

THE HOMEOWNER'S CABINETRY SPECIFICATION MANUAL

50 Must-Ask Questions for Cabinetry Suppliers & Installers to Avoid Overpaying & Ensure Quality

Choosing custom or semi-custom cabinetry is one of the most critical decisions during a kitchen or bathroom renovation. The cabinet system defines how your space looks, how it functions, and how well it stands up to decades of daily use. Sourcing cabinetry is a significant financial investment, representing 29% to 35% of a kitchen's total renovation budget. This comprehensive manual compiles exactly 50 technical, financial, and logistical questions to ask your supplier or installer. Every question is paired with a detailed, source-grounded answer based on national manufacturing performance standards (KCMA A161.1-2022) and local contractor matching expertise. Keep this manual on hand to protect your budget, protect against moisture damage, and hold your construction team accountable.

EXPERT FINISH WARNING: Before finalize-ordering any painted cabinetry line, please be aware that the finish on painted cabinetry is less durable than stained cabinetry across all cabinet brands. All painted cabinets chip, scratch, or show water damage over decades of daily use. Homeowners should never overpay for luxury paint under the assumption that it is indestructible, nor blame budget lines for standard paint wear. Professional touch-ups are a standard part of long-term kitchen maintenance.

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SECTION 1: REGIONAL SOURCING, TARIFFS & PROJECT BUDGETING

1. Where are the cabinet boxes and door panels manufactured?

Answer: It is critical to ask this because imported cabinets carry high trade tariff risks, while domestically manufactured cabinet lines have a 0% tariff burden. Knowing the source allows you to anticipate pricing changes mid-renovation. Sourcing through local networks like Birmingham and Montgomery custom cabinet matching services connects you to regional craftspeople, whereas national lines are built in major hubs like Ashland, Alabama or the Midwest.

2. How do current Section 232 tariffs impact the price of imported lines?

Answer: Under a federal proclamation, a 25% tariff on imported wood products—including cabinets and vanities—remains in effect. Additionally, imported lines originating from Vietnam (the largest exporter to the U.S.) face combined rates approaching 46%. Importers pass these costs down, which means stock imported cabinets that previously cost \$3,000 wholesale can jump to \$3,750 or \$4,200, directly inflating your cabinetry budget.

3. What is the typical cost range for a full custom kitchen in this region?

Answer: According to regional matching service data, custom kitchen cabinetry ranges between \$10,000 and \$30,000 in Birmingham and Montgomery. In Hickory, North Carolina, typical custom kitchen costs are slightly higher, ranging from \$12,000 to \$35,000, reflecting the local high-end furniture and cabinetry manufacturing standards in the Catawba Valley.

4. How much can I save by choosing cabinet refacing over a full custom cabinet replacement?

Answer: Cabinet refacing allows you to update your kitchen cabinetry at exactly half (50%) the cost of a full custom replacement. Instead of paying for complete custom cabinet fabrication (which runs from \$10,000 to over \$30,000), refacing keeps your existing structurally sound cabinet boxes and upgrades only the visible elements with new solid wood doors, drawer fronts, and soft-close hardware.

5. What is the standard cost range for a custom bathroom vanity?

Answer: Custom bathroom vanities are smaller in scope and cost significantly less than kitchen packages. In Birmingham and Montgomery, a custom bathroom vanity typically ranges between \$2,000 and \$6,000. In Hickory, a custom vanity ranges from \$2,500 to \$7,000. These costs include moisture-resistant solid wood boxes and furniture-grade custom styling.

6. Is there an additional charge or surcharge for custom paint color-matching?

Answer: Yes. Most cabinet lines charge a significant premium for non-standard, custom color paint match options. For example, opting for a custom color rather than a standard factory pre-finished line can add \$2,000 to \$3,000 to your total package, making factory pre-finished colors like White Dove, Iron Shaker, or Night Blue a more budget-friendly route.

7. Do you offer trade discounts or volume programs for contractors and designers?

Answer: Yes. Major cabinet suppliers offer trade-focused discount programs with tiered contractor pricing. Trade discounts typically range from 12% to as high as 45% or 50% for high-volume wholesale orders (such as multi-family projects or repeat builders purchasing 100+ cabinets). Homeowners should confirm whether their contractor is passing these trade savings along to protect the budget.

