

A FLOORCRITICS.COM GUIDE

VINYL PLANK PITFALLS

7 Most Common Mistakes New Vinyl
Plank Buyers Make



JEANINE M HINTZE

"Nothing throws a salesperson's script off track faster than a customer who brings their A-game."

Hi There,

Thank you for downloading our special report **covering the common pitfalls buyers face when buying vinyl plank.**

We hope you'll find this guide beneficial. Our purpose is to inform you and help make the buying process as painless as possible. If you have questions not addressed in this guide, send us an email, and we'll do our best to help.

Inside you'll find a list of guidelines and valuable tips to help you save time and money. After all, nothing throws a salesperson's script off track faster than a customer who brings their A-game.

And that's the point. If you walk into the showroom (or, website) confident, you're less likely to regret your decision.

This guide works like a countdown. We're going to start with the minor mistakes and work our way up to the *doozies*. By the time you're finished, you'll either be nodding in agreement or second-guessing your flooring choice.

Either way, *you'll have a good understanding of what you're getting yourself into.*

So, If you're ready, let's start at the bottom and work our way up.

First, lets talk about the maintenance...

7. Vinyl flooring isn't maintenance free

Manufacturers love to spin this flooring as easy to care for, but that's not entirely the case. Yes, vinyl plank is low maintenance, but it still requires some upkeep.

A few simple ways to keep your floors looking their best:

- **Always use coasters or pads underneath your furniture.**
- **Avoid dragging large pieces across your floors.**
- **Keep your pet's nails short.**
- **Avoid walking on your floors in high heels.**

Regular Maintenance

Routine cleaning reduces the chances of discoloration due to dust build up. Your best bet is to buy a vacuum with a bare floor setting.

[In our FloorCritics review of the top hard-surface vacuums](#), the **Shark Navigator Liftaway Pro** & the **Kenmore Elite Pet Friendly 31150** scored high marks.

If vacuuming isn't your style, a **Swiffer** or **microfiber dust mop** is an excellent alternative. As opposed to regular brooms that scatter particles through the air, these tools collect the dirt and trap it to the pad.

While vinyl floors are scratch resistant, they are not indestructible. Small rocks and mud tracked in from outdoors can severely damage the surface of your planks.

If a no-shoes policy isn't an option, combat debris by placing an **area rug** or **non-rubberized mat** in front of doorways.

Deeper Cleaning

Vinyl planks will stain and streak if spills are left to dry. Acidic liquids like juice and pet urine will eat away the top coat and leave behind unsightly spots.

Most warranties exclude this type of damage, it's usually hidden in the fine print. If you want to protect your investment, wipe up spills before they dry.

It's recommended that you damp mop your vinyl once or twice a month.

[Read FloorCritics review of the top damp mop options](#) (the review explicitly says "for tile," but these options are just as great for vinyl plank too).

Try not to flood your floors with water, it will seep into the seams and breed mold. If you must use a cleaner, opt for a mild detergent or no-wax solution that's safe for vinyl floors.

Never use harsh cleansers on your vinyl planks. These chemicals break down the surface layer and cause the vinyl to fade and peel. Remember to rinse the soap thoroughly, or you'll be left with a sticky mess.

6. Failing to buy enough material

OK, so using a tape measure isn't rocket science but mistakes happen, even to seasoned contractors.

Factors such as transitions, obstacles, and entryways affect how much flooring you'll need. If your room is an unusual shape or you have angled walls be sure to reflect that in your measurements.

Here are a few tips to help ensure an accurate measurement:

- **Measure the length and width at the widest points of your room.**
- **Multiply the length by width to give you the square footage.**
- **If you're continuing the planks inside a closet, add it to the calculation.**
- **Remember to subtract square footage if you're installing around cabinetry.**

The rule is always to buy **10-20% more material** than you think you'll need. You'll probably have to cut several boards to accommodate fixtures, staircases or transitions. If you have extra on-hand, it leaves you with a bit of insurance if you mess up a cut.

