

Choosing the Right Lighting Panel

We do not sell lighting panels on our website because they tend to break in shipping. We do carry them in our stores and can cut them to size while you wait. The information below might help you choose the lighting panel that is right for you.

Lighting plays a major impact on the appearance of a home, apartment, or office. Lighting can make the same room look either old and run down, or new, clean and sharp. Something as simple as replacing lighting panels can make all the difference. But which should you choose, and does it matter where you get them? Here is some information that should help you decide.

There are several types of panels out there. Here are a few and their advantages and disadvantages.

Cracked Ice and Prismatic. These represent the most common patterns and come in either clear or white. Clear transmits more light, but the bulbs are slightly more visible when lit. Either pattern can be used in any location...it's a matter of taste. The most important factor is what kind of plastic the panel is made of. Very inexpensive panels are made of styrene which yellows very quickly and becomes quite brittle. Though the initial cost is low, replacement is inevitable. Acrylic is the better choice because it will never yellow or become brittle. Be sure to check with your supplier to determine what the lighting panel you are buying is made of.

Smooth Matte is a white smooth panel that provides very even light. It has no texture or pattern, and is preferred by many for its appearance in oak frames in kitchens. Most suppliers carry only styrene smooth matte, which as mentioned above, will yellow and turn brittle. It is worth the effort to find smooth matte in acrylic.

Silver Egg Crate is typically used in commercial applications. It is actually a series of parabolic louvers which focus the light downward. When viewed at a distance, the light in the ceiling cannot be seen, which creates a 'warmer' atmosphere. It is often used over hotel registration desks to create a 'homey' feel, yet provide a well lighted work area. It is also used in computer work areas because it dramatically reduces glare on computer screens. In homes it is ideal for task lighting over kitchen islands for home offices. Supplied in 2' x 4' panels, you will need to find a supplier who can cut it if you need another size. This product also has special handling precautions. Be sure to ask about them.

White Egg Crate has open squares like the silver, but does not focus the light downward. It provides good lighting and is preferred by some over the cracked ice or prismatic. It too is supplied in 2x4 panels.

When you are looking for a supplier, here are some tips that can make your shopping more successful.

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Most retail locations supply lighting panels in one size (23 3/4" x 47 3/4"). Though this is the 'standard' size, it actually fits very few openings. Therefore most of the time the panel will need to be cut-to-size. Very few retailers are equipped to do this. So, you may feel like cutting the panels yourself. This is usually a frustrating and unsuccessful experience since it is so easy to chip or crack a lighting panel. Find a supplier who can cut panels to size while you wait, then you will not have to buy extra panels to replace the ones you chipped. It is best to bring in the old panel for accurate measurements.

If your panel dimensions are larger than 2' x 4', then you will need to find a supplier that carries large sheets (usually 4' x 8') that can be cut to size for you. Not all styles come in this large size, so check with your supplier. Larger openings may also require a thicker gauge of panel to prevent sagging. Though harder to find, the thicker gauge may be well worth the search and it can be cut to size for you as well.

If you use the phone to shop for lighting panels, you should ask at least three questions: 1) What is the lighting panel made of (acrylic is best if available), 2) What is the price for the specific size piece you need, 3) Is there a charge for cutting (there shouldn't be). This information will prevent you making fruitless trips to suppliers who cannot meet your needs.

Since so many lighting openings are not exactly 2'x4', accurate measuring is essential for a good fit. When installing panels, be careful when bending them (especially the styrene) because they can crack. Textured panels (like prismatic) are usually smooth on one side. If you mount that side up, it will be easier to clean later.

For truly custom sizes and looks, consider using regular acrylic sheets cut to size. These come in a rainbow of colors, textures, and thicknesses.

As a safety reminder, plastic lighting panels should never be used near incandescent or halogen bulbs or other high temperature sources. Ask your supplier for specifics on this subject.

New lighting panels can not only transform a room; they can also frustrate a shopper. Do a little homework, find a supplier who is willing to accommodate your needs, while you wait, and you will enjoy the fruits of your efforts for years to come.

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