How to Buy Church Carpeting

Reprinted from Your Church Magazine

A Common Sense Guide for the Furnishings or Building Committee

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From time to time as a church builds a new building or remodels an older building the need arises for the purchase of carpet. Often the committee has little or no knowledge of carpet, carpet fibers, various manufacturing techniques, or just to how to find the "best buy" on carpet. Unfortunately, too many people buy carpet for the wrong reasons -because it is the least expensive, or because it is the right color.

With hundreds of different carpet mills in the USA making carpet for the world, there's almost an unlimited selection of styles to choose from. However, it is most important to note that the carpet manufacturing process is very similar, even with different styles, and that many mills can make almost any style that any other mill can, if they have the right equipment.

Carpet Fibers

The primary fibers utilized in the manufacturing of carpet today in the United States are nylon and polypropylene (also called olefin), and to a lesser degree polyester, acrylic and wool. Some other fibers are used, but account for less than 1% of the market. The primary fiber used in carpet is nylon, which accounts for approximately 70-80% of the carpet made today. Each fiber has its individual strengths and weaknesses, and these contribute greatly to the overall performance of the carpet. We will examine the two which make up 95% of the carpet manufactured today.

NYLON

Nylon is the strongest of the fibers, and of course nylon is a man-made product, invented by the DuPont Corporation. Nylons are now made by different companies, such as BASF, AMOCO, and DuPont, but generally speaking in all circumstances a nylon fiber will behave and act like a nylon fiber, no matter who manufacturers it. Many smaller mills will in fact purchase end lots of the fibers sold to larger mills (who have permission as large buyers to use trade names such as Stainmaster, StainRelease, Masterlife, etc.,) and while the smaller mills manufacture carpets under less popular names, it is often carpet of equal quality. They often will, however have a much better price on the carpet.

Nylon's strength is in abrasion resistance (difficult to wear out), ease of coloration or dyeing (this makes custom dyeing possible with nylon cut pile carpets), and a very plush or finished appearance. Nylon also has the ability to "bounce back" making it more crush resistant than other fibers and easier to maintain. Nylon's weakness is that it is not stain resistant by itself, which means that it must be treated with Scotchgard or some other fiber treatment in order to become "stain resistant" . Once treated, nylon carpets have only a 7% soil absorption rate - making them a favorite! Since nylon carpet is usually dyed after the carpet is made, a good choice of colors is available, as well as custom dyeing.

Nylon is also available in a new form, called Nylon 6.6. The 6.6 refer to the number of carbon atoms used in each molecule. (The standard nylon is nylon 6.0). The newer nylon 6.6 is slightly firmer and has fewer pores, or open dye site. This means that it is more difficult to dye, but also means that it is more difficult to stain with wet stains.

OLEFIN (also known as POLYPROPYLENE)

Olefin is the second most popular fiber accounting for approximately 15-20% of the market today. Olefin is a naturally stain resistant fiber, and does not need to be treated to be stain

resistant. It's soil absorption rate is only 3% and even lower if it has been treated. (Many manufacturers will treat olefin simply because they know the public likes to see "Scotchgard" on the label, even though it does not need it). Olefin fibers also are generally solution dyed fibers, which means the fiber is made with the color already "built in". While this means a smaller color selection is available in olefin carpets, at the same time the colors cannot fade out due to a strong sunlight in exposed areas, and generally harsh detergents, chemicals and even bleaches will not remove the color or hurt the fibers.

Unfortunately, olefin tends to mat easily if made into a cut pile or plush carpet, and because of this one does not generally see olefin cut pile carpets. Furthermore, olefin is heat sensitive, and one needs to realize that dragging a table across an olefin carpet can melt the fibers (so can a hot coffee pot placed on the floor). Olefin fibers are usually made into level loop style carpets, and are best utilized in education areas, food service areas, and other areas where spills are likely to occur. Generally, level loop olefin carpets are a little less expensive that cut pile carpets, although the color selection, as noted above, is somewhat limited. While olefin is not as abrasion resistant as nylon, olefin carpets are nonetheless an excellent value for the price.

Carpet Quality

As noted previously, a nylon fiber will act like a nylon and an olefin will act like an olefin whether it is a name brand or not. The construction used in manufacturing the carpet, as well as the fiber used and application for the carpet determine the quality of carpet. The difference between residential carpet and commercial carpet today is determined first by construction, then fiber.

Quality is determined by fiber, pile height, stitch count, and needle size of the carpet-tufting machine. A tufting machine is 12 or 15 feet long and is the machine that sews or tufts the fiber into a backing material, called the primary backing. As this

machine operates, there may be anywhere from 700-1600 needles operating on a single machine. One measurement used to determine quality is to multiply the number of stitches per inch times the gauge of the needle to get the number of stitches per square inch. For instance, a 1/8-gauge needle tufting 10 stitches per linear inch gives 80 stitches per square inch, a fairly tight construction. The tighter the stitches are together, and the shorter the loop, the better the quality of carpet, and the less tracking (footprints) and soiling will occur. The best pile height for a church is about .25 -. 33 inches, to help eliminate tracking and soiling problems.

OVERBUYING CARPET

It is easy for today's church leader to want the very best for the church, yet it is important to realize that the best commercial carpets today are made to go into shopping malls, hospitals, major office complexes, and other areas where they get thousands of foot-prints each day. At that rate, they will last 10-20 years before wearing out. In the average church, the congregation will use carpet only 3-5 hours per week, and it is not necessary to pay for top quality when many fine, less expensive carpets will handle the job nicely. The fact is that the average church will build or remodel every 20 years, replacing carpet since they are tired of the colors, while their carpet will likely last 50 years or more. As good stewards of God's finances, we can get good quality and good value at the same time, and have the color we want - if necessary by having the carpet dyed for little or no extra money.

CHOOSING A VENDOR

Many times we buy things based on the lowest price, yet in many cases price is only one consideration. Service questions are also important, such as, how will it get to the church, and who will unload the truck? It usually takes a forklift or special handling tools, and common carrier truck lines will not unload the carpet at the church.

In addition, if there is a problem with the carpet, and you subcontract a local person to install the carpet (as opposed to the company selling the carpet) you may have a real problem. Many times the mill will say it is an installation problem, and the installer will say it is a carpet quality problem, and you will be stuck with the problem! It is best to use one firm to purchase the carpet, install it, and stand behind it.

It is most important when buying carpet, not to give in to high-pressure tactics from telephone sales, but to realize that carpet is not sold directly from mills. There are a number of companies which promote themselves as "carpet mills" selling direct, when in fact, they are not mills but resellers just like the local store.

MEASURING

Most reputable dealers will measure from your plans or building site at no cost to you, however, don't expect them to give you the yardage information. They don't want you to call every dealer in town after they have done the hard work of measuring for you. Ask for a complete job price, considering the removal of old carpet, moving of furniture, timetable, etc.

While proper carpet measuring involves a complex "take-off" of your plans to determine where and how the carpet can be laid, a quick way to double check numbers is to determine the square footage of the building as follows:

Measure length of area x width of area

Example 30' x 50' = 1500 square feet

Add 20% to this for measure adjustments - 1500 x 120% = 1800 Sq. feet

Divide by 9 to get the square yards - 1800 /9 = 200 square yards estimated.

Don't forget that risers, stairs and other vertical areas will add to this figure.

SUMMARY

Buying carpet can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, as it is generally the last "construction material" to be installed and will give a finishing touch to your church facilities. Ask questions, compare quality, and look for a fair price to determine your best carpet value.