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# the NEWS

A **BNP** PUBLICATION

THE HVACR CONTRACTOR'S WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

\$3.00

## Think Outside the Box: Offer Whole-House Solutions

A good contractor  
must evolve into a  
total comfort specialist.

BY BRENDAN REID  
FOR THE NEWS

How do you truly solve your customer's comfort, IAQ, and utility bill problems? Although new equipment helps, will it always solve the problem? What if you replace the equipment, and the customer still has comfort problems, or doesn't save much on utilities?

Comfort Institute (CI) member contractors find that almost every home has comfort problems beyond the equipment. These duct system and thermal envelope defects can greatly reduce the customer's satisfaction with his/her new equipment.

CI supports contractors who have committed to whole house and air distribution diagnostics and repair. CI members go outside the box! They know their clients' comfort and utility bill problems can't be solved by new equipment alone.

For instance, recent Department of Energy (DOE) research proves that most duct systems lose 25% to 40% of the energy put out by the furnace or air conditioner. This means a new, 12-SEER, 3-ton unit typically delivers only 2 tons of cooling to the living area, at only 8 SEER.

It's a fact that most homeowners aren't getting the efficiency and comfort they're paying for. The result is low savings from new high-efficiency equipment, and comfort problems that remain unsolved.

CI members use diagnostic instruments like "Infiltrometer" blower doors and airflow cap-

ture hoods during replacement presentations, to prove that these pre-existing problems are real. It also helps show the customer why it's worth paying more for a better job.

### HOT SPOTS, COLD SPOTS

According to a recent Honeywell homeowner survey, homeowners' biggest complaint is hot and cold spots. And at the recent Air Conditioning Contractors of America (ACCA) convention in Albuquerque, NM, CI presented a seminar on "How to Cool the Second Floor" to address this problem.

Many contractors try to solve hot or cold spots by installing larger-capacity equipment. However, if all you do is put in a bigger unit, the thermostat in the living room is satisfied even faster, the equipment shuts off sooner, and the distant problem room often ends up getting less heating or cooling.

Summer humidity also goes up due to short cycling, and the expected utility savings just don't materialize.

The load in problem areas can often be greatly reduced by increasing house insulation, finding and sealing hidden thermal bypasses, and adding attic radiant barriers. Combined with air-side improvements such as duct sealing, added returns, new ducting, zoning, and air balancing, this problem can almost always be solved. In-line booster fans sometimes have their place.



An airflow hood measures flow at the return vents.





Inspecting the insulation is part of CI's checklist.



CI personalizes each diagnostic and repair plan with its customers.

## NOT JUST PRICE

"Contrary to what many contractors think, most homeowners are *not* just looking for a low price when it comes time to replace their equipment," said Ken Summers, CI national sales manager. "Today's more sophisticated consumers will pay more initially if they see the value.

"But seen through the consumer's eyes, the decent contractors now all seem to be pretty much the same. Everyone wears uniforms, has insurance, is drug-free, offers decent equipment and financing, and says they do good work. So, unfortunately, the buying decision often does end up being based mostly on price."

According to Summers, "You've got to stand out from the crowd. Performing blower door and flow hood tests gives the CI member a unique competitive advantage.

"By building a strong trust relationship, and uncovering and showing the homeowner real problems the other contractors ignored, he gets the price he needs on the equipment, and adds profitable repair work to the installation.

"It's a custom proposal that can't be easily compared 'apples to apples,'" Summers continued. "The customer does pay more initially, but also gets more: increased comfort, a cleaner and healthier home, and much lower long-term utility and repair bills."

## EVOLUTION

With all the changes that have been happening in the hvac industry, it's more important than ever for the mid-sized, independent, quality-oriented contractor to evolve in this direction.

"The days of just servicing and replacing metal boxes are over,"

# More CI Benefits

In addition to offering instruments and technical training to all contractors, CI administers a limited competition hvac contractor networking and support membership program.

The company provides its full members with marketing systems built around the whole-house approach to generate sales leads year-round. Offering a "Whole House Comfort Checkup" to past service clients in the slow seasons creates profitable repair and replacement work that other contractors probably are not bidding on.

CI also offers a five-day sales training camp that blends the diagnostic process with conventional ethical "soft-sell" techniques.

Membership territories are on a limited competition and sometimes exclusive basis. Membership is open to dealers of all brands of equipment.

CI is on track to have 400 members by 2003, representing the best residential service and replacement hvac contractors in North America.

Pre-appointment consumer education is a major component of CI's proprietary retail marketing and sales systems. "Our members have access to a number of Special Reports published by our Consumer Protection Division. The reports have titles like 'Tips and Secrets To Buying A New Heating and Cooling System,' and 'How To Identify A Good Heating and Cooling Contractor,'" says Anthony Balistreri, CI Midwest regional manager.

"These Comfort Institute third-party reports teach the homeowner to avoid picking the typical contractor who either doesn't know, or doesn't care, about all of the important new research and problem-solving techniques. The CI member who shares this valuable information with homeowners is positioned in their eyes as a trustworthy and competent specialist."

*Comfort Institute's world headquarters are in Bellingham, WA. The company has trainers located throughout the United States and Canada. For more information, contact Ken Summers at 800-933-5656, or Brendan Reid at 800-742-1207.*

said Dave Sheldon, CI Canadian regional manager.

Sheldon has seen first hand the effects of consolidation in Canada. "The mega-retailers, utilities, and consolidators are getting pretty good at swapping boxes. They aren't the cheapest, they rarely provide the best service, but they're often perceived by many homeowners as the best value.

"A good contractor literally has to become a true total comfort and IAQ specialist to differentiate himself in the years to come. Once you pull out some test equipment, it's not hard to show the homeowner why just replacing their equipment won't solve their problems. The increased client loyalty and referrals are the icing on the cake."

The word also gets around to service and installation technicians in the area. While there's no magic cure for the labor crisis, a fundamental strategy is to become the kind of company the best techs will want to work for.

"Indoor air quality is also becoming a major issue," pointed out David Michaelis, CI senior technical trainer. "Dust, moisture, mold, allergy, asthma, and carbon monoxide problems are all increasing.

"The homeowner looks to the hvac industry for help, but often doesn't get it. Most contractors can't explain to their customer why they still have dust after installing a new air cleaner, why black soot is showing up in the carpets, why the CO alarm keeps sounding but the furnace is burning clean, or how to get rid of that moldy or musty odor.

"Unless a contractor can look at the whole house as a system, he has no hope of truly solving IAQ problems. Our members have the instruments and training to do this." ®