Questions to Ask Before Refacing or Repainting Your Cabinets
Whether you want to go lighter and brighter in your kitchen, or take medium oak cabinets to a deeper, more modern stain, you'll want to be sure your cabinets are in good shape before you open that can of paint and start your makeover. Our experts got together and made a list of eight critical questions that you need to ask.
INTRODUCTION

Will You Save Money?

While the temptation to reface, refinish or repaint is great, we generally find that the cost savings is not as large as you might expect, and often there are no savings at all. Repainting or refinishing a cabinet with underlying breakage or hidden damage will cost you in the long-run. Plus, refinishing a wood-stained cabinet requires many work steps using harsh and often toxic chemicals to strip the existing finish, sand and prepare the wood to accept new stain. Initial quotes for refacing are generally limited because the extra features most people want are added later. The result is the final bill for refacing shows it to be a costly process, and the price tag frequently exceeds the cost to buy brand new factory-direct cabinets.

Look for Hidden Damage First

Before you get started on a cosmetic upgrade, take a look behind the doors and drawers to see how your boxes are made. If your cabinets were built after 1970, there's a high likelihood that you'll find the boxes are made from particleboard and may already be showing damage from every day use. If you are considering a cosmetic update on particleboard boxes, then check for moisture damage first. Cabinets near the sink are highly susceptible to moisture damage, but in a kitchen moisture damage could occur anywhere. Besides hidden moisture issues, we also see many kitchens every day where the particleboard has blown out around the screws holding the cabinet to the wall, or the nails holding the cabinet sides together. Underlying structural damage such as that needs to be fixed before any cosmetic updates.
1. Are your cabinets secured to the wall?

Take a look at the side of your cabinets to see if there are any gaps where the cabinet meets the wall.

✅ You may see that the cabinet side fits snugly against the wall surface from top to bottom, and if so, that is good.

❌ Often though, homeowners find that their cabinets have begun to pull away from the wall. The top six to eight inches of your wall cabinet will be where this issue usually first appears.

💡 If you see a gap near the top of your wall cabinet, that’s a symptom your cabinet box has begun to break down. The back panel may actually be separating from the sides of your cabinet.

Neither painting nor refacing will correct this issue. To ensure a stable cabinet, you must replace it. We recommend looking for a new cabinet with a fully plywood back secured to the sides of the cabinet.

**Recommended: Replace.**
2. Do your drawers ever get stuck?

Open and close each drawer in your kitchen to see if it catches or jams as it rolls in and out.

- Your drawers should roll smoothly in and out allowing you to see all contents from the front to the back of the drawer.

- You may find that one or more drawers don’t operate smoothly, occasionally slips out of track, or worse yet, wobbles or tips forward in the front when opened all the way.

These are symptoms of the condition of the drawer glides, also known as slides, runners or guides. Older technology in the glides including side-mount, soft aluminum or limited extension guides tend to break down or jam more easily. This could also be the result of the drawer box breaking down.

A cosmetic change to the front of your cabinets, like repainting or refacing, won’t address this type of underlying hardware issue. Newer undermount, full-extension and soft-close drawer guides are usually rated to hold 70-pounds or more. **Recommended: Replace drawer glides.**

Smooth drawers with steel undermount soft-close guides
3. Are bottoms and sides of the drawers still solid?

Open each drawer to check for gaps along corners and edges. Are the sides pulling away or apart? Press firmly with your hand against the bottom of the drawer. Does the bottom begin to separate from the drawer box sides?

- A solid drawer box will be four-sided, all four corners will have tight dovetail joints, and the drawer bottom will be fully captured by the drawer box sides.

- The drawer box bottom should give as you press against it but should you should not see any gaps. If you find gaps, open joints, loose corners, or damaged wood, that is a sign the drawer has broken down requiring replacement.

Kitchen drawers tend to carry a heavy load of silverware, utensils, and other items. In order to make sure your drawers won’t fall apart under normal use, you need a drawer box that is structurally sound and in good condition.

Like the drawer glides, the drawer box will not be improved by repainting or refacing. The most reputable cabinets on the market today are shipped with drawer boxes made of solid hardwood and dovetail joints. Look for a strong plywood drawer bottom that is fully captured in a dado joint on all four sides of the box. **Recommended: Replace drawers.**
4. Have your shelves bowed?

Open your cabinet doors and look at your shelves? Are they still straight and level?

- Your shelves should be straight and level and should not jiggle or give way when you tug on them.

- Shelves that are bending, bowing or showing signs of cracking or delamination are a definite problem.

Over time and heavy usage, particleboard shelves are especially prone to bow and eventually give out in the middle.

A cosmetic change, like refacing or repainting, will not fix this issue. Aged, weakened or damaged shelves are another of the underlying structural issues to be addressed. If your shelves are strong and steady, then you will likely see years of worry-free use from them. However, if you’re seeing problems now, then we recommend replacing your shelves with heavy-duty plywood [not particleboard] shelves for long-lasting durability. **Recommended: Replace shelves.**
5. Adequate clearance around appliances?

