

Seven Questions to Ask Before Letting Any Floor Refinisher/Installer into Your Home

A Consumer Guide from Applied Wood Products, Inc.

by Chris, Geoff, and Chip Mako

1. What material do you use for a sealer coat?

Bad answer: Lacquer

Some flooring companies “splash and dash” with lacquer. Because it dries in 20 minutes, they can put down 2 coats in one day and save a trip to your house. a sealant with a 70° Fahrenheit flash point.

Lacquer dries in 20 minutes, can put down 2 coats in one day. Is the speed worth it? Lacquer can catch fire while wet – occasionally, “splash and dash” companies burn down a house.

The other problem with lacquer is that it doesn't stick to the wood very well. In technical terms, lacquer adheres weakly. What does this mean for you? Slide a chair across the floor and you can peel it right off.

You should work with a company that uses polyurethane exclusively.

There are two kinds of polyurethane: oil-based and water-based. If your wood floor company uses oil-based, they should be applying three straight coats. Depending on humidity, it can take 8-24 hours for the first coat to dry completely. If it's raining outside, oil-based polyurethane takes a long time to dry. Don't let anyone fool you by laying down two coats in a day – they're trying to save money at your expense.

Water-based polyurethane dries quicker, but requires three to four straight coats (depending on the manufacturer) to reach full strength. No matter what anyone tells you, when you're sealing and protecting natural wood, you can't short-cut quality.

How do you choose between oil- and water-based polyurethane? Oil-based polyurethane takes longer to dry, so the smell stays in your house longer as well. Water-based is more expensive and more labor-intensive, but you get your house back (odor-free) quickly. It's also considerably tougher than oil-based, and can take a lot more abuse.

They also differ in appearance – oil-based is honey colored, while water-based stays lighter. If you want to stain the wood before sealing, the color difference doesn't matter that much.

The Applied Wood Answer

Applied Wood Products uses oil- and water-based polyurethane exclusively. We will never short-cut on quality or risk a fire – we’ve been around since 1986, and about 80% of our business is by referral. Doing good work is just good business.

2. Will your insurance company fax or mail me your certificate?

Bad answer: We’ll fax you one ourselves.

This is a strange question – why not just ask the wood floor company to produce their own insurance certificate? Sadly, some fly-by-night companies scam homeowners by letting their policies lapse after paying for the first month. But they keep the certificate on file in their office and are happy to show you a copy. (One very good reason not to shop on price alone – when something’s the cheapest, always ask yourself why!)

Why is insurance important?

To prevent two possibilities.

One, that they get hurt on the job and end up suing you personally. Their workers must have insurance that protects them in the case of accidental injury. (As an aside, never let a worker on your property if you don’t have adequate homeowner’s insurance. One slip and you could get sued and lose your house.)

Two, that they damage (or totally destroy) your house and leave you high and dry.

The two types of insurance you want to see are workman’s comp and liability. If there is any question whatsoever about the coverage or the validity, run away and find another company! The risk is simply not worth taking.

The Applied Wood Answer

Yes, our reputable insurance agent will fax or mail you a current certificate of insurance.

We’ve been around for a long time. We are only flooring company on the architectural plans for respected architects Beer and Coleman. We can afford the right insurance to protect ourselves and our clients, and we aren’t tempted to cut corners for a few extra bucks. We’re in this business for the long haul.

3. Is your price an estimate, or a firm quote?

Bad answer: It’s firm, but of course things may come up...

Unfortunately, we hear of a fair amount of “bait and switch” in the wood floor industry. It’s not hard to understand why: installing or refinishing a wood floor is a serious investment, so homeowners are tempted to save a few bucks by going with the cheapest quote. After all, all wood floor companies can say the same things before they start working on your house, even if they can’t all deliver them.

So if the lowest bid often gets the job, some companies bid low and then insert various “weasel clauses” into the contract that allow them to charge you much more than their original “estimate.”

They know that once you’ve prepared your house for a job, it’s very inconvenient to change your mind and try to schedule another company to come in. You’re stuck with them and their “oh, by the way” extra charges.

The only way to avoid this is to sign a contract for a firm quote, not an estimate. Make sure that’s what you’re signing.

The Applied Wood Answer

This quote is firm. Sign here, and that’s exactly what you’ll pay.

To be fair, not all “extras” represent rip-offs. Sometimes unexpected things come up – existing boards turn out to be rotten, moldings can’t be replaced, etc. But our philosophy is, that’s our problem, not yours. If we misquote because we didn’t notice or find something, we eat the difference. We stand by our quotes.

When you call us for the first time, we give you a ballpark estimate over the phone. That’s not a commitment, just a basic idea of what we think the job will cost, based on our 17 years of experience. We don’t quote you a firm price until we’ve visited your home, looked over everything, and talked with you about your exact needs.