Floor Critics Recommendation:

Right now, we like a couple places in particular for their vinyl plank selection & pricing:

1. **Wayfair**: Usually have sales running, gigantic selection (1200+ options), great pricing & customer service
2. **Build Direct**: Up to 50% savings, huge selection & usually have seasonal promotions running

** We only recommend companies we would personally work with. FloorCritics.com may receive a small commission if you decide to purchase flooring at one of the above links.*

Remember, your planks will have irregularities in coloring and graining. It's easier to work from multiple boxes when trying to establish a pattern. Staggering the shading gives you a natural variation and adds a layer of depth to your room.

Besides, it never hurts to keep an extra box around, in case you need to replace an individual board. Years down the road when your planks start to wear, it'll be a lot easier to grab the box from your garage than return to the store hoping your color/style hasn't been discontinued.

If you're buying a fair amount of square footage, look into the bulk deals various stores have (either online or in-store).

5. Basing quality on name or price

Many consumers base their decisions strictly on brand preference. While well-known manufacturers tend to produce top-grade materials, that's not always the case.

Plenty of consumers have been burned by big names in flooring. If you visit consumer advocacy websites, you'll find pages of complaints against these companies.

Avoid lines that are name brand but exclusive to large home improvement stores. Look for buzz words such as "only at" or "by ---exclusively for---." These styles are lower quality and priced well below the manufacturer's regular lines.

You'll need to do some sleuthing, to avoid falling victim to the name game. The best place to start: your local flooring store. These shops are a treasure trove of information.

A helpful salesperson will often steer you away from sub-par products to avoid complaints. They get the inside scoop from their installers and are happy to pass along the info in exchange for your business.

Think about it, if you were in their shoes would you rather make a higher commission on a brand that will lead to hassles or a lower commission on a product that won't be returned? They want your loyalty, so a half hour of their time is a small price to pay for future referrals.

Don't forget to pick up some samples from a few different manufacturers. Not only will you be able to examine the quality, but you can take these pieces with you and test them in your home.

Drop them, scratch them and spill til your heart's content. If you're buying click-lock style planks, remember to check the mechanism for quality.

Compare the results. It's likely you'll find a clear winner among the group.

Another great resource is to look at company websites. Often you can download warranties and installation guides without ever speaking to a rep.

Study the fine print, and look for red flags and exclusions. If the same words keep coming up, it may mean there's a known problem with the flooring.

Never buy anything online that you haven't seen up close. Pictures are deceiving and its impossible to judge coloring and quality from stock photos.

4. Purchasing thin vinyl planks

Vinyl planks that look thick may not hold up any better than thinner materials. It's best not to gauge a floor's durability by its overall thickness.

Several components play a factor. While the board might be constructed with a solid core, it could have a paper thin wear layer.

The dreaded wear layer dilemma is often the driving factor behind most buyer remorse. The wear layer is the outermost level of your vinyl. This is what is exposed to sneakers, dirt, pet nails, and cleaning products.

The thicker the wear level, the better it will stand up over time. Better flooring includes a protective coating that increases the strength of the wear layer.

Companies measure the thickness of these layers in mil. A *mil* is not the same as a *millimeter*. 1 mil equals 1/1000 inch (0.0001 inches), whereas there are 25.4 mm in 1 inch. **1 mil = 0.025mm.**

Bear in mind, some products are too thin to withstand the abuse of the average family. Vinyl planks with a layer of 11mil or less are considered light use. These materials are suitable for areas without a lot of foot traffic.

[Here is our in-depth look at how to determine what vinyl plank thickness you need.](#)

If you have an active household, and especially if you have pets: consider looking at vinyl that's at least 12 mil, and up to 20 mil (or higher).

