Smart Shopping for Home Furnishings

Selecting Wood Paneling

Dr. Leona Hawks
Home Furnishings & Housing Specialist

1987 HI 16

Shopping for wood paneling? Prefinished wood paneling is available in many different types. To select the wood paneling that fits your needs, you should be able to answer these questions.

- WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?
- HOW OFTEN WILL I CLEAN MY WOOD PANELING?
- HOW MUCH WILL I NEED?
- WHAT'S THE CONDITION OF THE WALL SURFACE?
- WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?
- WHAT'S ON THE WARRANTY?

WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?

There are several different types of pre-finished wood paneling, varying in quality. Wood paneling can be classified by the type of surface, backing, and quality of groove.

Surface Types. The veneer pre-finished wood panel varies in the quality and the type of veneer used for the face. The most expensive wood veneer consists of three different plies of veneer. One veneer layer for the face, one layer Of wood for the core, and one layer of wood for the back. The more expensive face veneer consists of a beautiful grained hardwood. The less expensive wood veneer consists of non-grain veneer, one for the core, and one for the back. The non-grain face veneer is printed and embossed to make it look like more expensive hardwoods.

Face veneer used for paneling comes in different thicknesses. Some veneers are so thin that you can see the next layer of wood. You can check the thickness of the veneer by looking at the edge of the sample. The better quality veneers have a thicker veneer, which can be refinished if scratched.

The vinyl-covered wood paneling consists of a wood patterned vinyl laminated to particle board or plywood. Each vinyl panel looks the same, since the pattern is printed by a photo process. The vinyl has a plastic appearance and when scratched is difficult to repair.

Vinyl, however, can be cleaned by washing with soap and water.

You can get seconds in vinyl wood paneling. One way to check for this is to look at the ends. If there are vinyl pieces extending beyond the edges of the 4 x 8 sheet, the panel may be a second and may indicate that the manufacturer has not taken a lot of care during production.

Another method of determining the quality of vinyl wood paneling is to look at the panel to see if there are any bubbles under the vinyl. If there are bubbles, the adhesive did not stick in some places, which means poor quality.

The printed paper panel placed over hardboard or some other wood has a printed finish, which is laminated to a wood back. This type of panel is low cost and offers a practical solution for the do-it-yourselfer. To protect the paper, clear finishes are put over the surface.

The surface-printed wood paneling consists of a wood grain pattern photographed right onto a hardboard or particle board surface. This type of wood paneling offers a low-cost panel for the do-it-yourselfer. The problem with this panel is that some consumers do not take the time to find out what they purchased and they use inappropriate cleaning products on the paneling, thus ruining the wood grain.

Backing Types. Wood paneling can be purchased with backing made of hardboard, particle board, or plywood. The hardboard is the least expensive and is used as a backing for printed surfaces. Particle board is also an inexpensive backing and is used for wood-surface and paper-printed paneling. The plywood varies in quality. The most expensive backing material may be made of the same wood as the face except not stained and finished the same way. The less expensive plywood backs may have knots and other surface defects. Some of the more expensive backs are treated to reduce moisture absorption into the panel. Moisture warps the wood panels.

Groove Types. There are two types of grooves found on the surface of pre-finished wood paneling, painted grooves and real grooves. It is difficult to tell a painted groove unless you feel the groove. Generally, the painted groove panel is less expensive to produce than the real groove panel.

The real grooves vary in quality. Some are clean and straight and some are uneven and messy looking. You can tell a lot about quality by looking at the wood panel grooves. In the better paneling, the groove has clean sharp lines, whereas the poorer quality has rough and uneven lines.

HOW OFTEN WILL I CLEAN MY WOOD PANELING?

It is a good idea to know what you are purchasing and how easy it is to clean. The cleaning method is different for each surface type and some are easier to clean than others. If you purchase the face veneer paneling, you can use wood furniture polish to revitalize your paneling. The vinyl wood paneling can be cleaned with a mild detergent and water. If you purchase the paper-covered or the surface-printed paneling, take care when cleaning. Some household chemicals will remove the wood grain pattern.