Once we give you that quote, it’s binding as long as you sign within two weeks.

4. Can you give me the names and phone numbers of three local clients you’ve worked with in the last three weeks?

Bad answer: Here are the same three references we’ve been giving out for the past two years.

Let’s get real: every wood floor company is going to tell you they do great work. We sure will! But the only proof is the work itself, and we’re all only as good as our last job. You have a right to know whether your wood floor company’s most recent clients are happy with the job.

When you do call, here’s what you want to know, at minimum:

- Did the workers arrive as promised and do the work as scheduled?
- Were you happy with the job?
- Did they take care of your property?
- Did they respond immediately to your concerns?
- Was the quote accurate, or did you get surprised?
- How does it look?

- Did they follow up to make sure you were thrilled?
- Did they educate you to care for the floor?

Don't be shy about asking these and other questions – remember, if your wood floor company only gives out the names of recent clients, they're only going to receive calls for a couple of weeks.

The Applied Wood Answer

Yes! Here they are! Feel free to call them.

Of course, we ask for and receive your permission before giving out your phone number, and we don't give it to more than a couple of prospective clients. That's one of the nice things about doing so many jobs in Morris, Somerset, Hunterdon, and Mercer counties – we always lots of very happy, very recent clients to choose from.

5. What do you do to control and remove dust?

Bad answer: Don't worry about it. We're very neat.

Neatness is good – but make sure you get specific answers. Cutting and sanding wood produces a lot of dust – there's no way around it. Some companies see this dust as your problem. They'll do a quick and dirty vacuum, run a rag over the floor, and leave you with a giant dusting job. Try getting those tiny particles out of your upholstery!

You want your wood floor company to treat your property as if it were their own. Find out what their exact protection procedures are.

The Applied Wood Answer

We hang plastic to protect the rest of the house.

We understand that it's your property, and you want it to look better after we leave than before we came. Our care for your property extends beyond cleaning up our dust. We will never:

- trample your shrubs
- crush your lawns
- lean against your walls with dirty hands
- leave cigarette butts in your driveway
- leave beer cans lying around
- treat your house any differently than we would treat our own

6. What is the basis for your quote?

Bad answer: It's just what we charge.

There are a lot of ways to make a few fast bucks at your expense. We'd like to warn you about the most common.

Stealing by Inflating the Square Footage

This applies both to refinishing and new floors. It's relatively easy to add 5% to the square footage – who's going to check the measurements? And some wood floor companies justify this theft by telling themselves that 5% of the wood on a job gets wasted anyway. But why should you pay extra just because they of normal wood waste?

Check the measurements. For at least a couple of key measures (like the length and width of the living room or dining room, take a tape measure and make sure your figures agree.

Stealing by Using Lower Grade Materials

All wood manufactured in the US is graded and stamped based on its quality. The standard builders' grades are Select, No. 1 Common, and Clear.

If you've paid for Select and you see your wood stamped No. 1 Common or No. 2 Common, reject it before it gets installed. Someone's selling you cheap boards and pocketing the difference.

If one quote is significantly lower than another, you have to find out if the low bid is just cutting costs, or also cutting corners.

To evaluate bids of different amounts, make sure you're comparing apples to apples. Are both companies quoting for the same type of wood? The same type of finish? The same number of coats?

The Applied Wood Answer

Our price is based on this particular material, this particular finish, this many coats, this exact square footage, and this much for any extra work.

With us, you'll know exactly what you're getting so you'll know how to compare it to other bids. We're seldom the cheapest bid, for a good reason. We always strive to be the best value, using high quality materials and experienced people.

One last thing about price: the quote can't reflect the quality of workmanship. Make no mistake – creating a beautiful and long-lasting finish for a wood floor is a trade and an art. It's much more than passing sandpaper and a brush over your floor.

To find people who care deeply about the quality of their work is always a challenge. We can tell you about our commitment to quality until we're blue in the face, and so can all the other companies you could call. The only way to judge is to check our references, if possible to see samples of our work, and to make sure the contract you sign protects you at least as much as the company who wrote it.

7. Will you teach me how to keep my wood floor beautiful for years?

Bad answer: Just keep it clean.

Wood is the longest-lasting floor material in the world. Many old houses in Central New Jersey still have wood floors that were installed over 100 years ago. While linoleum and carpets last maybe 10 years, and wood laminate can last 20, real wood is virtually ageless. It doesn't discolor like vinyl, or crack like ceramic tile. You just have to know how to take care of it.

Keeping your floor clean is good advice, but not specific enough. You need to know what kind of cleaners and devices will nourish or harm your wood. You've got to deal with spills, with pets, with high heels, and with humidity in just the right way.

You've got to protect your floor with the right kind of rugs and mats in the right places. And you need to be able to call the company that installed or refinished your floor to ask questions and get recommendations without worrying that they'll just sell you an unnecessary refinishing job.