8. What are the delivery charges and job-site logistics included in this quote?

Answer: You must confirm whether your quote includes curbside delivery, inside placement, or job-site staging. Staging delivery schedules to match your installation steps is a major logistical advantage. Confirm if the supplier utilizes Less-Than-Truckload (LTL) or Full-Truckload (FTL) freight, as late or uncoordinated deliveries can delay your installation timeline by weeks.

9. What is the baseline price for a standard 10x10 kitchen package?

Answer: For basic project budgeting, a standard 10' x 10' kitchen package (including painted Shaker cabinetry, countertops, sink, and hardware) has a baseline cost starting around \$6,328.42 installed through major wholesale/retail networks. This provides a clear financial benchmark for homeowners to compare entry-level pricing against high-end semi-custom and custom builds.

10. Do you provide a price-match guarantee for identical cabinet specifications?

Answer: Certain major online direct-to-consumer wholesalers (such as Wholesale Cabinets) offer a low-price guarantee. When shopping, always ask if your supplier will match written bids for identical wood species, all-plywood box construction, solid wood dovetail drawer boxes, and premium soft-close hardware specs.

SECTION 2: STRUCTURAL MATERIALS & BOX CONSTRUCTION

11. Do you construct cabinet boxes with all-plywood or particleboard/MDF?

Answer: Always request upgraded all-plywood construction. Plywood cabinet boxes hold screws significantly better, resist sagging under load, and hold up far better against water and physical wear. Particleboard and MDF (Medium-Density Fiberboard) are highly susceptible to moisture absorption, swelling, and degradation—especially in humid Southern climates like Alabama's.

12. What is the thickness of your cabinet tops, bottoms, and side panels?

Answer: You must verify the exact thicknesses, as some national corporate brands have recently reduced material thicknesses on their base lines to 3/8-inch on tops/bottoms and 1/2-inch or less on side panels. Premium, long-lasting lines should utilize a minimum of 1/2-inch plywood sides and 1/2-inch tops/bottoms to ensure structural rigidity and prevent box warping.

13. What is the thickness of the cabinet back panels, and do they use hanging rails?

Answer: Many brands use extremely thin 1/8-inch or 1/4-inch fiberboard backs, which cannot support the weight of the cabinet. Ask if the cabinet features a solid wood hanging rail (typically 3/4-inch thick). A robust hanging rail transfers the cabinet weight directly to the wall studs, meaning the back panel acts primarily as a dust cover rather than a load-bearing element.

14. Are your solid wood materials kiln-dried to a certified moisture content?

Answer: To meet professional standards (such as KCMA A161.1-2022), all solid wood and composite wood materials must be kiln-dried to a moisture content of 10% or less before fabrication. Sourcing wood that has not been properly dried leads to severe cracking, joint separation, and warping as the wood adjusts to your home's indoor climate.

15. What wood species are most stable for high-humidity climates like Alabama's?

Answer: For high-humidity climates, the most stable and recommended solid hardwoods are kiln-dried maple and kiln-dried oak. Both woods have highly stable grain structures that resist excessive expansion and contraction under humid conditions, protecting your cabinets from warping, twisting, or door misalignment.

16. Are your cabinets certified under CARB Phase 2 standards?

Answer: Yes, CARB (California Air Resources Board) Phase 2 compliance is a non-negotiable health standard that strictly regulates formaldehyde emissions from composite wood products and adhesives. All reputable cabinetry brands selling in the U.S. must meet these safety criteria, protecting your home's indoor air quality.

17. Are your wood materials FSC-certified?

Answer: FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification indicates that the wood used in your cabinetry has been sustainably and responsibly harvested from well-managed forests. Ask your supplier for this certification if environmental sustainability and responsible forestry are priorities for your home remodel.

18. Do you utilize traditional framed or European frameless construction?

Answer: Framed cabinets feature a 1.5-inch solid wood face frame attached to the front of the box, providing a strong structural skeleton and highly secure hinge mounts. Frameless (European-style) cabinets have no face frame, offering a contemporary aesthetic and slightly wider interior access. However, frameless cabinets rely entirely on box panel thickness and are generally less structurally rigid over decades of use.

19. What are the door and drawer size limitations for frameless cabinet lines?

Answer: Because frameless cabinets lack front-frame reinforcement, they have strict structural limits to prevent box racking or hardware failure. Designers advise never using cabinet doors wider than 18 inches and never installing large drawer glides or roll-out trays in units wider than 30 inches, as exceeding these limits places excessive leverage on the frameless side walls.

