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Can we be Proactive in Preventing RH Problems for Wood Floors?

Wood flooring contractors, retailers and inspectors are all-too-familiar with issues associated with moisture and the shifts in relative humidity throughout the seasons that can wreak havoc on wood floors. Too often, these issues are addressed after the fact, once a wood floor has a problem and the customer is upset.

The good news is there are relatively simple solutions to maintaining the necessary RH in just about any customer's home. The challenge is changing the conversation in the wood flooring industry to be proactive instead of reactive about moisture problems caused by drastic fluctuations in RH. Can we help customers understand RH issues and protect their wood floor investment before damage is done? Absolutely. By asking the right questions and recommending the right products, a situation that is frustrating for both consumers and retailers can be avoided.

Starting the Conversation

Of course, assisting a customer in the purchase of a wood floor is a two-way conversation. It's impossible to sell a consumer the right floor without important information about a potential customer's expectations for cost, location of the floor and aesthetic details. However, helping someone make a selection on the style and species of floor is only the first step. Homeowners must understand why certain options are better for their application and how to care for their specific wood floor, ensuring they are happy with their purchase for years after the sale.

Peter Ricci, owner of Speers Flooring in Oakville, Ontario, is a retailer who understands this concept well and has made customer education a part of the sales process at his store. The cold winters in Canada cause indoor RH to drop considerably, often causing gapping in solid wood floors and dry-cupping and face-checking/splitting in engineered products. Once the temperature drops, Ricci expects the phone to start ringing. Members of Ricci's sales team, such as Mark DeViller, often field these calls.



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“When customers call about gapping, I always ask the same question first: What is the relative humidity in your home?” DeViller says. “I almost always get one of two answers: ‘What is relative humidity?’ or ‘I don’t know.’”

Most wood floor experts have a pretty thorough understanding of RH and moisture issues associated with wood floors. They do not necessarily need to be HVAC experts to provide the proper recommendations to customers—they simply need to understand what the needs are and how to connect homeowners to the right solution.

The Homeowner Conversation

Ricci and other flooring retailers recommend that once consumers have chosen their flooring materials, the conversation should turn to long-term care and maintenance. While warranties and maintenance tips often mention humidity control, it’s best to have a discussion that highlights the relationship of wood and water and methods for controlling it. The salesperson can also ask a few questions to determine how much control the homeowner currently has:

- How large is your home?
- Do you have a whole-home humidifier or dehumidifier?
- Do you know what the relative humidity of your house is right now?

Customers who currently own humidification products may not have them on or may have failed to maintain them. They may be also using smaller portable dehumidifiers or room humidifiers that are unable to add (or remove) enough moisture throughout the home.

A great way to avoid a frustrating conversation down the road is to recommend that consumers measure their indoor humidity with an RH meter and install a whole-home solution. This protects not only their wood flooring, but also their furniture and other woodwork in the home, all while making the living environment more comfortable for people, too.

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How One Retailer Does It



Selling customers a simple hygrometer or including one with their purchase can help emphasize awareness of RH and its importance in keeping wood floors comfortable year-round. (Photo: Shutterstock)

At Speer's Flooring, Ricci has inexpensive weather stations with the company's logo for sale at checkout, and his staff encourages all customers to purchase one. Deviller also recommends whole-home products for consumers who don't have a humidifier or currently use a room humidifier.

"I tell them, 'If you have one, make sure it's working properly. And if you don't have one, get one!'" Deviller says. "And if they're using portables, they need to make sure they are using one in each room and that they are filled and cleaned properly."



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The RH meter initiative, along with having more direct conversations with customers about RH, has provided positive results. “We are getting fewer calls,” Ricci says. “Considering how cold it was last year, I really expected a lot of phone calls. But even with the polar vortex we received fewer calls than the year before.”



Courtesy of Aprilaire

There are many products designed for specific applications and needs. Understanding these basic applications and explaining them to customer’s helps homeowners realize the importance of improved humidity control. In some instances homeowners must raise RH; in others they must lower it.

The bottom line is this: The flooring retailers and contractors who are winning the battle against RH-related wood floor complaints are those who have learned to elevate the conversation with customers beyond a brief mention buried in the maintenance instructions or the warranty.

