

the muddling middleman

By Tom McNall

Over the years, I've seen numerous complaints from homeowners promised all but heaven-and earth with their stone from an interior designer or kitchen-cabinet company, only to be left disappointed with the results. When they complained to whomever sold them the stone, they're told that "it's within industry standards."

And you wonder why these homeowners vow to never buy stone again, and pass a bad story to their friends? What left such a bitter taste in their mouth? How could the number-one medium for cleanability (in an independent test of the hospitality industry among other sources) not be loved by Joe and/or Judy Consumer?

Who's responsible? You're probably stumbling over the guilty parties everyday. And, it's something that we have to fix, or it could lead to the demise of an ever-growing market.

For example: Rosa Verona for a countertop? I've seen it!

For a tabletop holding flowers in the middle of a hotel lobby, I don't see a problem with a nice Rosa Verona. But, when I see it as a kitchen island top, I have to wonder, "What were they thinking?"

The answer is that they *weren't* thinking. They left the decision up to a designer who thought that granite was too boring, and that the pattern and veining of the marble flowed with the room.

After working on one such countertop, I asked the fabricator why – as in why you'd sell a marble like that to



Take a look at the marble tiles on the right, and you'll see a fix that prevented a full tear-out of a law-office's floor; in low-light conditions, the honed floor with a color enhancer/sealer is barely noticed. But what warranted this kind of repair? (Photos courtesy TomMcNall)

be used as an island? He said that the homeowners had their hearts set on the color. I asked if he had ever thought of explaining to her the consequences of such a decision; his reply was, "I told her it was a poor choice."

I know that some customers just won't listen. But, how is selling something that will just aggravate them going to increase sales? At that particular job, the top was etched beyond belief within one week. The bill to fix it? \$800.

I'm not a rocket scientist, but that would mean a \$4000 top would cost \$41,600 in annual maintenance to keep it looking new. Of course,

that won't happen. (I don't understand why not - we restoration people need to put our children through college.)

Eventually, the homeowners will either rip it out or cover it with glass. And, they'll likely vow to never purchase stone again, or are convinced by designers to buy man-made materials that are, in their minds, more-predictable.

This isn't an isolated case. We have Negro Marquina being used on hotel-lobby and airport floors, for instance, and limestone and marble going into kitchens and laundry rooms. Consumers, meanwhile, aren't being warned of the dangers.

How is selling something that will just aggravate them going to increase sales?

I believe that all stones have their uses, and all stones are beautiful. Stone is the best covering for any surface. However, some are inappropriate for certain areas, would you want your \$40,000 Persian carpet put down as an entrance mat? Or a house with floors covered entirely in cedar?

The answer is that, yes, these scenarios just aren't practical, and designers and other vendors learned that. And there's the key: They *learned*.

Sometimes, to teach the lesson, you can take the lemons and produce the lemonade. It's something we've done when we're called in to restore floors or counters that literally shouldn't have been installed in the first place – or, to be more precise, the particular locations where they ended up.

For example, let's take a busy lawyers' office lobby with an nice grey geological marble. We're called in because the floor's been waxed repeatedly for 17 years. And why all the wax? Because of the ston marks made where receptionists – usually wearing spiked-heel shoes – walk all day.

The solution: We stripped the coating and refinished the marble everywhere, except behind the reception counter. In that location, we merely honed the floor and applied a color enhancer/sealer. The floor where the receptionist walks all day will be easier to maintain (hone and enhance), and the application of the color enhancer gives the stone the dark wet look without the high shine. It's unnoticeable at a glance, since it's a low-light area anyway.

