

LET'S **RETHINK** EFFICIENCY IN THE HEARTH INDUSTRY

BY PETER PARSONS

When you shop for a new car, do you care about how efficient it is? Before you answer that question, let me clarify what I mean by "efficiency." I'm not asking about how far it can get per gallon of gas—I'm asking about how much exhaust comes out the tailpipe. You probably didn't think about tailpipe emissions when you bought your last car. In a similar way, I'm willing to bet your customers aren't thinking about what comes out of their chimney either.

So why do we talk about efficiency in our industry based on what goes out the vent or up the chimney? Why do we plaster it all over our brochures and talk about it to customers when they come into our showrooms? The truth is, they don't care about *emissions efficiency* the way we think they do. That's why the hearth industry needs to stop selling emissions efficiency and start selling *in-home efficiency*—real-world fuel consumption numbers that customers can actually use to make

decisions.

This is where I think our industry needs to change. I've always said the hearth industry is reactive, not proactive. We react to changes in test standards, but we don't use them to our advantage like the automotive industry does. The auto industry has emissions standards too, but unless you're actively digging for them, they'll never come up in a dealer's showroom or when shopping online. How did the auto industry flip the script and sell customers on how efficiently they can get a person from point A to point B? I think the answer is simple: They cater to the person's purpose. In its simplest form, people buy new cars so they don't have to walk. When customers buy a wood stove or fireplace, they simply want to know how warm they can make their space for the amount of fuel they can fit in it.

Why don't we test for that? Sure, we have specs

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that say Brand X can heat 2,000 square feet and can burn up to eight hours long, but isn't this just based on mathematical equations built around BTUs? Did manufacturers actually test the stove in buildings of multiple sizes and stop when the stove couldn't heat a certain size space? No, they didn't—but it would sure be nice if they did.

That's kind of my point. Shouldn't we be creating our own test method that's not affiliated with environmental efficiency? Yes, we know the better the stove is on emissions, the better it will heat a home. But don't we need to take the car on a trip down the highway to find out how many miles it gets per gallon?

On the showroom floor, I always used my own home as an example to customers. I have a 2,200-square-foot bungalow—1,100 square feet on the main floor and 1,100 square feet in the basement. It was built in the '80s with newer materials added to make it more efficient. The stove is downstairs in the rec room, and we live in Atlantic Canada, so it gets cold here. A stove rated at 2,000 square feet will heat my home perfectly, and I'll burn about eight to 12 truckloads of birch each year with a secondary air stove. I'll also heat the home with four to eight truckloads of birch with a catalytic stove hooked up in the same spot. Of course, I don't want to leave out pellet stoves here. I can heat my home with a pellet stove rated for 2,000 square feet with about 80 to 150 bags of pellets a year.

These numbers all come from my own experiences of having 12 different stoves in the 18 years we've lived there. That's nine wood stoves and three pellet stoves. I test everything we sell. I need to, because I need to be able to speak the customer's

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language when they come to buy. I speak in terms of “in-home efficiency” versus “emissions efficiency,” and I’ve been successful doing it this way for many years.

Something needs to change. What that looks like, I don’t know. But I do think we need our own test method that says Model A stove can heat a certain size home on a certain amount of fuel per year.

Another item that’s crossed my mind and ties perfectly into this is Energy Star ratings. You’ve all seen that little blue sticker on just about every appliance in your home. We need that as well, and we need our industry promoting it. That little blue sticker is now the universal sign for something that’s efficient. We’ve been programmed to think

that by manufacturers, and it often influences our buying decisions. We need something similar in our industry to identify what’s good for in-home efficiency and what’s not. When you buy a dishwasher or dryer, it tells you right on the label to expect to use X number of kilowatts per year when using this appliance. Why don’t we have the same thing?

Simply put, we need to set the standard in our industry, and we need to be more proactive to protect our businesses. The automotive industry shifted the conversation from tailpipe gases to miles per gallon. We can do the same by shifting our focus from emissions efficiency to in-home efficiency. Let’s start measuring—and marketing—the things our customers actually care about.

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