



BUYER'S GUIDE

Reception Desks

Your Complete Guide to Choosing the Right Reception Desk

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First Impressions Start at the Reception Desk

The reception desk is the first piece of furniture anyone visiting your office will interact with. It sets the tone for everything that follows. A cluttered, dated, or poorly positioned reception desk communicates one message; a clean, professional, well-designed one communicates a completely different one.

But beyond aesthetics, reception desks are also working furniture. Your receptionist spends hours at that desk managing calls, greeting visitors, handling packages, and juggling a dozen tasks simultaneously. The right desk makes that work efficient and comfortable. The wrong one creates ergonomic problems, workflow bottlenecks, and a front-of-house that looks — and works — poorly.

At FindOfficeFurniture.com, we help businesses find reception desks that look great, work harder, and cost less than you'd expect. This guide covers everything you need to make a smart purchase — types, sizing, ADA compliance, materials, and budget tiers.

Types of Reception Desks

Reception desks come in a range of configurations. Here's what each one does well:

L-Shaped Reception Desks — The most common configuration for modern offices. An L-shape gives the receptionist a main work surface (typically facing visitors) and a return surface perpendicular to it for secondary tasks — computer monitors, phones, document management. The L-shape efficiently uses corner space and gives the receptionist a natural separation between visitor-facing and task areas. Great for small to medium lobbies.

U-Shaped Reception Desks / Stations — Three connected surfaces forming a U. Maximum workspace in a reception setting. Allows for multiple workstations or one receptionist with dedicated zones for different activities (check-in, phone, admin). Takes up significantly more floor space — only viable in larger lobbies. Often used in medical offices, legal firms, and corporate headquarters.

Straight Reception Desks — A simple linear desk with a transaction counter. Clean, minimalist, and space-efficient. Works well in very small lobbies or as a secondary reception point. Limited workspace compared to L or U configurations.

Curved / Contemporary Reception Desks — Freestanding curved or arc-shaped desks that often serve as dramatic focal points in a lobby. High-design look. Usually includes a transaction counter with integrated storage below. The statement piece choice for modern, design-forward companies. More expensive, less configurable.

Modular Reception Systems — Component-based reception furniture that lets you combine straight, curved, and corner sections to create a custom configuration. Highly flexible. Components from the same line can be rearranged as your needs change. Excellent long-term value for growing companies.

Transaction Counter Height — The ADA-Critical Dimension

One of the most important details in a reception desk is the transaction counter: the raised front surface where visitors sign in, drop off packages, or interact with the receptionist.

Standard Transaction Counter Height — Typically 42"–44" inches from the floor. This creates a natural barrier between the visitor and the receptionist's work area, hides cabling and work clutter from visitor view, and provides a comfortable writing/signing surface for standing visitors.

ADA Compliance — The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that at least a portion of the transaction counter be at 36" or lower to accommodate visitors in wheelchairs. This doesn't mean the entire counter needs to be lower — just a section (typically at least 36" wide) must be accessible at ADA height. Many reception desks designed for commercial use include both a standard-height section and an ADA-compliant lower section as part of the standard configuration. Verify this before purchasing if your facility serves the public or has ADA compliance requirements.

Knee Clearance for ADA Section — The ADA-compliant section must also provide 27"+ of vertical knee clearance underneath to accommodate a wheelchair user pulling up to the counter. This affects the storage design under the lower counter section.

If you're not sure whether ADA applies to your reception area, consult your local building code — most commercial businesses open to the public have ADA obligations.

Sizing for Your Lobby

Getting the proportions right between your reception desk and your lobby space is as much art as science. Here are the practical guidelines:

Small Lobby (under 200 sq ft): — Go straight or compact L-shape. A reception desk with a 60"–72" main surface and a shorter 36"–42" return is appropriate. Leave at least 36" of clearance behind the desk for the receptionist to move, and 36"–48" in front of the transaction counter for visitor approach.

Medium Lobby (200–500 sq ft): — Standard L-shape or U-shape configurations work well here. Main surface of 72"–96" is common. Enough space to create a defined reception zone without dominating the room.

Large Lobby (500+ sq ft): — U-shaped stations, multiple reception desks, or dramatic curved centerpiece desks all become viable. This is where you can really invest in the aesthetic statement.

Always measure: — Floor plan the desk placement before you order. Mark the desk footprint on your floor with tape to visualize the clearances. Consider where visitors will approach from, where the receptionist's back faces (avoid facing a wall — it creates a closed, unwelcoming feel), and where cabling needs to route.

