

# Less (Luster) is More

Keep tabs on prefinished sheen level trends

By Luc Robitaille

**Q:** Why are low-luster hardwood floors becoming more popular today?

**A:** While already popular in Europe, low-luster hardwood flooring is gaining popularity in North America and offers a wide range of benefits for consumers. By becoming more familiar with these benefits and the basics of low-luster floors, you can make the most of this trend.

## Bountiful Benefits

While the traditional belief that “shiny” or high-gloss flooring is the most attractive option among hardwood products, there is a new trend toward low-gloss floors, which offer a number of benefits for the homeowner. First, low-luster floors hide small scratches and dents better than their high-gloss counterparts. This can be an important benefit for people with pets or small children. The wear and tear from animals, toys and heavy foot traffic is more noticeable on a shiny floor and is more difficult to “hide” or repair.

And, as you might expect, low-luster floors are easier to maintain and clean than high-gloss varieties; it is easier to keep the natural look of the floor because there is less “shine” to maintain. Again, this is less work and less worry for homeowners, especially those who live in areas where harsh weather conditions bring a lot of moisture and dirt into the house.

## Meaningful Measurements

How is flooring luster measured? The luster, or “sheen level” of a floor is determined by how the flooring surface reflects light at a particular angle. The luster is measured with a small device called a glossmeter, which measures the amount of reflected light from the light beamed at a given angle onto the floor. The glossmeter compares this value with the black-glass standard, which has a defined refractive index of 100 “gloss units.” While it’s common industry practice to describe the luster level as a percentage of this given standard (i.e., 60 percent luster), some refer to this figure as a gloss unit. For identifying categories of luster or gloss, flooring is often classified as one of three levels: low gloss (25 percent or less), semi-gloss (25 to 75 percent) or high gloss (75 percent and above).

## Where Has the Shine Gone?

As mentioned earlier, low-luster floors are already popular in Europe, and we are seeing an increased demand for it in North America. Many lower-luster products in North America are offered in approximately 30 percent luster, while those in Europe are at nearly 0 percent luster. As the trend toward low-luster finishes in North America continues, expect to see even lower luster finishes.

Homeowners or new-home buyers looking to catch the latest design trends should follow the rise of low-luster floors, an up-and-coming phenomenon in the new-home market. Interior Designer Patricia Gaylor of Little Falls, N.J., says that the low-luster look is quickly catching on in both flooring and wall treatments, and reflects a broader trend toward creating a calm, sophisticated look for the home. “Floors should be seen, not heard. A low-luster finish highlights the color and texture of the wood more than a shiny finish and creates a sophisticated, timeless look that provides a softer, quieter atmosphere in the home,” Gaylor says.

## Knowing Finishes

Before taking a closer look at low-luster floors, one should ask how the flooring was finished and consider the effects of the finish on the final product. Until recently, the only low-luster factory-finished floors had an oil finish (not to be confused with an “oil-based” or “oil-modified” polyurethane finish). With advances in factory-finishing technology, these lower luster floors are now available in topcoat-type finishes, such as urethane and acrylic finishes. These topcoat finishes are typically more resistant to scratches and dents than those with an oil finish, and this added durability could be important depending on how long the consumer plans to live in the home, and if they have children, pets, etc. Topcoat-finished floors also offer easier maintenance that, again, could be very important depending on a person’s individual needs and lifestyle.

The trend toward low-luster floors looks like it will be around for some time to come, and more consumers could be asking for it in the months and years ahead. By knowing the benefits of low-luster floors, the distinctions between finishes, and why this product is becoming so popular, you can educate your customers and maximize your opportunities from this new trend in flooring. ♣

*Luc Robitaille is vice president of marketing for St. Georges, Quebec-based Boa Franc Inc., manufacturer of Mirage Prefinished Hardwood Floors.*

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