

New Again

Refresh factory-finished floors with a recoat

By Neil Moss

Q: My factory-finished floor is starting to show wear. Can I recoat it?

A: Yes, but the first step is to determine what the manufacturer recommends for recoating your hardwood floor. Several years ago, it was far easier to recoat factory-finished hardwood floors. They didn't have the new high-tech mineral-based finishes used today that make recoating a bit more challenging. Today's new hardwood floors carry multi-year wear-through warranties. While most manufacturers guarantee a wear-through warranty (five to 25 years, for example), even the new high-tech finishes still need recoating at some stage to maintain the near-pristine condition of a new hardwood floor. They may be warranted against wear-through, but they are not warranted against loss of gloss or appearance. We like to say there is no "get ugly" warranty.

The Most Important Step

Normal traffic on the surface of any floor-covering product can eventually cause it to become unsightly. The key to good long-lasting appearance is the right maintenance, but nevertheless, wear will eventually show. Since customers often ask us how to "dress up" the appearance of their hardwood finish, we must first inform them of the need to create a "suitable bondable surface." It's the most important step in the recoating process and involves abrading (scratching) the surface of the old finish to create a mechanical bond or using a chemical system to create the same result.

Creating a Mechanical Bond ... (The Old Days)

The first step in the process is to clean the floor thoroughly. Vacuum first, then clean the surface with a cleaner that is compatible with the recoating product. Remove all spilled and bonded materials like gum and grease before moving to the next step. In the past, sandpaper or screens were used to abrade the floor to create a mechanical bond. We prepared the surface with used papers or screens of 150 grit or finer, or we used abrasive pads. We purposely used worn abrasives to reduce the "scratch potential" so marks were not left in the finish. We knew we'd sanded thoroughly when the finish "powdered," meaning a small white powder residue from the finish was left on the surface.

New Finishes Are More Challenging

Most new factory-finished floors contain some form of mineral or combination of minerals suspended in the finish. These abrasive-resistant minerals often are the same minerals used in sanding materials such as screens and sandpaper. Thus, it is far more difficult to abrade the finish, because the surface is harder (abrasive-resistant) and the minerals in the finish will dull the sandpaper or screen faster. This can be overcome by using abrasive pads with three uniformly spaced sanding strips of 150 to 220 grit. However, an additional challenge is created because the buffer tends to leave scratch or swirl marks, as some of the aluminum-oxide particles can be torn away from the finish and swirled around the floor. You'll need to thoroughly go over the floor to remove scratches. Additionally, few new finishes will "powder" to let you know the floor is ready. Examine the floor closely to ensure the surface is uniformly abraded.

Chemical Bonding

If you have a newer factory-finished hardwood floor, many manufacturers recommend chemical bonding systems to eliminate all or most of the abrading. These systems clean the floor of materials that prevent a bond while preparing the surface to create a bond with the new finish. While the chemical process is complicated, it will either etch the surface or prime it to create a finish bond. Some of the systems require multiple applications of various cleaning and bonding agents. Follow the manufacturer's recommendations closely. Since chemical bonding omits using sandpaper or screens with the buffer, the downside is that scratches in the floor may remain visible under the new finish. However, most systems include instructions for using an abrasive pad to camouflage these minor scratches so they'll blend with the final result.

Final Advice

Once again, it is best to identify the floor manufacturer and installation date. A call to customer service often will lead to information about the recoating system that works best with the floor's finish. A floor installed just four or five years ago may not have abrasive-resistant characteristics that will immediately change the difficulty of the recoating task. It's best to know before you start. ♣

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