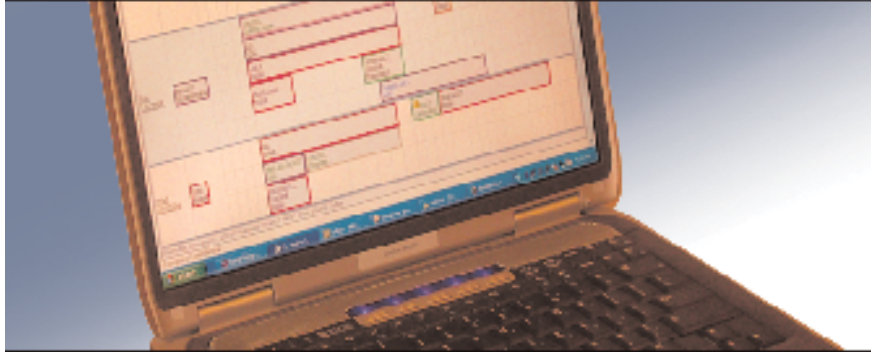
Resolutions like this help the customers live with a stone that doesn't hold up to abuse in certain areas. We have done the same in bathrooms with Negro Marquina floors, since a lack of aim or tidiness around the commode inevitably leads to etch marks. Why fight it? Learn how to solve the on-site dilemmas.

The biggest overall problem is with the middlemen – the interior designers, kitchen renovators and contractors – who have no clue about natural stone and/or industry standards. Too many of the kitchen-counter salespeople sold wood and

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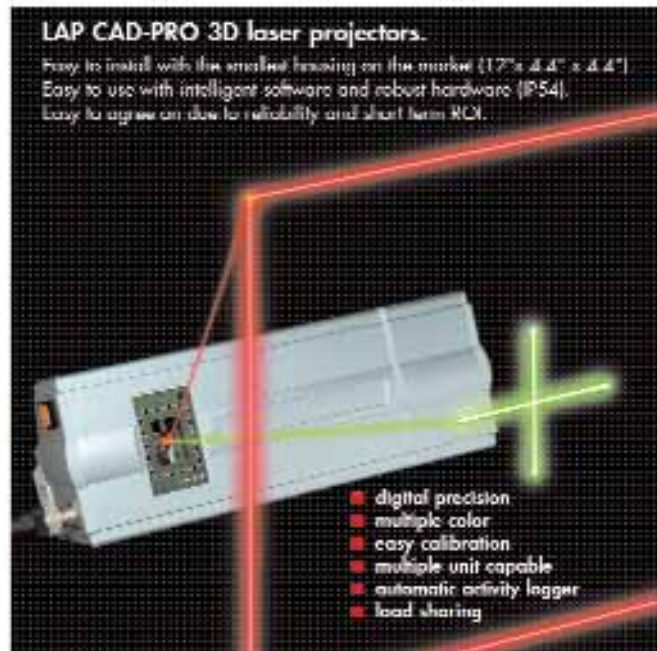
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pressboard cabinets and solid-surface counters for decades, and only recently picked up on stone's popularity. Interior designers have been specifying carpet and hardwood flooring for years, and not granite.

Stone is something that is relatively new to them, but they don't want to look or sound inexperienced. They lack the full understanding of stone and the different limitation. And, with some, they don't appreciate its beauty, and are only treating it like any other commodity.

What needs to be done here is to work toward better communication between homeowners, middlemen and fabricators. The sellers need to start getting an education in stone and realize how and what to communicate to the end user. Otherwise their ignorance will turn off consumers; the end result will be a lack of demand for the prod-



Here's the floor from page 78 before the repairs, and the scuff marks show someone hasn't learned that spike heels and a marble floor aren't exactly a good mix at the office, at home or anywhere.

uct that makes us a living.

It would also be far better to do as a few of my colleagues have done, and refuse to work with designers who are totally bottom-line minded and not interested in helping the end users come to a proper understanding of their investment. Rather than spit

out the "that is industry-standard" line, educate from the beginning. (I know many who do, and they're mostly Marble Institute of America members.)

Only work with middlemen willing to take courses on stone and educate their customers. Of course, this means you and your staff need to be properly educated first.

If we help end users view their stone as a real investment, they'll stop viewing it as a commodity. Or, as a good friend of mine says, "You have to adopt your stone."

Tom McNall is founder and owner of Great Northern Stone Care, a Huron Park, Ontario-based stone-cleaning and -restoration company servicing all of southern Ontario. He can be reached at tmcnall@tomsmaintenance.com. ♦



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