

Thought Leadership Series, May 2017

A Note from Our Partner

How Safe is the Carpet in Your Community?



Over the past two years, I have had the pleasure of meeting over three hundred leaders in the Senior Care industry, as well as tour over one hundred communities. This experience has allowed me to see firsthand the challenges many facilities have in choosing proper flooring materials. For most communities, there is a tremendous amount of resources and decision making that go into the selection process. From design and durability, to ease of cleaning and maintenance, making the right choice can be an overwhelming and daunting task. Sadly, the overall safety impact of the flooring is one that is often overlooked. So really, how safe is the carpeting in your community?

The Senior Care setting is quite unique and unlike any other market segment I've come across in my thirty years in the flooring industry. Many try to classify it as hospitality, residential, or even acute care. I believe this is where a majority of selection mistakes happen. In this case, one size does not fit all. In my opinion, Senior Care is a combination of all three. Facilities want the look and appeal of a hotel or restaurant, combined with the comforts of home, and the safeguards expected from a professional care facility. Obviously, the allocation of these elements will vary depending on the acuity level involved. This is why selecting flooring material can become one of the most important decisions to make. It is also why flooring decisions in this market require more consideration than a typical commercial environment. You must find a solution to balance the key attributes that are sought by a prospective family, the caregiver, and the resident. In this process, the inclusion of safety in the product can create that big WIN necessary for long term success with all parties.

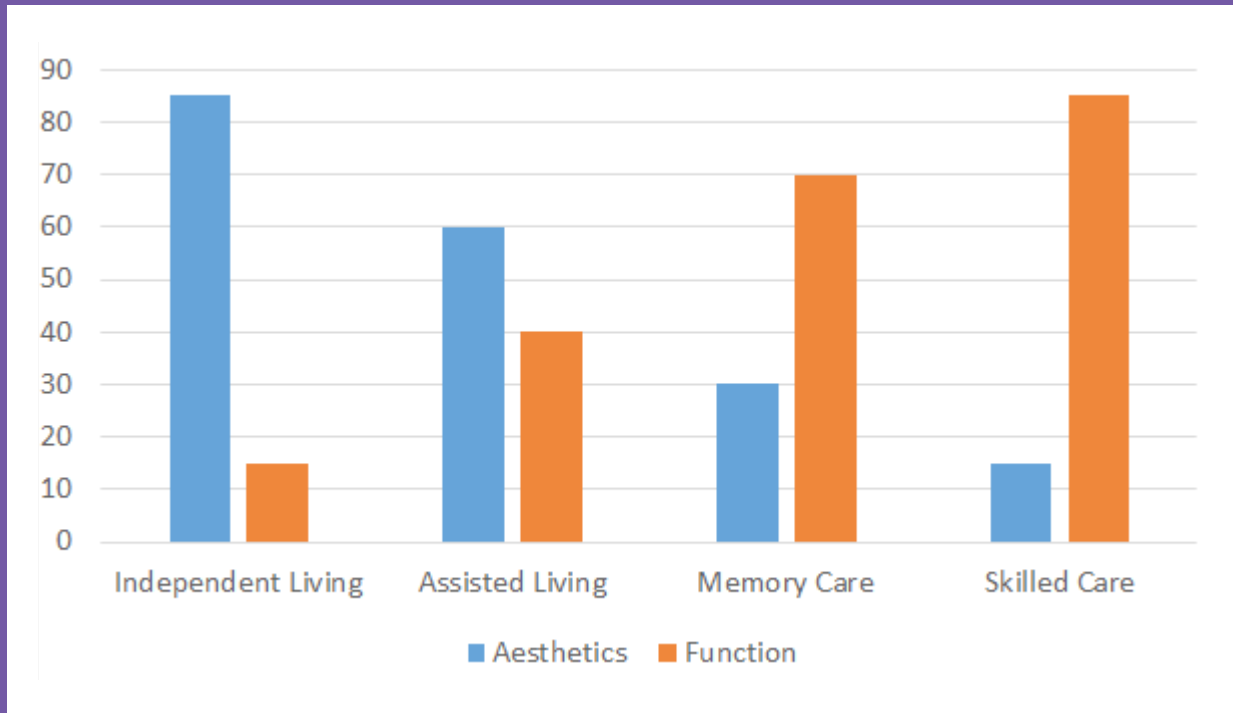


Webster's Dictionary defines safe as "free from damage, danger, or injury." Based on that definition, what are some possible flooring challenges that come to mind in your communities? Does your list include slip-and-fall incidents, tripping hazards, infection control, mobility issues, and fatigue? Each of these concerns should be compared equally with desired attributes, such as aesthetics, affordability, durability, odorless, stain resistant, maintenance free, and comfort. Unfortunately, no flooring product can meet all these requirements. That is why it can be grueling to select the ideal product for your situation. It also calls into question the importance of aesthetic versus function.

Everyone wants to create a beautiful interior space, but what will the floor look like in a month, a year, or even three years? When you look at products that are typically categorized as "eye catching," they often struggle to live up to expectations across all acuity levels. So a product that is suitable for Independent Living will lack the features necessary to meet the needs of residents moving through the higher stages of care. At the same time, a product selected for a Skilled Nursing environment will be too institutional for the lower levels of care. Thus, the aesthetic versus function question will vary based on the features preferred. Let's take a closer look at carpet and how it could negatively impact the safety of your communities when used throughout different levels of care.