ADA Compliance Requirements Summary

For most businesses open to the public, ADA accessibility at the reception desk is legally required. Here's the quick checklist:

- At least one section of the transaction counter must be 36" or less in height
- That accessible section must be at least 36" wide
- 27" minimum vertical knee clearance under the accessible section
- 30" x 48" clear floor space in front of the accessible section for wheelchair approach
- The approach path from the entrance to the reception desk must be ADA-accessible (36" minimum width, no obstacles)

Many commercially designed reception desks include these features as standard. When in doubt, ask the manufacturer or call FOF at 1.866.409.0202 — we'll confirm whether a specific desk meets your ADA requirements.

Materials and Style Options

Reception desks are available in a wide range of materials and aesthetic styles. Here's how to match material to environment:

High-Pressure Laminate — The commercial standard. Durable, easy to clean, available in dozens of wood grain and solid color finishes. The practical choice for most commercial applications. Excellent value. Holds up to daily use and the occasional ding from a cart or package.

Wood Veneer — Real wood surface over a wood composite core. Warm, professional, and impressive in the right setting. Most common in law firms, financial services, executive healthcare, and any environment where the reception area needs to project authority and refinement. Requires more care but looks significantly more premium.

Glass and Metal Accents — Many contemporary reception desks incorporate frosted or tempered glass panels, brushed aluminum accents, or chrome-finished bases. These add a modern, high-design look. Typically more expensive and require more careful handling (glass panels can crack under impact).

Style Categories:

- **Traditional** — Dark wood tones, raised panels, formal proportions. Classic law firm or financial services look.
- **Contemporary** — Clean lines, horizontal emphasis, neutral finishes, sometimes with metal accents. The most popular style for modern commercial offices.
- **Modern/Transitional** — Somewhere between contemporary and bold. Curved elements, mixed materials, white or light finishes. Popular in tech, creative, and healthcare spaces.

Cable Management and Technology Integration

Modern reception desks are command centers. The receptionist is running phones, computers, visitor management tablets, payment systems, and more. Cable management is not an afterthought — it's a fundamental feature.

Grommets — Round cutouts in the work surface with plastic or metal covers. Thread cables through and down to a power strip or cable tray below. Essential for any desk with a computer setup.

Cable Channels and Trays — Enclosed channels that run cables along the underside of the desk surface or through hollow panels to route cords cleanly from the computer area to the outlet. Keeps the back of the desk from becoming a cable explosion.

Under-Counter Power — Some reception desks come with or support integrated power strips mounted under the transaction counter. Powers phones, tablets, and other visitor-facing technology.

CPU Compartment — An enclosed compartment under the work surface for housing a desktop tower or small form factor PC. Keeps the computer off the floor and out of sight.

Technology plan first: — Know what devices your receptionist will be using before you order. Count the cables. Plan where each device will live, where it needs power, and how you'll route cables invisibly. A well-planned cable management setup makes the entire reception area look more professional.

Budget Ranges

Under \$500 — Basic straight or simple L-shape reception desks in laminate. Limited finish options, basic transaction counter, minimal storage. Fine for a small office with modest reception needs.

\$500–\$1,500 — Good commercial-grade L-shape and U-shape configurations in quality laminate. Multiple finish options, standard transaction counter with ADA section, basic cable management. This range covers the majority of small to mid-size business reception needs.

\$1,500–\$4,000 — Premium laminate systems, modular reception configurations, wood veneer options, integrated cable management, ADA-compliant design confirmed. The range most serious commercial buyers target for a professional reception area.

\$4,000+ — High-end wood veneer, custom configurations, curved statement desks, integrated technology. Executive-level or flagship reception installations.

FOF's lowest price guarantee means you get the best price available. Free shipping on qualifying orders. Call 1.866.409.0202 to discuss your space, style, and budget — we design reception solutions every day.

Quick-Buy Checklist

Before you finalize your order:

- Configuration: Straight, L-shape, U-shape, curved, or modular?
- Lobby size: Measured the space? Confirmed clearances?
- ADA compliance: Required? Does the desk include an ADA-height section?
- Style: Traditional, contemporary, or modern?
- Material: Laminate, veneer, or mixed materials?

- Transaction counter: Standard 42" height plus ADA 36" section?
- Cable management: Grommets, trays, and channels included?
- Technology plan: Accounted for all devices and cable routes?
- Receptionist workspace: Enough work surface for all tasks?
- Budget: Which tier fits your needs?
- Warranty: FOF's free lifetime warranty on qualifying products.
- Shipping: Free on qualifying orders — major savings on furniture this size.