HOW MUCH DO I NEED?

Before shopping for paneling, measure in feet the distance around the room, or just one wall depending where you are going to put the paneling. Do not deduct the feet for doors and windows, since you cut pieces out of the paneling to fit around doors and windows (see Figure 16.2, Measuring Wall or Room for Wood Paneling). Paneling is sold in 4 x 8 sheets so

after you get that figure, divide the rooms measurement by 4 to get the number of panels needed.

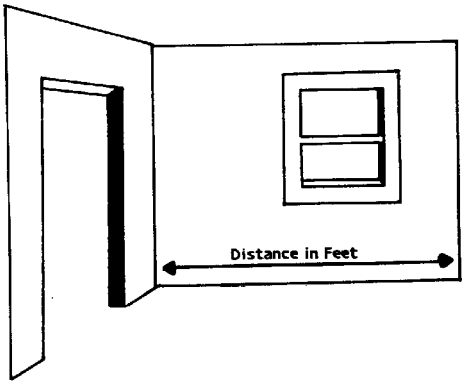

Figure 16.1. Measuring Wall or Room for Wood Paneling

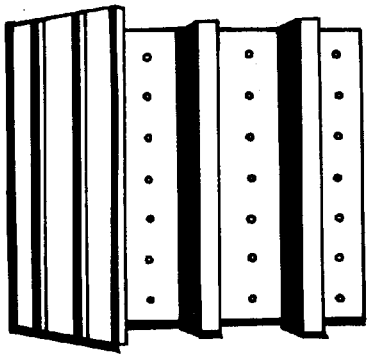

Figure 16.2. Installing Wood Paneling

WHAT'S THE CONDITION OF THE WALL SURFACE?

The surface where the paneling is installed should be level and dry. Moisture makes wood paneling warp and swell. If you are going to put paneling on a concrete wall, seal the concrete or install the wood paneling over 2 x 4 lumber or furring strips (see Figure 16.2, Installing Wood Paneling Over 2 x 4's and Concrete). This allows space for the moisture to evaporate. Some wood paneling comes with a moisture-resistant treatment painted on the back. Even with the moisture-resistant treatment, it is unwise to place paneling directly over unsealed concrete.

WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?

On wood paneling you will usually find the manufacturer's name and the name for the particular paneling. Face veneer will usually have a sticker indicating real wood. Vinyl overlay wood paneling will usually just indicate the name of the panel. You can tell vinyl by feeling the panel. On the paper paneling you will usually find the word paper somewhere. On the surface-printed paneling you may see the words simulated wood.

WHAT'S ON THE WARRANTY?

You will not see a warranty in writing on paneling, therefore, buy from a reputable dealer who would take care of manufacturer's defects. Paneling does not wear out. Most of the problems with paneling are due to expansion or shrinkage caused by moisture or dryness, lack of or incorrect care, and improper maintenance or careless treatment of the material.

✔QUALITY CHECKLIST

After each question, answer with a yes* or no.

1. Is the surface veneer made of a real grained wood rather than a photographed veneer?
2. Is the surface veneer thick when compared with other panels?

3. Is the backing made of plywood?
4. Is the groove straight, clean, and sharp?
5. Do you know how you should clean the panel?
6. Do you know how many panels you are going to need?
7. Does the panel have a special treatment on the back against moisture absorption?
8. If you are going to install the paneling below grade, are 2 x 4's or furring strips used between the concrete and the wood panels?
9. Did you check the label to try to determine which type of wood paneling you are going to purchase?
10. Did you ask if the store owner would replace defective paneling?

* If you answered all these questions with a yes, you can be assured of getting a high-quality wood paneling.

Utah State University is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University. (EP/05-95/DF)