Aesthetics vs. Function by Percentage



I have found, through my discussions with Senior Care professionals, that broadloom or rolled carpeting continues to be the product of choice. Like many flooring manufacturers, my company offers this flooring option. I mention this so that I am transparent in this critique. Broadloom carpeting delivers some important benefits that most seek in Senior Care. It offers noise reduction, slip resistance, and superior flexibility in color and design. However, maintaining the product is very challenging due to how the product is manufactured, mostly tufted. Historically, carpet does not hold up as well in the Senior Care environment as it does in other commercial market applications. This may be due to a combination of factors including high amounts of liquid spills, under staffing, improper cleaning techniques, and roller traffic such as carts, wheel chairs, and scooters.

Carpet's characteristic to absorb makes it very vulnerable to unwanted substances that enter freely and are difficult to remove. With tufted products, the manufacturing technique is comparable to a sewing machine where the thread, or yarn in this case, is punctured in and out of a primary material forming the surface, but also creating holes in the process. This process, combined with a loop pile construction (the most common tufting method), makes the extraction process similar "to pulling bubble gum out of a perm." Of course, that is if you can even get to the unwanted substances, which over time will migrate through the openings produced from tufting. In that case, the substances, especially liquids, could be on your subfloor. To address this issue, most carpet manufacturers offer a premium solution in the form of a moisture proof, or impervious, secondary backing to protect the subfloor.

Please understand that this special backing does not prevent “unpleasantries” from getting into the carpet, and we know removal methods for loop constructions are average at best. Many facilities live with the uninviting odors that are created by these unwanted substances in their carpet and/or slab. The odors become even more prominent when reactivated during the cleaning process. From my many site visits, I’ve found infection prevention and control to be one of the key priorities in every community. There are processes and procedures in place to address the spread of infections. Most facilities focus on employee practices while overlooking what might be breeding on the floor.

Unless your cleaning procedures are 100% effective in the removal of these invaders, your community could be boosting the growth of such things as by E. Coli, MRSA, C diff, and mold. My last concern with a tufted material is the “raw” edge. This is where the material is cut either at the factory or on the job site. Because of its tufted construction, carpeting tends to unravel or loose tufts, forcing the use of transition strips or “speedbumps for seniors.” When the seam begins to fail, fraying or zippering can occur, creating an unattractive and dangerous obstacle, as well as an additional cavity for liquids.

Being aware of all the challenges noted, some communities have moved to a pricier option of modular carpeting, or carpet tiles, as an alternative because of the ability to remove the troubled areas and replace it with one from extra stock. As one of my Regional Specialists always says, “this seems to be an expensive way to clean your carpet.” Most of the challenges with modular carpeting center on how it is installed and the increased amount of seams now present. To replace a carpet tile, the installation method is to use a pressure sensitive, removable type of adhesive instead of a permanent bonded solution.

Although this prevents lateral movement, it does not prevent liquids from reaching the subfloor at the seams – now we’re back to the initial issue shared regarding broadloom carpeting without an impervious backing. Another possible concern is what happens when the adhesive loses its tack from possible liquid or dirt contact, which can occur during use or replacement.

This loss of tack can result in the tiles either curling or cupping where the contact was lost, creating a dangerous path, especially for seniors who shuffle. As for the increased amount of seams, many studies have shown that residents with memory issues are uncomfortable transiting over breaks or lines. With most carpet tiles, the seams are evident, and in some cases emphasized, in the installation layout by turning or designing with the tiles.

From all the details I have outlined about carpet, you might ask how I would rate its safety. The answer is moderate at best, particularly as a resident moves beyond an independent setting. Yes, carpet helps prevent one of our biggest concerns, slip-and-fall, and reduces noise levels, which improves the amount of rest for residents. But outside of that, carpet can be a real risk proposition for communities. Because of its absorption characteristics and tufted construction methods, carpet can easily become an odor-filled breeding ground for infections, especially where incontinence is present. Remember, dark and wet places are not a good thing in the health care business. In addition, “raw” edge issues force the use of transition strips where carpet joins other flooring materials. That, along with troubled seams, can create tripping hazards for both residents and care-givers.

As for the carpet tile and the removable pressure sensitive alternative, I see little to no value as it will not prevent unwanted substances from getting onto the substrate at the seams, and the possibility of curling and cupping produces an additional tripping risk. From my experience, your best option for mid-to-higher acuity levels (most Assisted Living facilities and beyond), is to incorporate a bonded adhesive installation, using topically impervious and slip resistant solutions, where transition strips are not needed. Carpet cannot meet those functional attributes and should only be considered for lower levels of care where mobility constraints and spills are less common. Again, there is no perfect flooring solution, but safety should be a high priority in the selection process for your community.

About the Author



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An industry veteran with over thirty years of experience, Jamie has worked in many flooring sectors including: retail, wholesale, and manufacturing. Experienced in both Carpeting and Resilient flooring solutions, Jamie is responsible for Forbo’s Wellness & Care Division which focuses on Senior Living, Long Term Care, and Hospitality.

After holding several positions in his twenty plus year career at Milliken & Company, Jamie has been with Forbo for the last five. He earned his BS from North Carolina Wesleyan College and has participated in many Sales and Management Executive Programs including University of Virginia’s Darden School and University of St. Gallen, Switzerland.

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