

Guest & Side Chairs

Q1. What makes a good lobby chair for a professional office?

A: A good lobby chair serves two purposes simultaneously: it is a functional seating tool for visitors who may wait 5–30 minutes before an appointment, and it is a physical representation of the organization's brand and quality standards. The functional requirements are: adequate seat depth and back support for short waits, appropriate seat height for easy sitting and standing (17"–18" for standard users), durable upholstery that stays clean in high-traffic conditions, and commercial-grade construction that maintains its appearance under years of multi-user use. The aesthetic requirements depend on the specific brand positioning. A law firm lobby benefits from traditional seating in rich fabrics or leather with wood frame accents that convey stability and professionalism. A technology startup's lobby is better served by contemporary designs with clean lines, modern fabrics, and metal or molded frames. The lobby chair is frequently the first physical object a visitor interacts with in your space — its quality and style communicate the same message as your branding and interior design. Commercial-grade construction for lobby seating means BIFMA-tested or equivalent certification, multi-user upholstery with minimum 100,000 double-rub abrasion rating, solid wood or steel frame (not particleboard or injection-molded plastic at the structural joints), and commercial-grade seat foam (2.0 lb/ft³ or higher) that retains its height and support over years of heavy use. Residential-grade seating in a commercial lobby will show visible wear — sagging cushions, fraying seams, fading fabric — within two to three years.

Q2. What seat height is correct for lobby and reception seating?

A: Standard seat height for lobby and reception chairs is 17"–18" — the same as standard commercial task seating. At this height, a user of average height (5'6"–5'10") sits with hips at approximately knee level, thighs roughly parallel to the floor, and feet flat on the ground. This posture is comfortable for the typical 10–30 minute wait in a reception area and allows relatively easy standing without requiring significant forward momentum. Lower seat heights (15"–16") create a more lounge-like, relaxed aesthetic but make it more difficult to stand — particularly for older visitors, those with knee or hip limitations, and users carrying bags or briefcases. Lobby chairs below 16" seat height should only be specified if the intended user population is known to be predominantly young adults in a casual environment, or if ADA compliance is not a concern (it always should be). Higher seat heights (19"–20") are more accessible for users with mobility limitations — they reduce the depth of the sit-to-stand transition. For lobbies that serve an older or more physically diverse visitor population — healthcare facilities, financial services, or legal offices — specifying seating at 18"–19" seat height rather than 16"–17" improves accessibility without sacrificing aesthetics. Verify ADA requirements for accessible seating in public-facing spaces.

Q3. Should I choose individual guest chairs or a sofa for my lobby?

A: The choice between individual guest chairs and lobby sofas depends on space dimensions, visitor group size, and the interaction dynamic you want to create. Individual guest chairs can be arranged in multiple configurations — in rows against a wall, in conversation groupings around a table, or in lines at check-in areas — and can be repositioned as visitor volumes change. They scale up or down easily by adding or removing chairs without creating gaps that a removed sofa would leave. Sofas encourage small-group conversation and create a warmer, more residential feeling in the lobby — appropriate for agencies, creative firms, or healthcare practices where the goal is to reduce visitor anxiety and create a comfortable, relaxed environment. A two-seat loveseat or three-seat sofa seats its occupants side-by-side, which is not ideal for business conversations but is appropriate for companions accompanying a visitor or for small groups waiting together. A practical middle approach is to use individual guest chairs arranged in pairs facing a low coffee or side table, supplemented by a two-seat sofa along a wall. This arrangement accommodates both individual visitors and small groups, provides the visual warmth of upholstered seating, and maintains the flexibility to reconfigure as visitor patterns change. For reception areas of 150 square feet or less, individual chairs are usually more practical than sofas, which require more clearance around them.

Q4. What upholstery is most practical for high-traffic lobby seating?

