

HOW TO BUY A CONFERENCE TABLE

Purchasing a conference table has much in common with purchasing a car. Most models will adequately fulfill their primary purpose. However, there are a great many options, levels of quality and luxury, specific needs and practical requirements, aesthetic and budgetary considerations, as well as the “statement” you wish to make that will determine your final decision.

We can even take this metaphor a bit further by pointing out that while many conference tables can be had for a modest cost, others are every bit as expensive as the best European touring sedans. The information in this guide will help you sort out what type of conference table will best suit your needs as well as your budget.

Topics I will cover include practical advice on how to determine the size of table you need and insider tips on selecting construction materials and finishes:

Construction

- To Wood Veneer or Not to Veneer
- The Secrets of “Solid Wood”
- High Pressure Laminates - Pros & Cons
- What About Banding?

Look and Feel

- Finishes – The Many Faces of Lacquer
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- Stains & Dyes - Custom Matching

Fitting Your Space

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CONSTRUCTION

Conference tables can be designed in all shapes and sizes and can be constructed from many different types of materials including wood, glass, marble, synthetic materials, or some combination of the above.

Because wood is the most popular, versatile, and I believe the most beautiful of all the materials we might use, I am going to restrict this paper to using wood in its many manifestations.

Fundamentally, there are two basic ways to construct a wood conference table:

- Using a veneer over a recommended substrate
- Making the table out of solid pieces of wood and letting the wood itself act as the load bearing structure

To Wood Veneer or Not to Veneer

Most conference tables over eight to ten feet long have tops constructed from wood veneers. The veneers are normally applied to a material called **MDF (Medium Density Fiberboard)**.

MDF has a number of desirable qualities that make it the recommended substrate for veneer:

- MDF is dimensionally stable (It doesn't warp)
- MDF has no voids that could cause it to collapse or cause the veneer to break or crack
- MDF has an exceptionally smooth surface, allowing for flawless application of the veneer.

Even though wood veneers are quite thin, once they are properly applied to their substrate, they are extremely durable. Hitting a piece of solid walnut with a hammer and hitting a veneered piece with a hammer will produce approximately the same result.

Most veneer repairs can also be accomplished with about the same effort as a solid wood repair.

Finally, veneer is considerably less expensive than solid wood construction. Wood veneers have been around for more than 3,000 years and were first used by the ancient Egyptians. They have proved to be excellent materials for use in many types of furniture.

The Secrets of "Solid Wood"

"Solid Wood" is a term that unfortunately is no longer as descriptive as it used to be. At one time solid wood was used to describe furniture construction that had as its main component whole pieces of wood, grain and all, that had been milled, dimensioned and otherwise configured to create a piece of furniture.

This is the material I will be talking about when I use the term solid wood.

Today, the term solid wood is used to describe any material that is made from wood. The definition can now include plywood, particle board, MDF, blandex, and other engineered wood products as well as the original definition of solid wood.

Be specific when asking about constructing a table made from solid wood, or you may wind up getting something other than what you want.

As I mentioned earlier, tables over eight to ten feet long are normally not made from solid wood. This is due to the problems inherent with solid wood; warping, moving, shrinking, expanding and otherwise refusing to hold still.

When you build large table tops from solid wood all of these construction problems become magnified. These problems can be managed but they are in part the reason for the high cost of solid wood tables.

If you are in need of a smaller table, solid wood can be a good higher-end option for you.

High Pressure Laminates – Pros & Cons

We've come a long way from the speckled "Formica" table tops of the late '50's and early '60's. Although Formica, which is actually a brand name, has become a generic term, these high pressure plastics laminates are now manufactured by a large number of suppliers in an even larger numbers of looks and finishes.

- Even on close inspection, some laminates are difficult to tell from real wood
- Most are extremely strong, long lasting and resistant to abrasion.
- There are even real wood veneers that are similar to plastic laminates in that they are coated in a pvc (polyvinylchloride) material for durability and have a similar backing material for strength and ease of installation.
- Plastic laminates are often less expensive than wood veneers.

There are obviously a number of disadvantages to high pressure laminates as well:

- Once it is damaged it generally cannot be satisfactorily repaired and must be replaced.
- Although it is available in a wide range of colors and finishes, it cannot be custom matched.
- Some applications are limited due to its physical properties.
- If asked, you can't say its wood.

