

SOLID SURFACE UPDATE

BY CHUCK GREEN



A buyer's guide to the expanding number of new product choices

As the popularity of solid-surface materials continues to increase, the six leading manufacturers have expanded their product lines to include a much broader range of styles and colors in both sinks and sheet stock. While more choice is good, it can be confusing for the customer. Contractors who understand the differences among the various products can often “jump start” a stalled client who is confused by too many choices.

Styles, material composition, and warranty are all important factors to consider when choosing a solid-surface product. Here's an overview of what's available.

Avonite

Avonite was the second solid-surfacing product to come on the market, and is available in 45 styles, including 16 Granites, 13 Crystelles, 10 Formstones, and 6 Gemstones.

Avonite is the only company that offers a choice of material composition. The company's Advantage series is manufactured from a mineral-filled (aluminum trihydrate) polyester base and has a Class-1 flame-spread rating. The Decor series is made from an unfilled polyester and has one of the deepest translucent looks on the market. This series is not as hard as the other products, and should not be used in “high wear” areas. Its Class-3 flame-spread rating may restrict its use in some commercial applications.

Formstone, Avonite's third series, is made from an acrylic-based composite that can be bent using a thermo-forming process.



Certification

Avonite offers a three-day fabricator class at its Belen, N.M., manufacturing plant. Shops seeking to attain advanced Certified Master Fabricator/Installer status must maintain a minimum product volume, have low warranty claims, and undergo a shop inspection.

Warranty

Products that are installed by a Certified Master Fabricator/Installer are warranted by Avonite for ten years. The warranty covers materials and reasonable labor charges, and is transferable, providing a written request is sent registering the new owner.

For more information, contact: Avonite, 1945 S. Hwy. 304, Belen, NM 87002; 800/428-6648.

Corian

Created in the mid-'60s and manufactured by the Du Pont Company, Corian is probably the most recognized name in solid-surfacing.

The acrylic-based material is available in 51 styles and three price ranges. The styles are grouped into five series:

- Genesis: the least expensive series, comprised of ten solid colors
- the Sierra and Vanaro series: fifteen simulated granites and six veined swirl patterns
- the Jewel series: six very dark granites that are difficult to fabricate due to their high polish
- the Summit series: nine "large particled" simulated granites
- the Magna series: one of the best simulated stone looks on the market

Certification

Corian's Assured Quality Program is one of the most stringent in the business. Only Certified Fabricators are allowed to purchase unfinished materials. Fabricators seeking certification must meet specific criteria, including published price lists, full-time sales personnel, and minimum purchasing volumes. Training seminars are available through most distributors, with training centers located in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, California, and Illinois.

Kitchen and bath dealers must have an approved showroom and a trained sales staff before carrying the Corian product lines.

Warranty

Du Pont's ten-year residential warranty covers materials and labor, and is transferable, as long as the new owner registers the installation with Du Pont Co.

For more information, contact: Du Pont Co., Corian Products, Chestnut Run Plaza, P.O. Box 80702, Wilmington, DE 19880; 800/426-7426.



The Fuss Over Fabrication

It used to be that anybody could purchase solid surface sheet goods. But now most solid-surface manufacturers require that would-be fabricators "pass the test" before allowing them to purchase and fabricate sheet stock.

What caused this shift in policy? Those who no longer have access to the product often claim that the restrictive policies were established to help manufacturers "fix" the pricing. The logic typically offered by these disgruntled contractors is: "If you control who fabricates, then you can control the price."

In reality, though, the manufacturer's moves were based on the need to honor the generous warranties they offered without going broke.

Solid surfacing, often described as nearly indestructible, employs a joinery method called "invisible seaming." Is it any wonder that customers have high expectations when choosing this high-end product? When installations are less than perfect, customers immediately look to warranties for relief.

To control the cost of callbacks, manufacturers initiated certification and accreditation programs. As a result, the reduction in complaints was substantial.

In 1991, Du Pont launched its Assured Quality Program — a controversial move that left a lot of fabricators unhappy. Tom Young, of KBQ Inc. (New England's largest Corian distributor), based in Massachusetts, explained that when the program began, the firm's customer base went from over 200 down to about 65, but resulted in only a 5% drop in sales. Complaints, however, dropped by 85%.

So the next time you hear somebody mumble, "Yeah, I could make those counters, but they won't let me buy the stuff," you'll know the reason why.

Even though fabrication quality has improved, it's important that customers be presented with realistic expectations. Seaming should be referred to as "inconspicuous," not "invisible." Care-and-use product literature should be carefully reviewed by customers so they are aware of the limitations of the solid-surface material — that hot pan from the stove should never be placed directly on the counter, for instance. It's also prudent to avoid high gloss solid-surface finishes in kitchens: The work counter activity will quickly dull the sheen.

Contractors should make sure that cabinets are installed level (plus or minus 1/16 inch in 10 feet is a good target tolerance), and appliances should be on site so any required cut-outs can be laid out while referring to the actual appliance instead of product cut-sheets. The most common solid-surface failure is a crack at the corner of an appliance cut-out. Be sure that a fabrication off-cut is left with the installed counter. If a later repair is necessary, the off-cut will provide matching material for patching. Many fabricators feel it's easier to match a "matrix" style than a solid color, because the random pattern of the matrix helps conceal the joints.