- Open and close the door on your refrigerator, freezer, dishwasher, microwave and any other appliance.
  - Your appliance doors should open and close freely and without any obstruction.
  - If you find the refrigerator door bumps adjacent cabinets, or the dishwasher door blocks access to the sink cabinet, you may be seeing symptoms of a too crowded floor plan.

- Clear floor spaces at least 30-inches by 48-inches in front of each appliance are recommended by both the National Kitchen and Bath Association [NKBA] and the American National Standards Institute [ANSI].

- Refacing or repainting will not fix this issue. Your floor plan may need to be modified to ensure that you have adequate clearance around your appliances and that your floor plan meets both the safe-operation standards and local building codes. If you repaint or re-face your existing cabinets, you'll still likely need to remove and re-install at least some of your cabinets in order to make this floor plan change. Homeowners usually find it is easier and less expensive to replace the cabinets.

  **Recommended: Replace.**

Clear workspace and access to appliances
6. Is your kitchen layout functional?

Look at the primary work areas in your kitchen. Evaluate each space [cooking, clean up, storage] considering what you like, or don’t like about each one.

- All three primary work spaces fit together efficiently, and are easily accessible.

- Sometimes homeowners find work spaces that are interrupted by an obstacle, like a door. Other times, homeowners look at traffic patterns and wonder why the main walkway runs through the middle of the work area.

The NKBA recommends the width of a work area should be at least 42-inches for one cook and at least 48-inches for multiple cooks. Measure between the front of the countertop, tall cabinets and/or appliances.

Refacing or repainting will not fix this issue. You’ll need to change your floor plan to remove obstacles or fix traffic hazards. If you repaint or reface your cabinets, then you’ll need to remove the existing cabinets carefully and reinstall them following the improved floor plan. The simpler route is to tear out the old cabinets and replace with new ones, and in doing so an experienced kitchen designer will help you create the safest, most functional floor plan for your home. Recommended: Replace.
7. Any safety concerns with your kitchen?

Is your oven, range or cooktop set far away from windows, doorways and seating areas? Do you have ample countertop space on both sides of your cooking areas?

- **Adequate clearance, safe distances and clear access to a fire extinguisher in an emergency are all indications that your floor plan may be workable as is.**

- **If your cooking surface is located beneath an existing cabinet, or you have no countertop space on one side of your range, or that your window coverings are inches from the cooking area, then you have potential hazards.**

Refacing or repainting will not fix safety issues; ignoring safety hazards in the kitchen puts you and your family at risk. If you discover that your kitchen layout creates a risk or hazard, then your best bet is to rearrange the workspace to meet recommended guidelines. Rearranging the workspace will likely mean the removal of your existing cabinets. **Recommended: Replace.** If repainting or re-facing, tear out and reinstall to correct safety hazards.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, 41 percent of home fires start in the kitchen. Safety experts recommend you maintain at least 12-inches of clear countertop space on one side of your cooking area, and 15-inches on the other side, as landing zones for hot items. Guidelines also prohibit the placement of a cooking surface directly beneath a window. Allow 24-inches of clearance between the top of your cooking surface to the bottom of a protected, non-combustible surface directly above it. If you use a microwave hood combination, follow manufacturer’s guidelines. To ensure adequate ventilation, always check your local code for requirements.
8. Will your layout still work for the long term?

Do you have enough countertop space for the number of cooks in your kitchen? Are shelves easy-to-reach? Do you have adequate task lighting? Is there room to put in a larger [or smaller] refrigerator?

- Plenty of countertop space, flexible spaces around appliances, and easy-to-reach items.
- Too little work space or seating space for your household, not enough light where you need it most, hard to reach shelves requiring you to bend and stoop to find things.

Ask yourself whether your kitchen will need to accommodate a growing family, or perhaps aging parents, kids returning home from college, or a family downsizing. If you plan to stay in your home, then these possibilities should be considered.

Depending on the issues you uncover, you may be able to adjust your shelf height, or expand your dining area or buy a larger refrigerator to correct the problem. In that case, you may be able to simply repaint or reface existing cabinets. Often though, homeowners discover new replacement cabinets cost about the same as refacing and are more likely to have conveniences like easy-reach roll-out trays, well-organized storage inserts and adjustable shelves. **Recommended: Repaint, reface or replace.**
SUMMARY

If you found underlying issues in your kitchen, then you'll need to think carefully about the time and money involved in a cosmetic upgrade, especially if you have uncovered safety or functional issues. Removing and reinstalling old cabinets to fix those issues may lead to breakage, high labor costs, and a lot of frustration.

If you’re torn between making that cosmetic update or truly fixing a problem kitchen, then consider this:

Professional remodelers say that new cabinets should be 60 percent of the cost of a kitchen renovation, but that doesn't have to be the case. Homeowners who buy quality cabinets at factory-direct prices shrink that cabinet budget while still getting strong plywood boxes, solid maple, cherry, birch or painted fronts, plus soft-close drawers and built-in conveniences such as easy-reach roll-out trays. By cutting out that middle-man and buying directly from the cabinet factory, you could easily save thousands of dollars. That's enough money to upgrade countertops, appliances flooring or whatever is on your wish list.
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