Vinyl Wallcoverings

A Practical, Versatile Option for Commercial Facilities

By Kym Tobin Lee

Turn to Page 31 for Facts EverySpecifier Should Know Before Making That Final Selection
Wallcovering serves multiple practical functions as a major element of a commercial facility’s interior design. By virtue of its cost effectiveness, durability and ease of maintenance, wallcovering helps conserve resources. Moreover, the caliber of the facility, as perceived by the public, is positively influenced.

Awareness of these factors has caused savvy manufacturers of vinyl wallcovering for the commercial market to design their products with special attention to technical construction. Vinyl wallcovering has been developed to functionally outperform other wall surface options, such as plain wallpaper and paint. The aesthetic benefits of vinyl wallcovering also play an important role in providing a more soothing and comfortable environment.

**Durability and Practicality**

Vinyl wallcovering is extremely abrasion- and impact-resistant. Specially engineered backing materials result in a highly durable wall surface treatment that lasts three to five times longer than paint, for example, which needs to be reapplied an average of every 15 to 18 months. If material costs, labor expenses and disruption of work productivity are figured into the equation, vinyl wallcovering emerges as an even more cost-efficient option. In fact, comparative life-cycle costing shows that vinyl wallcovering offers a 40 percent to 60 percent savings over a five-year period.

Vinyl wallcovering is extremely practical in that it is strippable. In renovations, it peels off easily in one piece, unlike peelable wallpaper, where much of the paper backing remains on the wall and must be sanded off. Vinyl wallcoverings are scrubbable; maintenance personnel can apply a little elbow grease during the cleaning process without worrying about fading, defacing or otherwise damaging the wallcovering.

**Stain Resistance**

Stain resistance is of paramount importance to specifiers, and vinyl wallcovering is constructed for a higher degree of resistance than other wall treatment options to potential staining agents such as ink and oils. Vinyl wallcovering also stands up well to normal surface soiling in high-traffic areas, such as waiting rooms and corridors.

Stains generally can be removed with a solution of mild soap or detergent dissolved in warm water; most stubborn surface stains can be removed by using isopropyl alcohol or a very mild bleach solution. Many vinyl wallcovering manufacturers offer commercial products with stain-resistant coatings and finishes.

Vinyl wallcovering products usually are treated with biocides and mildewcides that discourage the growth of mold, mildew and fungus. An added benefit is that the vinyl composition makes the wallcovering microbe and bacteria resistant—a significant consideration for any commercial facility where an antiseptic environment is a main concern.

**Weights, Widths and Backings**

Vinyl wallcoverings that meet federal specifications and those of the Chemical Fabrics and Film Association are available in two basic weight categories: Type I and Type II.

Type I wallcoverings are those having a total weight measuring 10.5 to 19 ounces per lineal yard, depending on the product. They normally are produced on either a woven cotton/polyester blend sheeting backing or on nonwoven backing composed of cellulose and synthetic fibers.

Type II wallcoverings have a heavier total weight measuring 19.5 to 32 ounces per lineal yard, again depending on the product. This type usually is produced on a woven backing called osnaburg, or on a coarser sheeting with heavier yarns.

The type of wallcovering selected depends on the space under consideration. If the space is a public area subject to heavy traffic or is in use 24 hours a day, a heavier weight Type II wallcovering may be needed. If the space is not in constant use or is not accessible to the general public, the lighter weight Type I wallcovering might be the more suitable option.

A recent technological advancement in
the industry is the development of a unique backing for Type II vinyl wallcovering called apertured nonwoven. Apertured nonwoven backing combines the best qualities of regular woven and nonwoven backings. It delivers high performance and tensile and tear strengths while yielding excellent print quality and pattern definition. This backing also allows for ease of application.

The width of the vinyl wallcovering product ultimately selected depends on the special needs of the individual areas of a commercial facility. Commonly available widths include 27, 41, 48, and 54 inches. The 27-inch product may be more practical in a narrower space, such as a bathroom, while the 54-inch wallcovering may be more suitable for a corridor or other space with a larger wall surface area. Many 54-inch products are available in Type I and Type II weights. Some manufacturers offer special or custom widths.

Design Considerations

Many commercial designers cite the variety of designs and colors when explaining why they prefer vinyl wallcovering to other wall treatments. According to Gerry Porter, project manager for Architecture and Construction at Tendercare (Michigan) Inc., a design firm in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., vinyl wallcovering allows designers to achieve a more aesthetically pleasing environment than paint.

“Vinyl wallcovering offers patterns and textures that achieve a richer, more luxurious look,” Porter said. “The designs and patterns also give a facility a ‘homey’ atmosphere, whereas a monochromatic coat of paint usually produces a drab effect.”

Vinyl wallcoverings for health-care environments, for example, are designed to contribute to a pleasant ambience for the public and medical staff while simultaneously creating a comforting, reassuring atmosphere for patients. Vinyl-wallcovering manufacturers offer products in cheerful-yet-composed colors that reflect positively on skin tones. Patterns are intended to be “genderless” and appropriate for different patient groups. For example, certain floral patterns are regarded as universal and have been well accepted in the health-care industry. Large or “busy” designs, as well as impressionistic, “Monet,”-type patterns, are avoided because of manufacturers’ awareness that patients’ perceptions may be distorted by medication. Very deep embossings also are avoided because psychiatric patients may see them as “holes” in the wall.

The recent availability of coordinating borders has enhanced vinyl wallcovering’s reputation among designers and specifiers. At one time, designers had to hunt through residential sample books to employ borders in a facility. Now, many vinyl wallcovering manufacturers have included coordinating borders as a standard element.

Some manufacturers offer collections composed exclusively of borders to provide designers and specifiers with the widest possible design options. If a designer wants to use just a touch of a color rather than covering the entire wall surface with it, a border can accomplish this goal.

A practical side to the design aspect of vinyl wallcovering is that in a rather large facility, vinyl wallcovering can be employed as a “wayfinding” aid. Using a particular color or border in specific places can “lead,” a confused visitor to key locations such as the elevator or the reception area.

Coordination and Customization Options

Many vinyl wallcoverings and borders are designed to coordinate with other elements of commercial facilities, such as laminates, cubicle offices, vinyl floor tile, carpeting and paint. Certain manufacturers also offer customizing options and can work with the designer, specifier or facility manager to match any color or fabric, or to reproduce any pattern or texture. Logos, custom murals and slogans also can be reproduced on vinyl wallcovering. Sidewall or border patterns can be created in a variety of widths and weights to suit the overall facility.

“Designers and specifiers must consider many aesthetic and functional requirements when choosing wall-surface options,” says Tendercare (Michigan) Inc.’s Porter. “We’ve found vinyl wallcovering to be a well-rounded product that fulfills these requirements.”

About the Author

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