To be thorough, ask your flooring rep the following questions:

- **What is the overall thickness of the product? (Useful when transitioning to other surfaces)**
- **How thick is the wear layer? (Look for 12mil or higher)**
- **How is this product rated? (Residential, Commercial)**
- **How is this product constructed? (Solid core is best)**
- **Is there a protective top coat? (Helps to resist scratches)**
- **What's the warranty on the wear layer? (Often it's 10 years)**
- **Is there a bottom layer of padding? (Added soundproofing)**

3. All vinyl is not created equal

Really, it's not.

The manufacturing process has similar steps but how the company handles each stage varies.

Lesser known companies outsource most of the labor, not knowing the details. They can't tell you specifics like the adhesives used, curing times or the quality control methods for identifying faulty or substandard boards.

Why should that affect the consumer? *Lets count the ways.*

Say you go to your local big box store, spot a reasonably priced product that looks good, grab a few boxes and bring it home.

You open the box and immediately notice the smell. Thinking it will fade over time, you start to install the flooring.

A few weeks later, you're waking up to headaches, and you just feel off. The only thing that's changed is your bedroom flooring.

So you do a little digging, google the brand and find your not the only one with this issue. Big scary words like [Volatile Chemical Compounds](#) leap off the page, and you realize you might be in a predicament.

Calling the store where you bought it from seems like a logical choice, and you pick up the phone.

The friendly rep advises you that although you purchased the flooring at your local supercenter, it's the manufacturer's problem.

You'll need to call them. OK, no big deal right?

But wait, the manufacturer is actually a company with no clear point of contact. You can't find the right person to address the problem.

With no choice, you rip out your brand new \$5000 flooring and replace it with a safer and cheaper alternative. You're left with less money, a covering that's not what you wanted and a scrap pile of expensive waste.

The lesson here, Do your homework. It's important.

- **Make sure your flooring is [FloorScore](#) certified.**
- **Find out where the product is made.**
- **Ask for a copy of the safety documents.**
- **Ask about the product's warranty.**
- **Find out which department handles the claims process.**

If you opt to go to a big box store, get the supplier information before you buy. Bring it home and Google it.

Ask the rep for the stores complaint and return policy: If it's not already documented, get it in writing and signed by a manager.

Any reputable company should have a written procedure. Some managers may scoff at the request, most won't. After all, they wouldn't feel comfortable trusting their families health to a stranger, you shouldn't either.

No one expects substandard products, but they exist. We've all seen the horror stories on 60 minutes.

Although those [laminate](#) products were the exception, the [United States Consumer Product Safety Commision](#) estimates 614,000 households were affected.

Most companies look out for their customers and don't engage in deceptive practices, but it's best to cover your bases.

Make sure your documentation is ironclad – well-before handing over the cash. If a company won't back it's products in writing—walk away.

2. Failing to prepare the subfloor

Yup, you can do this the easy way or the hard way. In a perfect world, you'll have the extra cash on hand to [hire an installer and wash your hands of it](#).

In that case -- great, we're done. It's their problem if they mess it up. Sign the paperwork, grab a drink and prop your feet up.

But if you're attempting this on your own, we have some work to do.

First thing's first, vinyl planks are not always set it and forget it. The stores like to make you think that, but it's not true.

Prepping your substrate takes effort and time. This phase is crucial—don't take it lightly. Use these steps as a guideline. If you're having trouble, ask a local pro or look online for video tutorials.

If you're installing over concrete or tile:

Step 1: Check the temperature and moisture level of the subfloor. If you don't have a moisture meter, you can pick one up online for under \$40. Each manufacturer has specific guidelines for their products, so check your installation manual. If the readings fall outside the range, you'll need to add a membrane or vapor barrier to the surface before continuing.

Step 2: Clean the substrate of any dust, debris, old adhesive or paint. While this step is a pain, it makes a huge difference in the outcome.

