

Cabinets 101:

SHOULD YOU REFINISH, REFACE OR REPLACE?



BY GREG MIZER, LICENSED RESIDENTIAL CONTRACTOR

If you're considering a kitchen or bathroom update, you're probably wondering which route to go with your cabinets.

Should you refinish, reface, or replace?

Whether you want to upgrade your kitchen or bath for resale or update it for your own enjoyment, this article will help you make a good decision.

The first thing to do is to take a good look at your existing cabinets. Try to determine if they're built well enough to even consider refinishing or refacing.

- Are any of the bottoms or shelves sagging or warping?
- Are there signs of water damage around the bases or under the sink?
- Are the face frames still solidly attached to the cabinet boxes?
- Are there visible cracks in the joints of the face frames?
- Are the cabinet boxes constructed of less than 1/2"-thick material?

If you've answered yes to one or more of these questions, it's probably time to consider replacing. Another consideration is whether or not your current cabinets have adjustable shelves. Many older cabinets have fixed shelves, which makes them less useful.

Next, decide if the existing cabinet layout works for you, or if you would be happier with a redesign. If the layout is fine and you've determined that your cabinets are constructed well enough to keep, then refinishing and refacing are options worth considering.



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REFINISH, REFACE OR REPLACE?

	Refinish	Reface	Replace
Well-constructed existing cabinets	X	X	
Poorly-constructed existing cabinets			X
Good existing cabinet layout	X	X	
Inadequate existing cabinet layout			X
You don't like existing doorstyle		X	X
You like existing doorstyle	X		
You'd like to add accessories, such as pull-out shelves	X	X	X
If you have to pay about the same amount of money, you'd rather get all new.			X
You want to do-it-yourself	X		
You'd like professional help	X	X	X

REFINISHING

If your cabinets are well constructed and the layout works, but the finish is marred or outdated, refinishing might be the answer. You don't necessarily need to scrape and sand down to bare wood (although that's an option). Applying a new coat of clear finish might suffice. This process can be more involved than it sounds because often there's a lot of prep to do to get the new finish to adhere. The cabinets may also need some filler and stain touch-up to fix scratches and worn areas. But if you're willing to take a bit of time and care, refinishing materials aren't expensive. You can add a glaze to enhance the look or to change the color slightly, and you can even do some sand-through to give your cabinets an antique look. We've done this on several kitchens with older walnut cabinets, and they came out looking really good. If you'd like to paint your cabinets instead, make sure you use a paint that will stand up to the wear in a kitchen. And prep is the key to getting paint to adhere to the old finish. If it's not done correctly, your cabinets will soon look worse than they did before you painted—and your home value will be diminished instead of enhanced.

REPLACING

If you remove your old cabinets and start fresh, you can have any layout and look you want—and you can spend a little or a lot. Some cabinet manufacturers keep the cost down by offering a very limited selection of door styles and colors while still using good quality construction methods. Others will do almost anything you might want but charge extra for anything that is not a standard, so the cost can rise quickly. Another option is custom cabinets. True custom cabinet shops don't have standard sizes or colors. Instead, they build every job according to each customer's unique specifications.

REFACING

Refacing involves replacing all the cabinet doors, drawer fronts and end panels. The cabinet boxes stay—the structure that lies beneath—but a new face is put on them, so they will look like an entirely new set of cabinets. Like refinishing, refacing is a "green" option because it saves materials, but it doesn't always make sense from a cost and time standpoint. Refacing will generally cost a little less than replacing—but not much. The cost depends on what type of wood, stain color or glazed finish, trim options etc. you choose. You may also need to replace your drawer boxes, depending on their condition. Do you want to add rollout shelves in the base cabinets or pantry, lazy Susans, tray dividers, trash pullout and other storage options? By the time you add in the cost of accessories, you're often spending as much as you would replacing your cabinets.

We encourage our customers who are interested in refacing to let us estimate both refacing and replacing so they can see what the cost difference is. It takes a little more time for us to prepare the estimate this way, but we don't want customers to come back to us later wishing they had spent just a little more and gotten what they really wanted.



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SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

A point that I hear from some ads is that it takes less time and involves less mess to reface than to replace. That isn't true in most cases. It takes about a week to reface the average kitchen—including removing the doors, drawer fronts, and trim; overlaying all the cabinet fronts and exposed parts of the boxes with either a prefinished solid wood or veneer; and installing new doors, drawers, accessories and trim. Obviously, this is all done right there, in the home. When we replace cabinets, we typically remove the existing cabinets, appliances and countertops in a morning and start to install the new cabinets in the same day. It may take another day or two to finish the install and put the appliances back or install new ones.

Depending on the type of new countertop selected, it may take just a few hours to install a laminate top or up to three weeks to get a new solid surface top fabricated and installed. Most fabricators won't build solid surface tops (granite, Corian, Silestone, etc.) off the plans. Only after the

cabinets are in place will they come to your home to measure and make a template so they can be sure the new counters will fit correctly. In a refacing situation, the template could be made from the existing countertop to save some time.

There are so many kitchen and bath remodeling options that it's best to get some professional help. It may cost a little more, but it's more likely you'll end up with a kitchen or bathroom that functions well and that you're proud of. Another consideration is what remodeling will do for the value of the home. I've heard that you shouldn't spend more than 10 or 15 percent of the value of the home on a kitchen remodel, and I think that's good advice if you're concerned about recouping your costs. But if you're planning on staying in your home long-term, this rule-of-thumb may not hold true. Getting the kitchen and bath you want and enjoying them for the next decade or two may be all the return on investment you need.