— C.G.

Gibraltar

Gibraltar, which used to manufacture both acrylic and polyester solid-surfacing material, has discontinued its polyester product line and now produces a 100% acrylic material. The company's three products lines — Tempest, Solid, and Mirage — offer a total of 24 styles in solid colors and simulated granites.

Samples and literature can be had in 24 hours by calling the company's "rocket chip" delivery service at 800/433-3222.

Certification

Fabricators must be accredited, and Gibraltar offers advanced classes at its Texas training facility. To become accredited, fabricators must train at an approved fabricator's shop, and be able to purchase the \$2,500 to \$5,000 tooling typically required for fabrication. Trainees spend 16 to 18 hours following a Recognized Fabricator Program administered by a regional specialist.

Warranty

Gibraltar carries a ten-year warranty covering the full installation when installed by a recognized fabricator.

For more information, contact Wilsonart International, P.O. Box 6110, Temple, TX 76503; 800/433-3222.



Fountainhead

Fountainhead is a polyester-based thermoset product. Its product lines are grouped as Solids, Classix, Matrix, and Expressions, and are available in four solid colors, thirteen simulated granites, and six "large aggregate" simulated granites. Unlike other polyester-based solid-surface products, Fountainhead can be "mildly" thermoformed, but to a lesser degree than acrylic-based material.

Distributors set their own policy when deciding who they will sell "raw" material to. Fabrication training is available through distributors and at Nevamar's training center in Odenton, Md.

Certification

Certification is not required to purchase sheet goods, and sales policies are decided at the distributor's level. To become an Accredited Fabricator, a factory representative inspects a fabricator's previous work and shop arrangements.

Warranty

Nevamar will repair or replace the product or refund the purchase price if its product fails due to manufacturing defects within ten years after installation. Labor is not covered under the warranty.

For more information, contact Nevamar, 8339 Telegraph Rd., Odenton, MD 21113; 410/551-5000.

Solid Surface Underfoot

Mention solid surfacing, and most contractors think of smooth, high quality kitchen counters. But a relatively new application of this durable product — floor tile — is now being offered in Formica's Surrell.

Surell's solid surface tiles are 1/4 inch thick, and range in size from 8x8 inches up to 8x48 inches. Surell's list of applications includes kitchen and bath, residential, and light commercial flooring.

Before recommending this product to your customer, you may want to consider the price. The list prices for the Surrell tiles range from \$36 to \$56 per square foot. And these costs don't include the epoxy adhesive required to set the tile.

— C.G.



Surell

Surell, manufactured by the Formica Corporation, is a polyester-based solid-surface material available in 33 different styles found in four different product lines. Eight solid colors are available, as well as fifteen standard simulated granites and ten specialty simulated granites in their Mist and Revolution product lines.



Certification

Surell has one of the least restrictive sales and fabrication policies on the market, with training seminars available through area distributors. No certification is required. Company representatives routinely conduct seminars at distributors throughout the country. Private training for dealers is offered at Formica's training center in Ohio.

Warranty

Surell's ten-year warranty is nontransferable, and covers only manufacturing defects. Failure of caulked or filled joints or seams is not covered under the warranty.

For more information, contact Formica Corporation, 10155 Reading Rd., Cincinnati, OH 45241; 800/367-6422.



Swanstone

A reinforced, modified acrylic, Swanstone can be had in five solid colors and thirteen "aggregate" styles. Swanstone was the first manufacturer to offer stock simulated-granite sinks that matched their aggregate tops. These stock sinks can be used as "drop-ins" with other manufacturer's solid-surface counters, but because of incompatibility between different materials, should not be "seamed in."

In an effort to reduce fabrication costs, distributors also inventory lengths of partially finished tops. The back-splash and front edge treatment is complete on these blanks, and fabricators choose the appropriate size top, cut it to length, and seam it on site. Distributors claim savings of up to 20%.

Finished counters can be purchased through kitchen and bath dealers and lumberyards. Only certified fabricators can purchase partially finished counters or sheet stock.

Swanstone also manufactures 1/4-inch-thick sheet stock, which unlike other solid-surface products, is glued to a full particleboard substrate. The contact cement used to glue these 1/4-inch sheets to the substrate permits the two dissimilar materials to expand and contract at different rates. Edge treatments and backsplashes are "hard seamed" to the 1/4-inch solid-surface material.



Certification

Training is available at Swan's Centralia, Ill., facility, or at a qualified fabricator's shop. Trained fabricators are qualified as Certified Fabricators.

Warranty

Fabricated tops carry a ten-year limited warranty on materials. Labor charges incurred during any warranty repair are not included under the warranty.

For more information, contact The Swan Corp., One City Centre, Suite 2300, St. Louis, MO 63101; 800/325-7008. ■

Chuck Green is a NARI Certified Remodeler, and operates Four Corners Construction in Ashland, Mass. Thanks to Desavino & Sons of Olyphant, Pa., for assistance in preparing this article.