20. How do you prevent door sagging on frameless cabinet lines?

Answer: On frameless cabinets, hinges are mounted directly to the side panel (often plywood or engineered wood) rather than a solid wood frame. To prevent sagging doors over time, ensure the supplier uses heavy-duty concealed hinges with multiple adjustment points and robust mounting plates, or ask if they offer a reduced-frame hybrid cabinet that provides a sleek look with framed strength.

21. Is the cabinet interior finished with decorative film, paper, or clear coat?

Answer: KCMA A161.1 standards require all interior exposed surfaces to be free of saw marks and covered with either a decorative film/paper laminate or have a minimum of one coat of clear or pigmented finish. Standard high-quality cabinet lines feature a clean, durable, and easily wipeable natural birch wood-grain laminate or clear protective finish.

22. Are the cabinet sides finished at the factory or covered with panels on-site?

Answer: By industry standard (including KCMA), individual cabinet unit side panels do not have to be finished out-of-the-box. However, any exposed sides must be factory-finished to match the doors or covered with matching factory-finished end panels during installation on-site. Homeowners should verify that matching end panels are included in their quote.

SECTION 3: HARDWARE & MECHANICAL JOINT STANDARDS

23. Are the drawer boxes constructed with solid wood dovetail joinery or staples/glue?

Answer: Always specify solid wood dovetail joinery. Dovetail joints mechanically lock the drawer sides together, providing exceptional strength that holds up under years of heavy opening and closing forces. Glued and stapled drawer joints are cheap to manufacture but prone to splitting and complete structural failure over time.

24. Are the drawer glides full-extension and equipped with soft-close mechanisms?

Answer: Specify under-mount, full-extension drawer glides with integrated soft-close dampening. Under-mount glides support the weight of the drawer from the bottom (rather than the sides), providing higher weight capacity. Full-extension glides allow the drawer to open completely, granting full access to the back of the drawer box.

25. Do the cabinet door hinges feature integrated soft-close technology?

Answer: Yes. Soft-close hinges feature integrated hydraulic dampening mechanisms that gently pull the door closed and prevent slamming. This not only provides a luxury feel but also protects the door joints, face frame, and cabinet finishes from the daily physical wear and stress of slamming doors.

26. Are your hinges and drawer slides manufactured by a reputable brand?

Answer: Inexpensive cabinet lines frequently utilize cheap, unbranded hinges and tracks to cut production costs, which often carries a short 5-year warranty limit. Premium lines utilize globally recognized hardware brands like Blum, which provide lifetime warranties, smoother adjustments, and superior resistance to metal fatigue and corrosion.

27. What joint opening tolerances do you allow on exterior cabinet joints?

Answer: Under strict KCMA A161.1 quality standards, exterior joints must be tightly fitted in a workmanlike manner. Joint openings are restricted by strict limits: G1 face frame joints must not exceed 0.5 mm (0.02"), G2 door and drawer front joints are capped at 0.8 mm (0.03"), and G3 interior dadoes are capped at 1.5 mm (0.06") to ensure tight, seamless construction.

28. How long are your doors and drawer glides tested to operate under loaded stress?

Answer: To achieve KCMA certification, cabinet doors and drawer operating systems must be mounted and run through a rigorous 25,000-cycle open-and-close test under active loading (15 lb/sq ft for drawers). Both doors and drawers must remain fully operational and show no structural failure or mechanical binding after cycling.

29. Do your cabinet shelves and bottoms meet standard load-deflection requirements?

Answer: Under KCMA testing, shelves are uniformly loaded at 15 lb/sq ft for seven consecutive days. To pass, the shelf deflection must not exceed 1/16-inch (1.6 mm) per lineal foot between supports, and the absolute maximum deflection must not exceed 1/4-inch (6.4 mm). Visible joint separation or mounting failure is a complete standard failure.

30. Can your wall-mounted cabinets support heavy overhead storage?

Answer: Yes. KCMA wall-hung cabinet tests require fully loaded wall units up to 36 inches wide to support a static load of 272 kg (600 pounds) slowly applied to the frame front without any visible joint separation or failure of the mounting system. Wall-hung base units between 36 and 60 inches wide must support a massive 363 kg (800 pounds).

31. Are the cabinet bottoms and drawer bottoms impact-tested against falling objects?

Answer: Yes. KCMA standards require a 3-pound steel ball to be dropped from a height of 6 inches above the center of a mounted shelf, cabinet bottom, or drawer bottom (extended 2/3 open). To pass, the materials must not suffer joint separation or damage—except for a superficial strike indentation—and must remain fully operational.