Regional Options



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Regardless of where a wood floor is installed, humidity control is necessary. RH levels change throughout the course of a season, month and even in a single day. Protecting a wood floor means controlling humidity so it remains within the manufacturer's recommended range all year long.

While the specifications sound intimidating at first, homeowners and installers should keep in mind that there is nowhere in the country that humidity in the home cannot be improved. However, the exact solution for maintaining proper RH varies depending on the region.

In most cases, wood floor damage is a matter of too much moisture at one point in the year and too little at another time. The most severe damage to wood flooring occurs from moisture changes: The wood expanding when it absorbs water and then contracting when dry air pulls it out. When severe enough, it's a chronic and abusive process for a wood floor.

However, not all homeowners face the same challenges when it comes to controlling humidity, so solutions for whole-home humidity control vary. The size and age of a house, its foundation (basement, crawlspace or slab) and even the daily routines of family members can influence how much moisture is in the air. During times of the year when too much humidity is the problem, a whole-home dehumidifier is the best solution. High-capacity dehumidifiers are able to control moisture levels in every room, protecting a wood floor regardless of what level of the house it is on.

In climates where the furnace runs during the dry months, an evaporative humidifier is usually enough to keep humidity within acceptable ranges. This appliance distributes water onto a panel, and the moisture is then carried through the house as the furnace distributes heat.

For homeowners in the arid western climates, a dehumidifier is rarely, if ever, needed, but humidification is, and there are now humidification options that can battle some of the driest air. While evaporative humidifiers are popular across much of the country, they need air flow from a furnace to distribute moisture. Since homeowners in the desert often don't run a furnace, it's difficult to supply buildings with the immense amount of moisture needed to stay near manufacturers' recommended ranges. In these areas, steam humidification is a solution. With steam, moisture can be introduced to the air year-round, even when there is a need to cool the home.



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Bringing it All Together

For wood floor retailers and contractors who understand the value of an educated (and ultimately satisfied) customer, the big question is how to get there. The conversation about humidity needs to happen, but realistically no one expects salespeople to spend 45 minutes explaining RH and psychometrics to consumers on the showroom floor. And it's not necessary.

With an understanding of your regional climate, some unique information from the customer and good literature, you can quickly elevate this conversation—and provide a real solution.

I recommend a few simple steps for contractors and retailers looking to be more proactive about educating consumers about humidity control:

- Add sales/showroom literature that explains available solutions for humidity control.
- Offer RH meters when you sell wood flooring to encourage properly maintained humidity levels in the home.
- Enlist the help of HVAC experts.

There is potential for an incredible symbiotic relationship between wood floor retailers and contractors and their local HVAC professionals, who are IAQ (Indoor Air Quality) specialists. While humidity control is just one aspect of providing a customer with a quality hardwood floor, it's one with a huge impact that requires the right equipment and expertise.

Whole-home humidity control provides wood floor contractors and retailers with the chance to be more than educators when it comes to flooring protection. RH meters and showroom literature teach the consumer about indoor RH—but it's humidification products that ultimately control it and protect wood floors for years to come.



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Humidity Control Q&As

Q: What is the typical cost of a whole-home humidifier?

A: The consumer price for a professionally installed evaporative humidifier ranges from \$500 to \$800 and works for most homes up to 4,200 square feet. For larger homes and those in arid climates, an installed steam humidifier ranges from \$1,800 to \$2,500. A professional IAQ specialist can help a homeowner choose the best product for his or her unique application and budget.

Q: What is the difference between steam and evaporative humidifiers?

A: Evaporative humidifiers use a furnace's heat draw through a water panel to turn water into vapor. A steam humidifier heats water to its boiling point and creates steam. Both units use the home's HVAC ductwork to distribute humidity throughout the entire house. However, steam units can also be fitted with a blower pack if ductwork is not available.

Q: Do whole-home humidifiers require lots of maintenance?

A: Both evaporative and steam humidifiers installed with an HVAC system require very little maintenance. An annual water panel or steam canister change is all that's recommended to keep them in working order.

Q: Will people using whole-home humidifiers get condensation on their windows?

A: If the humidity level is set too high for the outside temperature, then, yes, water may streak down a home's windows. However, with an automatic digital humidifier control, the amount of moisture released into the home is adjusted depending on the outside temperature. This delivers the optimal amount of humidity without creating condensation.