Despite the drawbacks, a plastic laminate is a good choice for applications that will receive a high degree of use and abuse.

What About Banding?

Banding is the term that refers to the table edge or perimeter. The banding can be made of MDF, like the table itself and covered with the same veneer as the top. This is not a preferred method since the banding will probably sustain more impacts than the top.

Solid wood provides a better quality banding that is more likely to hold up over time.

Often a "reveal" is built into the table top between the banding and the table itself. This is a narrow 1/8" X 1/8" groove that acts as a decorative border between the banding and the top. It also makes wood movement between the solid wood banding and a veneer top less of a problem.

The banding can be of a variety of widths and thicknesses depending on your preferences. It will also have an edge or profile that should compliment the rest of the table. There are a large variety of profiles to choose from and a well-designed table will have a profile that enhances the architectural continuity of your table.

LOOK AND FEEL

Now that you understand the construction issues involved in table design, it's time to talk about the look and feel of your conference table. Several important factors come together to contribute to your table's final "finish."

Finishes – The Many Faces of Lacquer

Most high quality wood conference tables are finished with either a catalyzed or pre-catalyzed lacquer. These lacquers are extremely hard and durable and are responsible for highlighting one of the most appealing qualities of a wood conference table; its warm, rich and sensual presence.

Lacquer finishes can be applied in a wide range of sheens; flat, egg shell, satin, semi-gloss and high gloss. In general, the more gloss, the more that scratches and abrasions are going to show.

Woods and Colors – Selecting Wisely

Conference tables, whether veneer or solid wood, are generally made from hardwoods. Popular woods include cherry, mahogany, walnut, maple, oak and teak. All of these woods have their own look, feel and personality.

Since most of the cost of a table is in the labor, the difference in cost between most of these woods will not greatly affect the price of the table.

The exception in this short list is teak. It is considerably more expensive, and more difficult to work with as well.

All of these woods can be stained and dyed to create a particular color or effect for your application. Obviously, the darker the natural wood is to begin with, the less the color is able to be changed. A light wood is more like a blank pallet.

Most of the woods I have mentioned above are closed grain – meaning the That is grain is very tight.

The exception here is oak. It is an opened grained hardwood and ideally the grain should be sealed before finishing. Oak is also very susceptible to warping and splintering in addition to an unsubtle and unattractive grain pattern. I generally recommend against it if given the opportunity. This obviously doesn't prevent it from being a very popular wood for many types of furnishing.

Stains and Dyes – Custom Matching

Woods are often stained or dyed to bring out the color of the wood and amplify the grain, or simply to enhance the architectural aesthetics of the room.

There are a virtually unlimited number of colors and hues to choose from, again, limited only by the natural dyes and pigments in the wood itself. Lighter woods are usually better at hiding many types of damage than darker woods, similar to the way a lighter color car seems to hide dirt better than a darker one.

This is a good place to make mention of a confusion I've run into on many occasions. Cherry is a very popular wood and a popular color as well. Cherry wood is reddish brown with highlights of blond. Cherry the color, is the color of cherries; a deep reddish burgundy.

I have seen much wooden furniture, especially in discount stores, labeled, or mis-labeled, as cherry. This furniture is usually stained the deep reddish burgundy of a cherry. This confusion of terms was painfully revealed to me after building and finishing a very expensive piece of custom furniture out of cherry wood for a client who wanted a "cherry" (reddish burgundy) finish.

FITTING YOUR SPACE

How do you know what size table you need? What shape will best fit your company's brand message and corporate style? How should you handle power and communication needs? In this section, I'll give you some important tips on envisioning a table that is ideally designed for your business needs.

Table Size – How Many & Where?

The rule of thumb regarding table size is 30" per person. This works out rather conveniently when figuring how many people a table can seat: an 8' table seats eight people, a 10' table seats ten people, a 12' table seats twelve people, etc.

This assumes an even number of people on each side of the table and one at each end. A little plane geometry is needed for a round table ($c = \pi \times d$ (circumference = 3.14159 X diameter.). Thus, an 8' diameter table will hold 10 people ($3.14159 \times 96''$ divided by $30'' = 10$).