32. Do the cabinet door and drawer finishes resist common kitchen chemical spills?

Answer: KCMA A161.1 requires the exterior finish to withstand 24 hours of active exposure to lemon juice, orange juice, grape juice, tomato ketchup, vinegar, coffee, olive oil, 100-proof alcohol, and liquid dishwashing detergent. Mustard must be resisted for 1 hour. No discoloration, staining, or whitening that won't polish away is permitted.

SECTION 4: SURFACE FINISHES, PAINTS & AESTHETIC MAINTENANCE

33. Is the cabinet finish factory spray-applied or hand-rubbed/painted?

Answer: Hand-painted and hand-rubbed finishes (typical of artisan custom woodshops and premium European lines) offer exceptional depth of color and age with unique character over time. Factory-applied, spray-line baked finishes (typical of large-scale domestic manufacturers) provide higher consistency and uniform thickness across all surfaces.

34. How durable is a painted cabinet finish compared to a stained wood finish?

Answer: Homeowners must understand that the finish on painted cabinetry is less durable than stained cabinetry across all cabinet brands on the market. Stains absorb directly into the wood pores, whereas paint sits as a surface coat. All painted wood cabinets can chip, scratch, or show moisture cracking at the joints over years of daily use.

35. Does your cabinet finish resist heat and humidity shrinkage?

Answer: To ensure durability, high-quality finishes must pass the KCMA A161.1 shrinkage and heat resistance test (24 hours in a hotbox at 120°F and 70% relative humidity), followed by a hot-and-cold check test (5 cycles transitioning from 120°F down to -5°F). The finish must show no discoloration, blistering, checking, or cracking.

36. Are your cabinet door edges tested to resist water and detergent exposure?

Answer: Yes. To test for delamination, cabinet doors undergo the KCMA detergent-and-water resistance test. Doors are placed vertically on a liquid-detergent-soaked sponge. Solid wood doors (no seams) must survive 24 hours of continuous exposure; doors with material seams (like edge-banded laminate or thermofoil) must survive 4 hours without swelling or delaminating.

37. How are minor scratches, nail holes, and staple holes touched up on-site?

Answer: Under professional standards, exposed nail and staple holes on finished cabinet surfaces must be set and filled flush. All touch-up colors and burn-in repairs must be matched seamlessly with the surrounding finished area. Verify that your installer utilizes matched factory touch-up wax sticks and color pens on installation day.

38. Are the cabinets finished on-site or off-site, and what are the off-gassing properties?

Answer: Cabinets that are factory-finished off-site and travel long distances actually off-gas most of their volatile organic compounds (VOCs) during transit and storage. When they arrive in your home, their off-gassing is largely complete. On-site hand-painting or finishing will off-gas significantly more within your living space at first, even when using low-VOC formulas.

SECTION 5: PROJECT TIMELINES, ON-SITE LOGISTICS & ALIGNMENT

39. What is the expected lead time and turnaround for a full custom cabinetry project?

Answer: Fully custom cabinetry typically requires a lead time of 8 to 12 weeks through national custom brands. However, local custom workshops utilizing regional cabinetry matching services in Birmingham, Montgomery, or Hickory can often reduce this turnaround to a competitive 4 to 8 weeks (or 40 to 60 days) from design approval to final installation.

40. How fast can a cabinet refacing project be completed in my home?

Answer: Cabinet refacing projects are incredibly fast and efficient. Because the structural cabinet boxes remain completely intact and in place, the entire process—including installing new wood doors, drawer fronts, and upgraded soft-close hinges—is completed in just 3 to 5 days, minimizing the downtime of your home.

41. What is the standard turnaround time for flat-packed Ready-to-Assemble (RTA) cabinets?

Answer: RTA cabinetry excels in speed and rapid fulfillment. Because they utilize standardized, in-stock parts, flat-packed RTA cabinet orders are processed quickly and typically ship out within 3 to 9 business days (with online wholesalers like Stock Cabinet Express shipping in 3 to 14 business days, and Highland Cabinetry shipping in 7 to 9 days).

42. Who is responsible for taking final on-site measurements before fabrication starts?

Answer: The cabinet designer or custom workshop team must take final on-site measurements. Sizing errors are extremely costly to correct mid-project. A professional designer assumes full accountability for field dimensions, appliance clearances, and plumbing/gas locations, translating these into precise build drawings.

