

*Selling*

# Vent-Free Appliances

## WITH Clarity and Confidence

**BY RYAN WARD**

Practicality, self-reliance, and obstinacy are all qualities that New Englanders like me are known for. We tend to believe that these traits make or break us—especially when winter arrives, as that’s when we need them the most.

Given the rich tradition of cold weather hardiness in the region, it’s no surprise that hearth customers in New England want to know which products will best meet the specific needs of their particular homes. These customers want a unit that will properly perform through each blustery winter and demand transparent knowledge of the product. That’s one of the main reasons I’ve developed strategies for clearly explaining the pros and cons of various product categories—including vent-free gas appliances, which often get a bad rap. After years of selling, installing, and servicing these appliances, I’ve developed straightforward explanations that help clients understand the category’s complexities, benefits, and drawbacks.

For starters, I break down the unit into parts and highlight its crucial aspects, such as the makeup of combustion air. Unlike direct-vent appliances that take in outside air for combustion, vent-free units utilize indoor air instead. In my gas apprenticeship program, we learned that “the machine always wins.” This is a blunt way of saying that these appliances use the same air as the humans in any given room. In theory, a vent-free unit would eventually use

up the oxygen in the room—if not for intrinsic safety devices—leading to incomplete combustion. The combustion triangle consists of three factors that lead to fire: fuel, heat, and oxygen. When one of those is lacking, it results in incomplete combustion. In this case, a lack of oxygen would result in carbon monoxide creation. As a



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result, clients must know that these units can't be installed in bedrooms or bathrooms due to the risk of shutting a door and running a unit for an extended period. Simply put, the first step toward helping hearth clients understand whether a vent-free unit will meet their needs is explaining where these appliances get their oxygen.

Once clients understand this concept, I discuss how they can and should use vent-free units on a daily basis. By explaining what an average day of operating one of these units could look like, clients can anticipate whether it would be manageable for them. More specifically, they should know that a vent-free unit can't run for long periods and must be turned off throughout the day and overnight. Transparency is key for their understanding and safety. As nice as it sounds to run a vent-free fireplace all day long during the holidays or on cold nights, doing so would be dangerous. In contrast, a direct-vent appliance can run endlessly without concern for combustion air.

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After discussing daily usage, I move on to whether vent-free units are meant to be used as a "heat source" or not. Assuming that clients meet all the necessary requirements to install a fully vent-free setup (i.e., their damper stays shut), they will get a tremendous amount of heat back into the room. These units do not utilize a vent to the atmosphere, so they can achieve 99% efficiency. At 30,000 BTUs and

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99% efficiency, these appliances can produce a lot of heat—yet they're not meant to be the main heat source. Manufacturers make this quite clear with these sorts of statements: "may not be installed in a room with no other source of heat." This means that clients with vent-free appliances will be left without a heat source on a cold blizzard night when the power goes out. This would not have been the case had they purchased a direct-vent unit, and it's important to explain that to customers.

I also prioritize understanding each client's needs, since everyone has different problems they're trying to solve by installing hearth products. When referring to vent-free appliances, I'm careful to set and maintain clear expectations with each client. For example, there's a huge difference between the person who says, "I'm just looking to take the chill off and get some quaint ambiance," and the person who insists, "I want to make sure my family stays safe and warm when the power goes out." Selling a vent-free unit to a client looking for a true heat source would be a mistake, and selling a direct-vent gas fireplace insert to someone looking for ambiance may not be the best option. Simply put, if a client wants a small heating system in the fireplace, a direct-vent unit would be the best option; in contrast, if a customer is looking for ambiance with heat as a byproduct, a vent-free unit would suffice.



Finally, I always conclude conversations with clients about vent-free products by reiterating three crucial points:

1. These units should not be installed if they're the only source of heat in the room.
2. They must have an accompanying carbon monoxide detector in the same room.
3. They are by no means allowed for installation in a closed-off room.

That said, I also reassure customers that these products can function safely in open spaces and come equipped with oxygen depletion sensors for safety.

In short, selling and installing vent-free appliances requires more explanation than other types of hearth systems, and keeping that in mind is critical if you're a salesperson, installer, or service tech. These appliances aren't the perfect match for everyone's needs, and being upfront about that helps ensure your clients get exactly what they're looking for. By offering facts, addressing concerns, and emphasizing safety, you can help clients see through the unverified rumors and unfounded speculation that often circulate around vent-free products, giving them the clarity they need to feel confident about their purchase.