A: High-traffic lobby seating requires upholstery that resists abrasion, cleans easily, and maintains its appearance under continuous multi-user contact. The most practical specifications are: commercial-grade woven fabric with a minimum 100,000 double-rub rating, genuine leather, or commercial-grade vinyl (premium synthetic). Each has a different maintenance profile: fabric requires periodic spot cleaning and professional deep cleaning; leather requires periodic conditioning; vinyl is the easiest to clean with disinfectant wipes. For healthcare, financial services, legal, or government lobbies where cleanliness and professional appearance are critical, vinyl or genuine leather is the most practical choice — both can be cleaned to a clinical standard with approved sanitizing products. Fabric requires more aggressive cleaning to remove oils, makeup, and food residue that accumulate from high visitor contact; not all fabrics tolerate aggressive cleaning without color loss or texture damage. Pattern and color selection affects how visible soiling is between cleanings. Solid light colors (white, beige, cream) show soiling most readily and require the most frequent cleaning attention. Medium-tone solid colors (taupe, gray, medium blue) are the most forgiving for lobbies with moderate cleaning schedules. Patterned fabrics in medium tones mask minor soiling most effectively between cleaning cycles. Whatever color is selected, verify the fabric is solution-dyed (color is part of the fiber, not applied to the surface) rather than surface-dyed, which fades more rapidly and is more vulnerable to cleaning chemical damage.

Q5. How do I specify lobby seating for ADA accessibility?

A: ADA accessibility requirements for lobby seating focus on two provisions: at least 5% of public seating should be accessible (minimum one accessible seat), and the accessible seats should be on an accessible route from the building entrance. An accessible lobby seat must have a clear floor space of 30"x48" alongside it for a wheelchair user companion, must not obstruct the accessible path, and should be positioned to allow wheelchair users to converse face-to-face with seated visitors rather than from a separate area. ADA does not specify a seat height requirement for lobby seating (the 17"–19" range is a practical guideline for user comfort and ease of transfer, not a legal mandate). However, the accessible route to and around lobby seating must maintain 36" minimum clear width, and seating arrangements must not create dead-ends on the accessible path. In designing lobby layouts, ensure wheelchair users can approach any seating position from the accessible route without having to navigate around a cluster of chairs. Grab-bar equipped transfer chairs — designed to assist visitors with difficulty sitting or standing — are available in commercial seating lines and are a proactive accessibility investment for lobbies serving older or physically limited visitor populations. These are distinct from ADA-mandated accessible seats but improve the inclusivity of the waiting area for a population that represents a significant share of visitors to healthcare, financial services, and government offices.

Q6. How many lobby chairs do I need for my reception area?

A: Lobby seating quantity is determined by the peak concurrent wait count — the maximum number of visitors you expect to be waiting simultaneously during busy periods. For a single-practitioner professional office where appointments are staggered, two to four seats is typically adequate. For a multi-practitioner medical office, legal firm, or high-traffic service office, the waiting area may need to accommodate 8–15 or more seated visitors simultaneously. As a practical rule, count the maximum number of appointments per hour during your busiest period and the typical wait time per visitor. If you see 10 clients per hour and each waits an average of 15 minutes, you will have approximately 2–3 visitors waiting at any given time — plan for 4–6 lobby seats to accommodate brief peaks above average. If wait times are longer or volumes are higher, scale accordingly with a 20–30% buffer above the calculated average. Allow a minimum of 30" of clear aisle width around seating for visitor circulation and 24" per seat for individual guest chairs arranged in a row. A row of four 22"-wide chairs requires at least 88" of linear wall space. For grouped arrangements with a coffee table between facing chairs, allow a minimum of 36"–48" between facing seat fronts for comfortable legroom and passage between the seats. Measure the available space precisely before ordering to confirm the planned arrangement fits without crowding.

Q7. What frame materials are best for lobby guest chairs?

A: Frame material determines the chair's structural durability and visual character. The three most common frame materials for lobby seating are: solid wood, steel (painted, powder-coated, or chrome/polished), and aluminum alloy. Solid wood frames (typically hardwood — beech, oak, ash, or walnut) provide warmth, traditional character, and excellent structural durability. They can be refinished if scratched. Solid wood frames are the appropriate choice for law firms, financial institutions, and healthcare environments that project a traditional professional aesthetic. Steel frames — particularly powder-coated steel — are the most durable commercial option for high-traffic lobby environments. They resist impact, do not crack under heavy use, and are available in a wide range of painted colors and textures. Chrome or brushed stainless steel frames provide a contemporary, industrial aesthetic appropriate for technology companies, creative agencies, and modern professional services firms. Steel frames at connection points (leg-to-seat joint, armrest attachment) are significantly stronger than wood at the same visual scale. Aluminum alloy frames are lightweight, rust-proof, and available in polished, anodized, or powder-coated finishes. They are appropriate for lobbies where chairs are moved frequently or where a contemporary, clean aesthetic is desired. Injection-molded polypropylene frames — common in lower-cost lobby seating — are adequate for light-use applications but show flexing and stress-whitening at high-load points under sustained commercial use. For any lobby expecting more than 20–30 visitor contacts per day, specify wood, steel, or aluminum frames rather than polypropylene.