43. What is your policy and timeline for resolving shipping damage or defective units?

Answer: Before accepting a delivery, a pre-installation inspection must be conducted to check for box squareness, transit cracks, or finish defects. If damage is found, you should document the issue on the carrier's receipt with photos. Standard resolution for in-stock RTA lines is rapid, whereas custom replacements can take weeks.

SECTION 6: READY-TO-ASSEMBLE (RTA) SHIPPING & ASSEMBLY TOOLS

44. Are RTA cabinets delivered pre-assembled or flat-packed, and what is the assembly difficulty?

Answer: RTA cabinets are delivered flat-packed to achieve the lowest shipping costs. The tradeoff is assembly labor; they must be put together on-site. Assembly requires careful, knowledgeable labor, and proper clamping and fastening. If assembled sloppily or out of square, the drawers will bind and cabinet boxes won't align.

45. What assembly tools and techniques are needed to prevent plywood from splitting?

Answer: Plywood RTA cabinetry requires pre-drilling pilot holes for all wood screws and fasteners to prevent splitting the wood grain or plywood layers. Installers must use assembly jigs and clamps to hold panels flush, applying high-quality wood glue along with wood screws or staples to ensure long-term structural durability.

46. How do we ensure that RTA cabinet boxes remain perfectly square during assembly?

Answer: Never check squareness by eye. Installers must place a metal framing square against the outer and interior corners of the cabinet box during assembly. Gaps indicate the box has 'racked' (twisted). If screwed or glued together out-of-square, doors and drawer glides will bind, and adjacent cabinets cannot be aligned flush.

47. Do you offer tool-free 'quick-snap' assembly systems for any products?

Answer: Yes. Certain modern modular storage lines (such as NorthPoint Closets) utilize proprietary tool-free 'quick-snap' assembly systems. This hardware allows panels to lock together securely without screws or drills, providing a clean finished look with completely hidden fasteners and significantly faster assembly times on-site.

SECTION 7: WARRANTIES, DELIVERY INSPECTION & PROFESSIONAL SERVICE AGREEMENTS

48. What is the warranty coverage for the cabinet boxes and door panels?

Answer: Cabinet warranties vary significantly. Inexpensive stock lines typically offer a limited 5-year warranty, which often reflects cheaper hardware and thin composite wood. Genuinely high-end semi-custom and custom cabinet brands back their structural boxes and doors with a limited lifetime warranty under normal residential use.

49. What is your specific warranty on paint finishes?

Answer: Because painted finishes are less durable than stain and prone to daily physical wear, paint finishes carry shorter warranty periods. For example, premier custom shops (such as Suman Custom Carpentry) offer a lifetime warranty on structural boxes and doors but back the painted finish with a specific 3-year warranty.

50. What specific checks should be performed before signing the delivery receipt?

Answer: Perform a rigorous pre-installation checklist: 1) Verify box squareness using a metal framing square; 2) Inspect joint tightness (KCMA exterior joints must be under 0.5 mm to 1.5 mm); 3) Inspect finishes under diffused, overhead lighting for runs or scratches; 4) Confirm all doors, hinges, drawer glides, and shelf clips are complete.

CABINETRY PROJECT TYPES AT-A-GLANCE

Use the following comparison table to evaluate which cabinetry option matches your project budget, timeline, and structural durability needs.

Cabinetry Type	Typical Timeline	Average Cost (Kitchen)	Customization Depth	Primary Sourcing Options
Ready-to-Assemble (RTA)	3 to 9 days (shipping)	Lowest (\$3,000 - \$8,000)	Limited to catalog sizes	Wholesalers (Stock Cabinet Express, Highland, USA Cabinets)
Cabinet Refacing	3 to 5 days (installation)	Moderate (50% savings, \$5,000 - \$15,000)	Moderate (keeps existing boxes)	Local matching services (Birmingham, Montgomery)
Semi-Custom Cabinetry	4 to 6 weeks	Mid-Range (\$10,000 - \$20,000)	Flexible sizing & finishes	Domestic brands (KraftMaid, Wellborn, Dura Supreme, Medallion)
Full Custom Cabinetry	4 to 8 weeks (local) or 8 to 12 weeks	High-End (\$10,000 - \$35,000+)	Unlimited bespoke measurements	Local custom workshops, luxury brands (Plain & Fancy, Crystal, QCCI)

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD: Take this specification manual with you to your design showroom or when vetting local installers. Always verify that your cabinet boxes are made from real plywood rather than particleboard, that the wood has been kiln-dried below 10% moisture content, and that your installer uses a physical framing square on delivery day to verify box squareness before installation begins.