A minimum of 36" would be needed between the table and the wall as well. This is pushing it, but it will allow someone to walk between the chair and the wall.

I always suggest that if there is any doubt about the size that will fit comfortably in the room that you mark the table size on the floor using blue masking tape (the blue tape is low stick thus easier to remove). Pull your chairs up to the tape and see how it works.

Table Shapes – Geometry Rules

Beyond the aesthetic appeal of a particular table shape there are practical considerations involving how the table is to be used. A round table assures that no one is at the head of the table and everyone has a good view of everyone else.

A boat shaped table provides for a table head while also improving everyone's line of sight to others. A "V" shaped table is ideal for teleconferencing because everyone is facing in the same general direction although it somewhat restricts interaction. "U" shaped, as well as "V" shaped tables give easy access to all participants

through the open end of the tables. Rectangular, racetrack, and arced (rounded ends but greater diameter than the table width) tables allow maximum seating with a minimum amount of room.

In addition to the aesthetic, practical and space considerations, the shape of the table will also have an effect on the cost.

In general, when wood has to be curved in any way it is going to cost more than straight lines.

Additionally, tables of certain shapes will also have special engineering requirements that may increase the cost. A round table, for instance, not only has to be engineered to support the weight at the center, but it requires more material than other shapes due to the geometry of its design.

Ultimately, the shape of your conference table will emerge from two factors: the practical and the imaginative – the actually space available in your conference room and the statement (mood, branding, business philosophy or energy) you want to convey.

Table Legs – Know How to Use Them

The legs of your table go a long way toward impacting its look, cost and practicality. On a high-end custom table the legs should receive the same degree of attention, thought and craftsmanship as the top. They will not only support the table, but support everything that you expect the table to do for you.

If you are on a restricted budget but still want a quality custom table, you may want to consider a simple, non-custom leg.

Cannister legs, usually hollow metal cylinders, available in a wide variety of sizes, are a good choice for many applications. They can have a copper, brass, chrome or brushed aluminum finish, among others. They can also be powder coated (a thick finish with a slight texture) in black or other colors. These legs, especially in black, tend to simply disappear under a table that is surrounded by chairs and does not offer a long sight line.

Custom legs will add to the cost of the table but can also greatly enhance the look and presence of the table as well. This is another opportunity for the craftsman who designs and builds your table to make it unique. The legs will also provide another practical function that is described below.

Power/Communication Grommets

Grommets are the devices that go into your table top to facilitate your power and communication needs.

The simplest ones are “pass-thru”, a hole, usually with a decorative sleeve and cover, that allows you to run your cords through the table top rather than over the edge.

The more sophisticated ones allow you to access all of your power and communication needs by connecting directly into the table top grommet itself. These can be configured with 110 volt outlets, CAT5e data modules, 15 pin monitor outlets, 1/8” audio plugs, S- video, 3 pin XLR microphone, USB, et.al.

These units will start from under a \$100.00 and run well over a \$1,000.00 depending on how they are technologically and aesthetically configured.

No matter what kind of grommet you choose, you’ll still need to deal with the wires under the table. Your table should have some kind of wire management system to get the wires from the grommets to the floor as unobtrusively as possible.

This is often done with a wire chase or channel under the table that serves each grommet. This channel then runs to the table legs giving you an opportunity to run the wires to your floor outlets. The legs can be made hollow, have a hollow channel so the wires pass through them, or a separate chase can be attached to the legs to carry the wires to the floor.

CONCLUSION

I have designed and built a number of conference tables that are pictured on my website at www.furniturebyrandyblock.com.

Two of these tables offer a valuable example of the importance of an informed purchase.

- One is my Limited Edition walnut table, boat shaped, 14' long with hardwood banding.
- The other is a custom table, also walnut, boat shaped, and 14' long with hardwood banding.

The Limited Edition table is \$4,000.00. The custom table is over \$25,000.00.

The difference? Let's return to the buying a car metaphor, one is a Chevrolet, the other – a BMW. I hope the information that I have provided will help you make an informed purchase, get exactly the conference table you want, and at a price that fits your budget.

For More Information

Please feel free to contact me at **501-664-2074** or email me at rblock@aristotle.net. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. .



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