

Selling FRTW

Are you looking for a contractor- oriented product with higher margins and less competition? There is a growing interest in fire-retardant-treated wood (FRTW) among building material dealers who serve professional contractors. FRTW fits well with their desire for appropriate specialty products. Plus, specifiers, who are looking for design solutions to comply with building code requirements are increasingly turning to FRTW for cost effective alternatives for both new construction and remodeling projects.

The process for producing exterior FRTW is similar to that of preservative-treated wood. Dry softwood lumber and plywood of certain species are impregnated with a chemical solution under pressure in a treating cylinder. However, there are major differences in the specification, application, and marketing of these two types of pressure-treated wood products.

FRTW is rarely purchased by DIYers; it is bought by contractors, after being specified by architects and engineers, to comply with building code requirements. While the use of FRTW is not as widespread as the numerous backyard projects for preservative-treated wood, it is commonly found in multi-family residences, industrial construction, and commercial and recreational buildings. Because FRTW is easier to work with and less expensive than other noncombustible materials like concrete and steel, it is frequently specified for constructing schools, theaters, offices, restaurants, and retail stores. In short, it may be more common than you realize.

Since FRTW is not a DIY product, most mass merchandisers don't stock it. As a result, a stocking dealer has far fewer competitors in FRTW and can generate a reasonable profit if they are located in an area where commercial development is underway. By stocking FRTW and informing commercial contractors that it is in stock, dealers can attract new customers to the store and prevent existing customers from looking elsewhere.

Brands of FRTW are unique and have significantly different characteristics. Brands should not be casually interchanged or substituted. Dealers should recognize difference between brands and the importance of meeting building code requirements. It is important that they ask questions before choosing which brand to stock and sell.

In order to comply with the model codes, FRTW must be:

- Pressure-impregnated (surface applied coatings do not meet code)
- Re-dried after treatment to a moisture content of 19 percent for lumber, 15 percent for plywood.
- Have a Flame Spread Index of less than 25 in a 30-minute ASTM E84 / UL723 tunnel test.
- Have follow-up inspection service by an approved third-party.
- Have published and verified third-party design value adjustment factors which are appropriate for anticipated in-service temperatures.

Beyond these basic qualifications, products vary. To get the product they want, specifiers and dealers should consider the following points:

- Performance record - How long has the brand existed, and has it proven itself?
- Code compliance report - Is there a UL Evaluation Report?
- Warranty - What is covered, how long does it extend, and what disclaimers are included?

Furthermore, dealers will want to consider the service and reliability of the treating company. Does it support efforts in selling a high margin specialty item, or does it set up numerous dealers who revert to commodity selling?

The first and probably most important step in selling FRTW is for dealers to let contractors know that they supply it. This may seem obvious, but even the dealer's best customers are not aware of all the products they offer. They shouldn't assume that customers know that they handle FRTW. To help with this, the dealer should choose a supplier who will provide adequate product knowledge training and continuing assistance in understanding the product.

Next, check the specification. FRTW is a code-driven specified product in almost all cases. See which brand is specified and beware of the "or equal" clause. There are significant differences in the brands available and a substitution that fails to perform could become the dealer's problem. Before substituting brands, make sure to know the answers to these questions:

- Does this product have the same warranty?
- Does the product have the same corrosion properties?
- Does the product have the same code approvals?

Also, does it have the same strength properties? The model codes require published design value adjustments, but these adjustment factors are not the same for all brands. The project designer uses the factors based on the brand specified; they are not interchangeable with other products. Unless the dealer or the contractor is prepared to recalculate the design of the building, don't substitute!

In summary, fire-retardant-treated wood products makes sense for contractor yards. It is purchased by the same customers already being served, it extends the product line without requiring a large number of SKUs, and it can return an appealing profit.