Q8. Can I use stacking or folding chairs in a lobby as supplemental seating?

A: Stacking chairs are a practical supplemental seating option for lobbies with variable visitor volumes. During periods of unexpectedly high demand, a stack of commercial-grade guest chairs stored in an adjacent closet can be retrieved in minutes to supplement permanent lobby seating. For this to work effectively, the stacking chairs must be in a consistent finish and style with the permanent seating — or intentionally contrasting as a design choice — and must be stored in a readily accessible location. The limitation of stacking chairs in a professional lobby is their visual character: most commercial stack chairs have a utilitarian appearance that does not complement the designed aesthetic of a professional reception area. Using visually mismatched stacking chairs as supplemental lobby seating sends a mixed message about the organization's attention to environment quality. If overflow seating is a regular need, consider investing in a comfortable, visually appropriate commercial stack chair that coordinates with the lobby aesthetic — these exist in upholstered versions — rather than relying on utilitarian cafeteria-style stack chairs. Folding chairs should generally not be used in client-facing lobby areas as either primary or supplemental seating. Their visual association with temporary, low-cost setups is inconsistent with a professional reception environment. If overflow seating needs to be stored and deployed quickly, commercial-grade nesting or stacking chairs in a lobby-appropriate finish are the better choice.

Q9. How do I arrange guest seating to make the lobby feel welcoming?

A: Lobby seating arrangement significantly influences how visitors perceive the space and feel while waiting. The most welcoming arrangement positions seating to face the reception desk or entry area — visitors should be able to see who is approaching without turning in their seat. Chairs angled slightly toward each other in groupings of two or three (rather than arranged in rigid lines against the wall) create a more conversational, human-scaled environment that reduces the institutional feel of a waiting room. A low coffee table or side table in each seating grouping provides visitors with a surface to set bags, phones, or reading material — a practical amenity that significantly improves the waiting experience. Table height for lobby seating is 16"–18" for a coffee table alongside standard-height chairs (17"–18" seat). Ensure tables do not create a physical obstacle between the visitor and their path to stand and move — leave at least 18" of clearance between the table edge and the nearest chair position. Avoid placing seating directly in front of windows with strong backlight, which creates a glare problem and an uncomfortable direct-sun exposure for seated visitors. Position seating to take advantage of natural light while keeping visitors out of direct sun. If the lobby has a natural focal point — artwork, a branded installation, or a planted feature wall — arrange seating to face or appreciate it rather than positioning visitors facing blank walls, which extend the psychological perception of wait time.

Q10. What is the difference between guest chairs and side chairs?

A: Guest chairs and side chairs are closely related categories that overlap significantly. Guest chairs are designed for the waiting area or reception application: they prioritize durability under multi-user use, ease of entry and exit, and appropriate seat height for short waits. They are typically armless or have fixed arms, come in a wide range of upholstery options, and are specified as standalone pieces or in matched sets. Side chairs — also called pull-up chairs or visitor chairs — are designed to be pulled up to a desk or table for a face-to-face meeting. They are slightly more compact than freestanding lobby chairs, often have a lower-profile appearance that positions the visitor slightly below the executive's eye line, and may or may not have arms. Side chairs used in private offices double as guest seating for the one or two visitors who attend a private meeting. In practice, the same chair model is often specified for both uses. A commercial-grade armless or fixed-arm upholstered chair with a 17"–18" seat height works equally well in a lobby arrangement and pulled up to a desk for a private meeting. If you are equipping both a lobby and a set of private offices, specifying the same chair for both applications maintains visual consistency and simplifies procurement. Download PDF Buyer's Guide PDF Shop Guest & Side Chairs Talk to an Expert 1.800.460.0858 Monday – Friday, 7am to 6pm CT

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