

Untangling the web for consumers



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Here's what I learned about myself when I visited the new consumer education website developed by the World Floor Covering Association to help its members drum up new business. After answering a few multiple choice questions—which of these lamps would you pick, which mansion comes closest to your “dream house,” etc.—I was informed that my style can be best described as “Rustic Reflections.” According to the website, this means I believe “life’s greatest role model is Mother Nature” and that I “crave the organic, avoid the artificial and celebrate what’s real.” That all sounds very flattering, thank you. I’ll take it.

I was pleased with this assessment, but that is partly because the others style types—“Seaside Simplicity,” “Urban Chic,” “Italian Impressions,” and “Stately Elegance”—sound nothing like me. Now, I’m not sure I “crave the organic,” (unless “organic” includes a juicy steak and a cold Heineken) and, admittedly, living in Los Angeles makes it tough to “avoid the artificial and celebrate what’s real.” But WFCA’s new website is very impressive. After all, it could tell I am an earthy kind of guy. Someone who favors wood grain over acrylic. More L.L. Bean than Brooks Brothers. So, now that you know something about my style, what kind of flooring do you think I should buy? That, you see, is the whole point.

The new site, www.wfca.org, is, by far and away the best of its kind. It is clear, easy-to-use and, most important, it is unbiased. No deep-pocketed manufacturer has a banner ad splashed across the screen. No one is twisting arms to get a fee from those who want to be included in the “find a retailer” search. The WFCA’s new website is an excellent example of how to bridge the gap between the powerful array of products our industry sells and people in the market for flooring. Generally speaking, consumers are oblivious to all the flooring options available. Many simply wander into a big box retailer and buy the equivalent of plain vanilla. With the help of the WFCA site, retailers now have

a fighting chance to usurp that business. For consumers, the site makes floor shopping far more intimate and personal. There is a huge difference between selling something and helping someone achieve a beautiful home.

Broadening people’s expectations and drawing on the passion they feel for their homes can catapult a retailer from mediocrity to big time success. It also helps traditional retailers harness the power of the web so that it becomes an ally, not a competitor.

Websites that conjure up decorating ideas are not new, of course—creating “virtual rooms” has become commonplace. But WFCA’s Virtual Room Designer encourages you to experiment and be daring. You can mix and match flooring materials and color schemes in a variety of room settings. Also increasingly common are sites that link a user to a nearby store. In fact, efforts to use the web to draw people into brick and mortar stores are coming from all corners of the industry. Some eager to become the one source for information look like there are simply climbing on the bandwagon with a “me-too” approach that is more likely to confuse than inspire. I went to one flooring website and entered my 323 area code (which covers nearly half of L.A.), but was informed the number of flooring stores in my area was zero. None, apparently, had paid the required fee to be listed.

The WFCA has set itself apart from this “me-too” approach. The site includes “What I like” questions and questions about lifestyle (How many kids do you have? Do you entertain?). It directs consumers to member stores (it listed dozens when I entered my zip code) but it reminds them that those listed have agreed to a code of conduct. Of course, the WFCA’s chief objective is to generate new business for its members. It is not trying to steer people to specific manufacturers. WFCA didn’t do this to make money. It did this to help its members and make life easier for consumers. That is why wfca.org is really the best flooring website out there. And remember I “celebrate what’s real.” 