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“Q: Hey Kitchen Guy, we are currently putting together a plan to remodel our kitchen. We have been quite surprised at the wide range of cabinet prices and lead times. How do I know if I am getting good quality? How come some companies need 6 weeks and others can deliver in three days? How do I know if these cabinets are made with safe materials?”

A: Ouch, you just hit a nerve. There has always been a wide range of pricing and quality in residential cabinetry. Typically in the past there was some correlation between quality and price. Cabinet classifications or groups ranged from “Builders Grade” or “Stock” at the low end through “Semi- Custom” to “High Custom”. However, in recent years we have seen a huge influx of RTA (Ready to Assemble) or flat packed cabinetry into the market place, most of which is imported from countries with much cheaper labor and material cost. Few can argue the effect that RTA cabinetry is having on the US market place.

Moreover, given the economic pressures on the market place, many dealers and contractors have taken to “upselling” RTA cabinetry. In short, they say or imply to their customers they are getting higher quality product than is the reality. Often left out of the conversation is the country of origin, the lack of oversight when it comes to material safety, lack of construction standards and factory support or warranties. This trend has caused many reputable dealers and contractors great frustration.

As a consumer, here is what you need to know or ask when purchasing cabinetry: Does the cabinetry you’re purchasing come with the “Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association”(KCMA) seals? Does the manufacturer qualify or participate in the KCMA’s “Environmental Stewardship Program” (ESP)? Do they comply with the “California Air Resources Board” (CARB) standards? Where and how are these cabinets manufactured and shipped? What is the warranty and how is it administered?

How important is the KCMA seal? It certainly can be important and I see no reason why a mid-size or larger manufacturer shouldn’t invest in getting and maintaining the certification. Having said that, not having the KCMA seal is not necessarily a deal breaker. Many small cabinet manufacturers may not be able to justify the expense involved in the certification and custom millwork houses don’t make standard cabinets that they submit for testing because by their nature everything they do is custom. In the absence of the KCMA seal, I suggest you ask more questions about the construction of the cabinets until you are satisfied with the answers or decide to move on. Honest manufacturers and dealers should be able to answer your questions forthrightly and quickly. If you are not satisfied with the answers move on.

Does the manufacturer qualify or participate in the KCMA’s ESP program? The importance of this question is subjective; however, it stands to reason that you will be selling the house someday with the kitchen you are installing now. Do you think environmental concerns will be more or less important to perspective buyers in the years to come?

Do the cabinets you are purchasing comply with the “California Air Resources Board” (CARB) standards? If you live in California this is very important. If you live outside California it may not be important now but who knows what standards might be adopted in your locality in the future.

In what area is the cabinets you are purchasing manufactured? The further away cabinet manufacturers are from their source materials, lumber for instance or customers, the higher the shipping costs. If your cabinetry is coming from half way around the world and the costs are thousands less than other quotes you should ask about the quality of the cabinetry.

Where and how are these cabinets manufactured and shipped? This is the key issue, if you start hearing phrases like “assembled locally” or they are shipped “ready to install” watch out. Any cabinet dealer has specification books that detail their manufacturer’s construction details. If a dealer can’t produce this information quickly run don’t walk out the door. Most cabinets are constructed with dowels, screws, glues and various forms of braces and or face frames. Typically, RTA cabinetry is put together with “Locking Cams” and not much else unless the carpenters choose to beef up construction in the field. This is the same type of construction found in the flat packed utility cabinets and book shelves found in the big box stores. Your cabinetry will be exposed to everyday use, at least one over stuffed drawer ☺ if you’re like Ms. Kitchen Guy, and will need to support a heavy counter top not to mention an occasional adolescent or adult that might use the counter for support. I, for one, would not be comfortable knowing all that weight was resting on a few locking cams. Nor would I be comfortable putting Grandma’s china in an RTA product.

What is the warranty and how is it administered? Who stands behind these products? Typically the first call someone makes on a warranty issue is to the dealer they bought it from. But what if that dealer isn’t in business or carrying that line anymore? Now you need to go to the manufacturer directly. This is when you want to know you bought a quality brand not a cheap import with a cool sounding name.

In defense of the RTA cabinet industry if you are informed of what you are buying and understand the risks involved and the origin of the products you should be given that option, safety and environmental issues notwithstanding of course.

As a concerned cabinet dealer and installer what should I do to advise and guide my clients in this process? How can we stop this flood of bad imports? How do I balance the risk of working with potentially hazardous materials with the lower cost benefit? How do I handle or educate price driven clients? How can we level the playing field to compete with the cheaper imports and unscrupulous dealers and remodelers that sell cheaper or riskier products?

What should I do to advise and guide my clients in this process? Plan, plan and plan some more. The three most important aspects to a successful kitchen remodel are a good plan, a detailed budget and the right people executing the project. See my previous article “Kitchen Commandments” for more detail. As the process unfolds, the clients become more educated in the process. The more informed your client is the better the decision making. Moreover, the better your understanding of the client’s situation, the more effective you can be.

How do I balance the risk of working with potentially hazardous materials with the lower cost benefit? With respect to installation issues I would not want any of my clients, employees or contractors dealing with products that might prove hazardous when cabinets are cut and particles are air borne. To the best of my knowledge, US cabinet manufacturers are required to keep Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for all materials being used in their plants. This is for both employee safety and consumer safety.

However, imported items are not held to those standards. Given the issues builders have had in recent years with imported drywall products not to mention the careless disregard some foreign manufacturers displayed using lead paint on children's toys, I am not willing to take chances with the health of my clients or employees or contractors.

How do I handle or educate price driven clients? There will always be a certain percentage of the market place that is determined to use the same skills developed through years of bargain hunting at the mall to remodeling the largest investment of their lives. My theory for those of us that make a living building, remodeling and fixing things is we must realize you can't fix stupid.

How can we level the playing field to compete with the cheaper imports and unscrupulous dealers and remodelers that sell cheaper or riskier products? Education is the key. A greater effort must be made through responsible trade groups like National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI), KCMA and the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA) to educate consumers and the sources they use for information like Angie's List and other home improvement resources to the risks.

As for manufacturing, an effort must be made to urge the federal government to require foreign manufacturers seeking access to the US market to meet the same manufacturing and product safety standards that US manufacturers are subject to. Moreover, a testing and certification process should be put into place (similar to the EPA's RRP rule for lead) requiring importers and those selling imported products to test and certify they are safe to use.

Ironically, by suggesting the Federal and State governments actually try to help US manufacturers, tradesmen and small businesses, I am also testing my theory about fixing stupid. I digress.

The American consumers get what they demand. Ultimately, if the American Consumer doesn't demand better, safer products, none will be offered. Perhaps if we as consumers demanded more US made as well as certified safe products instead of better paying jobs, we could have both. There I go testing that theory again.