BOARD IN THE KITCHEN

When purchasing a new kitchen, you may consider the work surface, the colour scheme, handles and hinges and even the layout and how much storage space you will get. But have you considered the base materials that will make up the majority of your kitchen?

Various wood-based boards form the fundamental structure of most kitchens. The way these boards are treated and installed will ultimately determine the durability and longevity of your kitchen. Understanding the type and quality of board your kitchen company is using will help give you piece of mind.

Melamine face board (MFB), also sometimes just called "melamine," is the most common board used in the manufacturing of kitchen carcasses and door and drawer fronts. MFB consists of particleboard, also known as chipboard, which has had melamine-impregnated decorative paper fused to both sides of the board under heat and pressure. This product is highly functional in vertical kitchen applications as its decorative surface is durable and moisture resistant. However, the exposed edges of the board must be properly sealed and edged with an appropriate edging material, as they are highly susceptible to moisture. While MFB is not recommended for horizontal work surfaces, it is primarily used in vertical applications, such as cupboard sides and doors, as well as for shelving.

MFB from a reputable source, installed, edged and sealed properly offers a practical, durable and affordable solution for your kitchen. If the particleboard / chipboard base or the melamine paper is of inferior quality, the durability and finish of the end product will be compromised. Added to that, it is vital that your kitchen company use good quality edging and glue to seal the exposed edges of the board properly. This will ensure that everyday moisture found in the kitchen does not get absorbed into the board and cause it to swell.

Medium density fibreboard (MDF) is most commonly used for PVC wrapped or spray painted / duco door and drawer fronts. It is also used to manufacture dado rails and architraves. MDF is different to particleboard in that it has a homogenous fibre construction. This allows the board to be machined and shaped either with a CNC machine or router, creating some of the lovely panelled or shaker doors that can be found on the market. The material is strong and durable and is designed for specific applications where decorative surface or high gloss paint finishes are required. MDF commands a premium over MFB and is therefore most often used only for the doors and drawer fronts and not for the carcasses. Where a straightforward flat melamine application is required, you are better served using a particleboard substrate.

Board is not only used in the manufacture of carcasses and door and drawer fronts, but in the manufacturing of worktops too. Postform worktops use a core of particleboard with a high pressure laminate (HPL) as a surface. Premium quality postform worktops also use a balancing surface material on the underside of the top and a glue strip on the front edge where the laminate meets the board, to protect the joint from moisture. The HPL provides a durable, easy-to-clean, non-

porous, hygienic and moisture resistant surface ideal for use in kitchens.

The manufacturing process for HPL has improved dramatically over the years, allowing the decorative finishes to be very lifelike in their representation of timber or stone. The profiles and thicknesses of postform worktops have also been adapted to allow more options and be more on trend. Quality here is an absolute necessity. Counter-tops take the majority of the stress and strain in a kitchen and are exposed to stains, scuffs, cleaning materials, heat and water. If their manufacturing and installation is in any way inferior there is a risk of them delaminating or absorbing moisture and swelling. It is vital to ensure exposed edges of postform worktops are suitably sealed. These include the back edges against the wall, the corner joins, the ends as well as sink, hob and plumbing cut-outs. Applying a silicone bead line is simply not enough. All of these edges should have a suitable exterior grade varnish or damp-seal applied to the particleboard core before being put in place. Going the extra mile with this sort of treatment will ensure the tops last.

It is important to note that the wood-based panels used in kitchen construction are not waterproof. Firstly, this is not economically viable and secondly it is not really necessary, provided the surfaces and edges are properly sealed. Some products are available in a moisture resistant option but these come at a premium price and normally have to be specially requested when you order your kitchen as they are not normally used as standard. If it is within your budget requesting moisture resistant board for the wet areas in your kitchen would be a good investment. At the end of the day, all wood-based products should be properly edged and sealed before installation to improve their longevity.

So, why is board quality so important? Poor quality boards have poor mechanical properties and performance characteristics. These characteristics relate to how well the board is manufactured and here is where the strength of the bond between the wood particles becomes important. If these properties are low, it can result in issues such as rough edges and chipping when the board is cut. It can also cause weak screw holding, meaning the screw holding a hinge in place can be easily pulled out of the board with minimal force. Good quality boards are produced in factories that have process controls in place. These controls allow for the testing of the board to ensure their performance meets the required standards. Boards with strong, well-known brand names as well as board from Europe imported via a reputable source tend to be a safe bet.

Even for the more trained eye, sometimes distinguishing good quality board from poor quality board can be difficult. The quality often only becomes noticeable while the board is being cut or machined. To ensure you are receiving good quality board ask for specific brands by name or board that is supplied by a reputable manufacturer where there is recourse should there be a quality problem. Also, try and choose colours and finishes that are exclusive to reputable board manufacturers. This will help ensure the product is not substituted with poor quality board. Most importantly, choose a reputable kitchen manufacturer and installer. Even the highest quality board will fail if it is not handled and installed with knowledge and care.

With thanks to the following KSA members for their help with this article:

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