When 34 contractors from around the country were canvassed about their use of acoustic ceiling tiles, they basically demonstrated that the industry is alive and well, with market share paralleling distribution channels. While the Big Three manufacturers (Armstrong, USG and Celotex) dominate the market, they do so with little difference among each other's products, or indeed those of the smaller companies.

As one contractor from Washington put it, "We use the three big manufacturers and frequently others like Gordon, Steel Ceilings, Ceilings Plus for the specialty ceiling applications. The large companies have by far the most competitive pricing, the greater range of products, and many more architectural reps working in every state to have their products specified on the job."

A contractor from Michigan agreed with the general idea, saying, "USG has a good product. We don't necessarily think that all products in USG are better than those of Armstrong and Celotex—some of theirs are much better! But we just prefer USG because of the relationships we've developed with the manufacturer's reps and suppliers."

In Kentucky, another contractor added, "which tile we use depends on what is specified by the architect. Most
of the time, the manufacturers have equals for every other manufacturer’s tiles, and the architects will accept an equal substitute. USG and Armstrong, for instance, have pretty much the same make-up of mineral fiber tiles, and they have both their problems and their good qualities. People in the field don’t see that any one manufacturer’s tile has any advantage over the other.”

A Good Workman Never Blames His Tiles

When asked which aspects of ceiling tiles or their installation could still use some improvement, 20 out of the 34 surveyed had some suggestions or requests. A contractor from South Carolina best expresses the general opinion when he says that “ceiling tile is ceiling tile. It can only really be installed in a certain number of ways, and the ceiling companies have worked hard to make it easier.”

The quality of tile is an issue for three contractors, however. “They need to handle the sagging tiles,” noted a contractor from Alabama. “Being in the industry, I always look at other people’s work whenever I go out to a restaurant or anywhere else. I keep seeing tiles sagging in the middle and popping up at the corners. The industry says it is working on handling the sag issue and some companies even have a 10-year ‘sag-free’ tile, but I haven’t seen any that last that long.”

For a contractor from Texas, the fact that “most tiles are still brittle and don’t respond well to being taken in and out without chipping,” is an issue. “They could be more abuse-resistant,” adds a Kansas contractor.

“Quality control sometimes goes out of whack,” says a Michigan contractor, “with different color runs or small stones in half the products.”

Wishing hopefully with his eye on the bottom line, but without offering any ideas, a Connecticut contractor wants to see a system that is even quicker to install.

Also looking for easier application is a Missouri contractor: “The one thing I’d
When 34 contractors were asked about their use of acoustic ceiling tiles, they basically demonstrated that the industry is alive and well, with market share paralleling distribution channels.

like to see made a little easier is the radius in the ceilings.”

To Change or Not?

Then there are the two contractors who are not too happy with the continual changes in product line. “Every year there are 20 different types of tile,” complains a Floridian. “They need to quit changing so often, as it’s hard to keep up with and it creates a continuity problem—sometimes you can’t replace old tiles.”

Looking on the brighter side, however, a Massachusetts man points out that, “Standardization is what we need. Maybe I am just getting too old to remember all the different styles we have today. When manufacturers drop certain lines or change colors, we can’t match what was done before when we go into rehab. But then again, we get to replace the whole ceiling, so that may not be that bad!”

One contractor from Illinois is in favor of the continual change and product development: “Ceiling tile manufacturers have
done a good job of giving us a wide range of competitive products, from the low end of the spectrum to the high end.”

A contractor from Indiana complains not of a lack of variety in tiles themselves, but of their use in the field. “I’d like to see more projects specifying the higher end and more innovative products. There is a wide variety of ceiling tiles out there, with many new and higher-end products, but day in day out, all we ever see specified is the standard board lay-in. USG in particular has some different profiles and a wave-like product with a curved surface. There are some completely different looks, too, metal ceilings for instance. But we install the same thing at almost every site—probably because of price.”

A Kansas contractor echoed the call for variety by bringing down prices: “If manufacturers can keep the costs in line, imprinted designs would be an improvement. They have imprinted designs with the panels themselves actually raised up and showing highlights, but they are too expensive.”

All Cut Up About Their Tiles

Looking for greater variety in tile sizes, a contractor from New Jersey wants “1-by-2 tiles in addition to 2-by-2, because there is a lot of demand for that size in this part of the country.”

“When the guys cut tile in the field, the result is rough. It doesn’t matter when the tile is on the edge of the wall and hidden, but around light fixtures, the cut is visible. If the tiles were factory cut, the field guys could just finish off the cut and the edge would be properly beveled and painted as well. The manufacturers
keep promising to produce these tiles, but they don’t—probably because their machines can’t cut to that size. One thing they could do is create a pre-cut along the middle—they have done it before, and it does work.”

Four other contractors took issue with similar problems in cutting tiles, making it the most common complaint.

“When they put a coating on tile surfaces,” mentions a Kansas contractor, “and you cut the edges, they sometimes fray a bit. It happens with all makes. Maybe the tiles should be a little denser, so they don’t have a tendency to chip off so much.”

“When we cut borders,” adds a contractor from Maryland, “we usually end up with a roll edge, so there should be a better way of doing it.”

“An easier way of making cuts on recessed or beveled edges,” adds a contractor from Vermont, “would be valuable. Maybe some kind of machine that could do it, instead of having to cut by hand.”

“Somehow or other speeding up the
cutting of Tegular tile,” would make a contractor from South Carolina happy, “It’s always such a slow-moving process otherwise.”

**Good Things Come in Rough Packaging**

Another issue three contractors have concerns the packaging of tiles. A contractor from Louisiana mentions that, “Sometimes we receive factory defects, but the main issue is the ceiling tiles were wrapped up while too damp. When we try to unpack them and they have been placed face to face, they stick to each other.”

“Sometimes we receive damaged tiles,” adds an Oregonian, “and they’re too expensive to lose because the corners have been beaten up in transit.”

“We still receive damaged tiles,” says a Washingtonian, “in terms of having common quantities per box, to make ordering easier.”

**A Prickly Issue**

Lastly, a Georgian dislikes “the fact that tiles made of fiberglass are itchy.” Perhaps he should know that they can be more than “itchy.” Alan Hedge, a professor of design and environmental analysis at Cornell University, has studied the effects of manmade mineral fibers dropped into the air by ceiling tiles, among other sources.

“Inhaling fibers is like swallowing a javelin,” he says. “If you swallow them end-ways, they can get quite far. The fiber pieces are three to eight microns in diameter and up to 30 microns long. They can cause fiber damage to epithelial cells of your eyes, nose and throat.” Hedge also believes fibers cause skin irritation and other symptoms. Until the day full and proper tests are done, even though manufacturers may hit the ceiling when they read this, it may be safer to avoid using tiles made of fiberglass, especially when they are cut in the field, creating airborne particles.

When all is said and done, ceiling tile manufacturers continue to supply and innovate, making the folks with their head in the tiles all day, generally very happy with the level of service and products they receive.

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**About the Author**

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