights and attention grabbing bullet points, most reputable manufacturers have a technical department – probably responsible for the small print caveats – that will help

you identify the risks for a particular job should you need it.

Even if you don't fancy reading all the way through the small print, at least approach the highlighted features and benefits with a healthy dose of scepticism until you clearly know to what conditions they will apply.

It is also worth noting that as cost-down products arrive, always in a recession, so the risks often increase and that small print has never said so much to you.

I've heard one manufacturer blame 'microscopic airborne particles' as a technical reason for an installation failure, a problem also known technically as "bullsh*t".

That would not have happened if the flooring contractor had read the small print and followed the correct preparation advice. You really should not be giving us manufacturers the opportunity to

blame you.

Difficult times obviously call for ways of cutting costs whilst maintaining good levels of profitability and margin; not all these processes are necessarily bad (reviewing products can on occasions give technical and performance improvements).

But when the focus becomes ways to cut corners then you risk being landed with bigger costs when you have to sort out a problem.

No matter what the economic situation, quality and reputation are still the cornerstones to long-term success, regardless of how competitive the market becomes; it would just be a shame if you lost out in the small print! **CFJ**

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