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Cabinets: Should You Replace or Reface?

Save money on your kitchen remodel by refacing your cabinets instead of replacing them. But make sure your current cabinets are up to snuff first.

Whether you're planning a simple kitchen spruce-up or a complete overhaul, deciding what to do about your cabinetry is one of the biggest decisions you'll make. New cabinets can take up nearly 50 percent of your total budget for a kitchen renovation—and functional cabinets can mean the difference between a kitchen that works and one that doesn't. But what if you can't afford to buy all-new cabinets with the latest storage features and styles?

Many homeowners today are saving money by “refacing” rather than completely replacing their existing kitchen cabinets. There are three primary ways to reface cabinets:

- Refinish or paint existing cabinet and drawer fronts.
- Install new wood or laminate veneer over existing cabinet and drawer fronts.
- Install completely new cabinet doors and drawer fronts.

In all three cases, new hardware such as hinges and pulls help to complete the update. The interiors of the cabinets can also be sanded and painted or stained for a completely new look.

AFFORDABLE AND CONVENIENT

Fans of refacing say this mini-makeover can give a kitchen a whole new look at a much lower cost than installing all-new cabinets.

“Cabinet refacing can save up to 50 percent compared to the cost of replacing,” says Cheryl Catalano, owner of Kitchen Solvers, a cabinet refacing franchise in Naperville, Ill.

Cabinet refacing is also a much less involved process than removing old cabinets and installing new ones.

“Refacing is an ideal option for many people because of its convenience,” says Catalano. “The process doesn't require removal of the appliances, so the kitchen stays functional while the work is being done.”

NOT FOR EVERY KITCHEN

Even with the potential cost-savings, however, refacing isn't right for every kitchen remodel. Before making the decision to reface, rather than replace, homeowners need to consider a number of factors, starting with the “bones” of their current kitchen cabinetry.

"If they are not high-quality cabinets to begin with, it usually makes sense to replace the entire piece," says Deborah Ramos, an interior designer in St. Petersburg, FL.

Lorey Cavanaugh of Kitchen and Bath Design Consultants in Hartford, Conn., agrees.

"The old adage about not throwing good money after bad comes into play here," says Cavanaugh. "Don't spend money to refront products that are truly worn out."

Gary Reynolds, a cabinet craftsman in North Carolina, encourages homeowners to take a careful look at the quality of their existing cabinets before going with refacing.

"Cabinets built prior to the 1980s were generally built of better materials than newer ones. Back then, ¾ inch plywood was actually ¾ inches thick and particle board was used for floor underlayment," explains Reynolds, who handles both refacing and new cabinet construction.

ANOTHER OPTION: OPEN SHELVING

Another alternative for homeowners with older cabinets in good condition is to remove the doors altogether and convert their existing cabinets to open shelving. Interior shelves can be removed or reconfigured inside the existing cabinet frames for a thoroughly modern and updated look.

"(With conversion to open shelving) there is an opportunity to refinish interiors in another color from the exterior or add beadboard backs," says Cavanaugh.

However, even if your original cabinets are solidly built and in good condition, refacing or converting to open shelving may not be the best option if your current cabinet design or layout isn't efficient or functional. If the cabinets you have now aren't deep enough to hold your saucepans or tall enough to accommodate your cookie trays, replacing them completely may be the better option.

"If a homeowner is looking for major design or layout changes, those can be better achieved by starting over," says Reynolds.

What about a mix-and-match option, where some existing cabinets are rehabbed while others are completely replaced? Experts say this is a practical and cost-saving option many homeowners overlook.

"We often leave original glass upper cabinet doors and replace just the base cabinets to improve functionality," says Cavanaugh.

Resources

Kitchen Solvers, www.kitchensolvers.com

Teragren Panels and Veneers, www.teragren.com

Sears Cabinet Refacing Services, www.sears.com