

buying ESD flooring on the internet: HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

By Dave Long, *President & CEO*, Staticworx

Every marketplace presents would-be buyers with landmines that need to be avoided, so why should ESD flooring be any different? The Internet may be a great resource, and it may offer an opportunity to save money on a new ESD floor. Indeed, at a time when we often buy goods and services without ever meeting the supplier, buyers still need to perform a certain amount of due diligence before clicking the Send button and spending thousands of dollars.

Let's start with why you are using the Internet in the first place. Most often, you are looking for a few benefits, but all these matters deserve a closer look.

Convenience. An Internet source can theoretically save you time and allow you to take advantage of one-stop shopping. But does this convenience come with the tradeoff of not knowing exactly with whom you're doing business?

Reliability. You want the correct solution for a technical application, and perhaps you don't trust your local supplier. While your local distributor knows about inventory and installation, he may not understand grounding, testing, and ESD standards. But what do you know about the faceless source on the Internet?

Price. You want to know that you are paying the right price without overpaying for "no value-added" middlemen mark-ups. But consider what the extra costs will be if you don't install flooring that meets specifications.

The fact is that a web site isn't necessarily a real company, no matter how long they claim to be in business. Be wary of "grey market suppliers."

How Can You Verify the Branding? The tile you receive should be marked and packaged with the same names and part numbers as shown on the web site. Unfortunately, some web sites offer products that don't actually exist; they're just "web marketing" names used to mask the identity of the actual supplier that will fulfill the order. These web sellers market their "brand" but may subsequently ship someone else's product. Why is this problematic? Because your floor tiles may come from one manufacturer and the adhesive from another producer – neither from the source you thought you identified. In some cases, companies will supply adhesives that are not even warranted for use with the particular flooring they have sold. As a result, you may learn that you've wasted a lot of time and money after it's too late.

Also, ask the supplier what the labels will say. Many Internet companies advertise a web site brand to prevent the buyer from dealing with the real manufacturer. Ask the seller what the labels will say when you receive the tile. Will it be branded the same as your purchase order reads? Making this a standard practice will eliminate product substitution by the seller and give you

traceability. It will allow you to prevent problems like tile shrinkage, conductivity loss, or air quality concerns related to "outgassed" ingredients from the tile.

Fortunately, ESD flooring involves a combination of certifiable parameters like electrical properties, air quality properties, and physical properties. It is actually easy to determine if you are buying a real brand.

To identify brand credibility, do the following:

- **Request a California 1350 Indoor Air Quality Report.** This will feature a cover letter from an independent lab with the name of the source that will be supplying your flooring. Be forewarned: Imported flooring may contain heavy metals or high VOCs that don't meet our government's standards for use indoors.
- **Ask for independent audit reports from nationally recognized testing labs.** These include: **Dangelmayer Associates**, **Fowler Associates**, and **RMV Technology Group**.
- **Ask for Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for the proposed adhesive.** The MSDS sheets will identify the adhesive source and chemical control center for questions and problems associated with the chemicals used.
- **Look for product awards and discriminating certifications.** For example, the logos in figure 1 and 2 on the reverse ensure that the flooring was tested and approved by Dangelmayer Associates and *The ESD Journal* for use in Class-0 ESD handling applications. Dangelmayer is a leading industry analyst, and *The ESD Journal* is an independent material performance-testing lab specializing in static control material testing and certification.
- **Ask for the identity of the warranty holder.** Some grey-area market suppliers issue a third-party warranty during the project close-out phase, long after the installation is complete. You need to know the warrantor's identity before you buy – not after it is too late to do anything about it.
- **Ask for the name of the technical contact.** Many Internet suppliers lack technical expertise. To mask this liability, their web sites may feature technical articles and documents that were written by third parties – often gleaned from respected technical publications. Some web sites use copyrighted

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materials to attract search engines to their sites. But just because an article is posted, it doesn't mean the author supports the product claims of the web site. If you read something by an expert, ask for the author's contact information. This will help you avoid being scammed by "implied endorsements."

- **Request outside technical support.** Flooring shouldn't be bought without a site visit from a representative of the seller. This can be a contractor, a product rep, or a local technical liaison. Grey-area market suppliers prefer to submit proposals that include a list of charges for services that can't be determined until a team is on site. For example, a typical "site unseen" proposal will note all up-charges for situations that can't be determined by digital photos and telephone conversations. These extras can extend the project timeline and cost more than the floor itself. Examples include moisture mitigation barriers for an up-charge of \$3.00 per square foot, cementitious leveling for \$1.00 per square foot, and special charges for difficulty terming old floors. None of this should be determined at the zero hour.

How Else Can You Protect Yourself? Here are some additional ways to protect yourself and ensure you're dealing with a reputable supplier:

- **Get references.** Remember, no one gives bad references so you will need to do a little digging. So, ask the following questions:
 - When was the floor installed?
 - Was the floor certified?
 - Did the source supply you with California 1350 Indoor Air Quality test results?
 - Did anyone visit your facility prior to your purchase?
 - Why did they choose this supplier?
 - Did the supplier send the same products it identifies on its web site?

- **Also ask where the floor was manufactured.** If a product is manufactured in the United States, the seller will usually promote that the product is American-made. In the case of construction materials, American-made means a lot. For starters, American manufacturers, like their European counterparts, can't load their flooring with banned and questionable ingredients. Many countries have, for instance, banned heavy metals and phthalate plasticizers from certain products. Despite this fact, a great deal of imported tile contains these ingredients because there is no watchdog in Customs to inspect for lead, DOP, DEHP, and other potentially hazardous ingredients.
- **Insist on written proof.** To insure you are getting materials that are safe for people and the environment, ask for written verification to determine no presence of heavy metals, DOP plasticizers, DEHP plasticizers, and asbestos.
- **Note how the supplier states its electrical properties.** Static-control flooring is supposed to be sold as either static dissipative or as static conductive. A static conductive floor has an OHMs rating between 2.5×10^4 and 1.0×10^6 . A static dissipative floor has an OHMs rating between 1.0×10^6 and 1.0×10^9 . You need the right balance of conductivity, and your supplier should be prepared to help you with this.

In the final analysis, shopping online will certainly continue to have its place, but you need to determine whether it's right for you when it comes to the high stakes of ESD flooring. Above all, make sure you're dealing with a reputable single-source supplier that will be accountable to you throughout the process. Ideally, you should select a supplier that tests products during and after manufacturing, provides service before and after the sale, performs an ESD flooring audit, and certifies that your flooring is safe and meets specifications.

So, make sure you're "grounded" and don't get scammed!



Figure 1



Figure 2

Dave Long is president & CEO of Staticworx, Inc. Named to the Inc. 500/5000, Staticworx, www.staticworx.com, is North America's largest manufacturer of electrostatic discharge (ESD) flooring products that protect work sites with customized, static-free solutions. Based in Watertown, Mass., Staticworx has warehouses on both coasts and is factory-direct. Comprehensive flooring options include rubber, vinyl tile, carpet, epoxy, and adhesives. All products meet international standards, are environmentally friendly, and come with lifetime warranties. Start-to-finish services include ongoing access to technical support. Known as problem-solvers and educators, Staticworx streamlines the supply chain, working directly with contractors and end-users to provide accountability. The company has won many industry accolades and has served thousands of customers with experience that spans 35 years. For more information, visit www.staticworx.com.