Step 3: Make sure the concrete is mostly level, any dips will result in an uneven floor. If the substrate is sloped, chipped or cracked, consider using a leveling product to smooth the surface. Be sure to fill in any grout lines if you're installing vinyl plank over tile.

Step 4: Take a walkthrough, just to be safe. If you have a dry, clean and level surface, your good to go.

If you're installing over a wood underlayment:

Step 1: Make sure the plywood is [APA](#) rated and at least 1/4" thick (1/2" is preferable).

Step 2: Inspect the plywood for raised spots or dips. Sand any high spots and replace or bulk up areas that are sagging.

Step 3: Check for moisture or evidence of water damage. If you see dark spots or staining, you may have to replace some of the underlayment and add a vapor barrier.

One final note on preparation--If you're installing your vinyl planks over existing resilient floors, be sure to read the manufacturer's guidelines.

So you've made it to the moment of truth. The number one pitfall is:

1. Incorrect installation

Did you know most vinyl floors need time to acclimatize before they're installed?

Unfortunately, most stores fail to mention that to their customers. Skipping this step can cause your boards to peak at the joints. Even slight changes in temperature and humidity may affect expansion and contraction. Open the boxes and give the material a chance to breathe. Flooring experts suggest allowing a minimum of 48 hours for your boards to adjust.

Now that your planks are comfortable in their new home its time to move on to the layout. Even though it seems counterproductive, this step saves a ton of time. If you follow this process, planning shouldn't take more than an hour depending on the size of your room.

- **Secure underlayment (if applicable)**
- **Remove any baseboards or wall trim.**
- **Work from multiple boxes to mix patterns and shading.**
- **Start with the longest wall and lay the planks at a 90-degree angle.**
- **Use a chalk line to keep your rows straight.**
- **Leave room for expansion gaps between your floor and the walls.**
- **Line the boards up so that your first and last row is at least ½ plank wide.**
- **Mark any boards that need to be cut.**
- **Undercut the door jams using a multi-tool.**
- **Notch out the planks around cabinets or obstacles, with a razor-knife.**
- **Clean up any debris with a shop-vac.**
- **Step back and survey the floor to ensure it looks the way you envisioned.**

The next step varies depending on whether you're gluing the planks or installing them with a click-lock mechanism.

If your floor has a click-lock system, follow these steps:

Step 1. Lock the planks together--you should hear a click as they join.

Step 2. Work your way down each row--joining rows by sliding the tongue into the groove.

Step 3. If any seams are lifting, knock them down with a rubber mallet and a scrap piece of vinyl.

Step 4. When you're done, make sure the boards are in tight and lying flat.

Step 5. Replace any molding or baseboards, and apply caulk to fill in the gaps.

If you're gluing the boards:

- Remove the planks, and number the backs. (so you don't lose your lines)
- Make sure you're using the correct adhesive.
- Use a trowel to spread the glue.
- Try to get as close to the corners as you can.
- Let the glue set for 30 min or until it's tacky.
- Line up each piece and avoid leaving gaps between boards.
- Press down and remove any air bubbles.
- Don't forget to leave room for expansion along the wall.
- Replace your trim, and fill in any gaps with caulk.
- Smile, You're Done.

Floor Critics Recommendation:

If you're skipping the headache & hiring a professional installer, *make sure* you shop around for quotes.

[We have a tool in place for you to quickly & easily receive multiple quotes from vetted contractors in your area.](#)

Click above & fill out the short form to get started.

So there you have it, folks, this concludes our guide. Hopefully, these pointers have steered you in the right direction and provided you with useful information, to take on your trip to the flooring department. If you know anyone that would benefit from this guide, please share it with them.

In addition to this report, [check out our website](#) for specific product ratings and reviews. You'll also find tips for cleaning, installation, and maintaining various types of flooring.

Don't forget to stop in and say "Hi" on social media.

As always, If you have any comments, questions, or suggestions for improvement, feel free to reach out to us @ Floor Critics via e-mail.