

Specifying leather for furniture

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Leather has been used as an upholstery cover for centuries and present-day furniture styles and designs, coupled with modern leather finishing techniques and types, have increased its market share considerably in recent years. However, the attractiveness and popularity of today's leather upholstery must not detract from the fact that the leather, like any other material, must be of satisfactory quality and fit for purpose.

Upholstery leather is expected to be free from manufacturing faults and reasonably durable - performance requirements should not be an afterthought but a first consideration, and if suitable levels are not achievable the leather is not suitable for use no matter how attractive it may be.

The sensible course of action is to evaluate the leather prior to use to minimise premature breakdown and customer complaint.

What standard is used to demonstrate upholstery leather quality?

Standards which can be used to evaluate leather performance are:

- BS 6608:1985 'Cattle hide leathers for upholstered furniture' (now withdrawn)
- BS EN 13336 :2012 'Leather- Upholstery leather characteristics – Guide for the selection of leather for furniture'

However the situation is not straightforward as the British Standard is over 20 years old and the European standard does not grade leather performance for different end use categories. In the interim FIRA uses a set of requirements based on the two standards and in-house expert knowledge of upholstery leather to determine whether a leather is suitable for upholstery use. It also provides advice on applicability for different upholstery use environments.

Once a revised BS 6608 is published performance requirements for different upholstery applications will be available to all and leather manufacturers, specifiers, purchasers etc. will be able to specify clearly the performance level achieved and /or required for different leather types and grades.

Which properties are relevant to leather performance?

There are a number of test methods relevant to upholstery leather performance – some key properties are listed below

- Tear
- Flexing endurance
- Adhesion of finish
- Colour fastness to wet and dry to-and-fro rubbing
- Colour fastness to light

These properties provide information on leather strength; the possibility of premature cracking during use leading to delamination of the top surface; whether the surface colour is likely to wear away early due to rubbing and whether the colour will fade prematurely due to sunlight. Other test methods not currently incorporated in the BS or BSEN include measurement of soil resistance, colourfastness to perspiration and leather stretch. These methods are useful when used in conjunction with the current standards as a full profile of the leather's performance is obtained.

Reduce complaints and see a cost benefit

The true cost of a customer complaint incorporates not only the value of replacement, repair or refund but also staff time, transport, telephone calls, possible loss of goodwill and future business.

Ensuring the performance of leather through testing will reduce complaints and demonstrate that it is of suitable quality for upholstery applications.

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