All types of wood are different, and require different types and schedules of care. You need wood floor experts, not just to give you information up front, but also to support you to keep your floors beautiful for the life of your house.

The Applied Wood answer: We give you detailed care instructions, and welcome your questions for as long as you have them.

We're wood floor experts. It's all we do. Not only do we understand the properties of common American woods like oak, maple, and cherry, but we learn about and install over 900 varieties of exotic, sustainable woods from around the world. A big part of our expertise is knowing and teaching how to best care for each of these varieties.

We have a very selfish reason for helping you keep your floor beautiful for many years. We spend very little on advertising – we prefer that our work speak for us. Your beautiful wood floor is our most effective form of advertising – the longer you keep it beautiful, the most effectively it refers your friends and neighbors to us.

Next Steps

We hope this Consumer Guide helps you protect yourself and make a wise choice when it comes to installing or refinishing fine wood floors.

If you like what you've read, and you want to talk to us about your wood floor needs, we welcome your call. Before we try to sell you anything, we will find out exactly what you want and why.

We're wood floor consultants, not salespeople. We'll help you discover what you need, and be mindful of your taste, your use of the room, and your budget. We will never be the cheapest option, but we will never rip you off.

Applied Wood Products is a family owned and run business located in central New Jersey, near Hillsborough. The owners are the Mako brothers, Chris, Geoff, and Chip. When you call our office/warehouse at 1-800-731-9663, you can talk to us and hear us laughing and yelling at each other over the din of telephones, fax machines, and delivery trucks.

We look forward to your call, and for the opportunity to provide you with long-lasting wood floors that will enhance the value and beauty of your home forever.

What Some Clients Are Saying

"I Like to Get Them On as Many Jobs as I Possibly Can"

Applied Wood has been our suggested wood installer for about 15 years. They do excellent work. I like to get them on as many jobs as I possibly can. Chip is very knowledgeable in wood, and he's always done an exceptional job for our clients. We're very happy to recommend him.

Doug Coleman
Principal
Beer & Coleman Architects
Warren, NJ

"I recommended you without hesitation"

I wanted to personally thank you for the beautiful hard wood floor you installed in my home in Bridgewater. My husband and I were very pleased with the quality of your work. Visitors have complimented my husband and I on how lovely our living room looks.

When my dad expressed interest in having the hard wood floors in his Metuchen home refinished I recommended you without hesitation. Dad was thrilled with your promptness for appointments, professional manner and reasonable price. Over 50 years ago he had handpicked each section of the hard wood floors & installed in his house (which he built). The care of your workman on handling the job is appreciated. The floors are gorgeous.

Sincerely,
Anne Furnari
Bridgewater, NJ

“The whole process went smoothly”

Chris, I would just like to take a moment to thank you for a job well done regarding the installation of our new hardwood floors. The whole process went smoothly from beginning to end.

A special thanks to your installation crew. Their attention to detail made all the difference.

Our floors look beautiful.

Thanks again,
Mary Jo and Rich Eckhard
Belle Mead, NJ

“Beautifully re-sanded & re-finished”

I just wanted to let you know how happy I am with my beautiful re-sanded & re-finished floors. You can see the reddish tint in the red oak wood.

The job was professionally done with no “waves” made in the wood.

Daniella Ferraris
South Plainfield, NJ

“Thank you for your attention, responsiveness, and a top-notch job!”

Dear Chip,

I just wanted to send you a brief note of thanks for all your work and advice as we began the process of installing our wood floor.

Not to diminish your input, however, my wife and I would especially like to ask that you express to Vinnie our thanks for a job well done. His attention to detail and the pride he has in his work were apparent and made us all the more comfortable with our selection of the Merbau and of Applied Wood.

Again, thank you for your attention, responsiveness, and a top-notch job!

Regards,
Richard Ramage
Long Valley, NJ

“Thankx a Million!”

Chip –

Thankx a Million! The Floors are Beautiful! Don't be a stranger... Come visit your gorgeous make-over.

Jennifer Rehmann
Flemington

“Spectacularly beautiful floor”

Dear Chip, Chris, and Geoff,

Thanks for all your help, advice & expertise in installing our spectacularly beautiful floor.

Please stop over to see it – it really “makes” the room – and feel free to name us as a reference for other clients of yours.

We'll certainly keep you in mind for future work.

Thanks again.

Best regards,

Christine Lupo
Interior Designer and Decorator
Califon, NJ

“A Beautiful Job”

Dear Chip,

Thank you for a beautiful job finishing our floors. They look wonderful – please pass on our appreciation to Walter.

Yours sincerely,
Mary Harps
Princeton, NJ

To see if we can please you like we've pleased our other clients, give us a call, toll-free, at 1-800-731-9663.

Feel free to pass this consumer guide to a friend!

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