

UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER PAINT RATINGS

Consumer product ratings can be a useful starting point when evaluating paint products, particularly for homeowners seeking simple comparisons among brands. Publications such as Consumer Reports test a range of paints and publish rankings intended to help consumers make purchasing decisions. However, these ratings should not be interpreted as a complete measure of overall coating performance.

Architectural coatings are complex products designed to perform under a wide range of substrates, environments, and application conditions. Consumers Union (the nonprofit organization behind Consumer Reports) evaluates interior and exterior paints through a series of controlled laboratory tests designed to simulate common residential conditions. The goal is to compare products on a standardized basis, but the testing scope is intentionally limited and focused on factors most relevant to homeowners rather than the full range of performance characteristics relevant to painting professionals such as painting contractors, architects, and specifiers. As a result, high rankings in consumer publications do not necessarily reflect how a paint will perform in demanding field conditions or across a wide range of professional applications.

The logo for Consumer Reports, featuring the letters 'CR' in a large, bold, green font, followed by the words 'Consumer Reports' in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

The Scope of Consumer Testing

Consumer paint evaluations typically focus on a relatively narrow group of characteristics intended to reflect the needs of do-it-yourself users. For interior paints, these often emphasize properties such as hiding and scrub resistance, while exterior evaluations generally include a more limited set of weathering-related tests.

While these properties are certainly important, they represent only a portion of the many performance attributes that determine how well a coating performs over time. Professional coating evaluation often considers a much broader range of criteria.

For example, architectural coatings may also need to be evaluated for:

- Adhesion to various substrates
- Alkali resistance on masonry surfaces
- Corrosion protection on metal substrates
- Film flexibility and crack-bridging ability
- Compatibility with primers and existing coatings

Many of these properties are not included in consumer testing protocols but are critical for long-term coating performance in professional applications.

How Product Design Can Influence Ratings

Because consumer ratings carry significant visibility in the marketplace, some manufacturers may optimize product formulations to perform particularly well in the specific tests used by consumer publications. This is a common practice in many industries where standardized testing influences purchasing decisions.

While this approach can help a product achieve high scores in certain evaluation categories, the characteristics emphasized in those tests may not always align with the performance attributes most important to professional users. Contractors and specifiers often prioritize factors such as application properties, long-term durability, compatibility with various substrates, and performance in demanding environments—attributes that may not be fully captured in simplified consumer testing programs.

Broader Evaluation Factors for Pros

Painting contractors, architects, and property/facility managers often assess coatings using a broader set of criteria that reflect jobsite conditions, application requirements, and long-term service performance. In addition to properties commonly highlighted in consumer testing, professional users typically consider factors such as ease of application, flow and workability, drying and recoat times, compatibility with primers and existing coatings, durability under weather exposure, performance on challenging substrates, and the availability of manufacturer technical support and warranty programs. For commercial and institutional projects, product selection is also guided by product data sheets, field performance history, and applicable specification standards. These sources help ensure the coating system is appropriate for the substrate, exposure conditions, and expected service life.

Key Takeaways

Consumer ratings can still be a helpful reference, especially when comparing basic residential products or looking at specific attributes such as hide or scrub resistance. However, they are most useful when considered as one part of a broader evaluation process rather than the sole basis for product selection. For professional applications, consumer ratings are best supplemented with manufacturer literature, technical bulletins, industry standards, and field experience. Looking at the full picture helps ensure the selected coating system is aligned with the project's substrate conditions, environment, and performance expectations.

For architects, contractors, and facility managers, selecting the right paint requires a broader review of substrate compatibility, environmental exposure, application properties, and long-term durability. When consumer information is considered alongside industry standards and field experience, it becomes easier to make well-informed coating decisions that support reliable long-term performance.

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