



"The education of a man is never completed until he dies."

—Robert E. Lee (1807-1870)

A common complaint from homeowners and property managers last year and continuing this summer and fall has been how can we lower our fuel bills? What will they sound like this winter if oil prices continue to creep up as they have in the past?



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I spoke to over a few hundred technicians this spring while presenting several training seminars on hydronic and steam systems. We discussed how they are *supposed* to work, how to improve the operation of these systems, how to troubleshoot them when they encounter a problem, how to identify the various systems out there.

A common theme throughout all of these seminars was the feeling that maybe the company wasn't offering the best replacement heating system available to their customer or was not providing the best solution to their customer's heating system problem. Maybe the customer was getting a mediocre system or a mediocre solution to a problem. When I questioned them further on what they meant, they would

respond that the sales staff doesn't understand how that particular heating system works and consequently, they wouldn't provide the customer with the best solution.

Whenever I would get a chance to talk to the salesmen from some of these companies, they would tell me the service department doesn't know what its like to compete against other companies that are vying for their business. So they felt *forced* to sell the less expensive/less complicated components or systems, etc.

In the end of this bickering back and forth, who loses? Who has standard efficiency equipment installed instead of higher efficiency? Who has higher than necessary fuel bills? Who has a heating system that isn't as comfortable as it could or should be? That's right—the customer.

In one of the seminars, questions came up on whether an existing steam system should be converted to a forced hot water system or remain as a steam system. This brought about great debate:

- "Definitely convert to hot water"
- "Too expensive; maintain the steam..."
- "Steam systems are old and inefficient ...change them."
- "What if the radiators are too small when they are heated by water instead of steam?"

What is the best answer? Obviously, when asked to install a new modern efficient heating system today, steam does not pop up at the top of the list. If it is possible, there are benefits to be had by converting the system over. At the same time, maybe the homeowners can't afford the initial costs involved with a steam to water conversion. But if you understand the basic operating principles of a steam system, there is no reason why you can't bring it back to its original form.

The key is assessing each situation individually and coming up with the best answer for that system. And the best answer may be based on both an economic level as well as a knowledge level. If you know how to mechanically design a system so that it is going to work correctly, you now have all kinds of options available to use. You can explain to your customer the pluses and minuses of each system. What benefits they will receive by going with the more expensive "up-front" cost system versus the less expensive "up-front" cost sys-

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tem. By being knowledgeable about heating systems and control options, you can show the customer how, by spending some money up front, the more efficient system will pay for itself in a short period of time.

A need for knowledge...

We have the quote on the facing page, by Robert E. Lee on FIA's Training home page on our website. I think it speaks volumes about what the oil industry needs.

Service technicians need to realize they can be the company's best salespeople. The customer already trusts you, evidenced by the fact that they have allowed you into their house to service their heating system. If you tell the homeowner not to try a particular product or brand or heating system concept, 99% of the time they are going to listen to you. If, on the other hand, you tell them they have to have this or should install that because you know it works or have had good success with it, they are going to want what you suggest. That puts a lot of responsibility on you to learn as much as you can about what you do. And the company you work for should realize this as well. Why wouldn't you want knowledgeable, effective service technicians representing your company? Education is the key. Attending training seminars with subjects that relate to your industry is a must!

Oil equipment salespeople should be comfortable with assessing a customer's heating system and coming up with some recommended suggestions. If not, then ask for help until you become more proficient with heating systems. For example, when dealing with hot water heating systems, make sure you are comfortable with performing a heat loss on the house. One of the worst "efficiency-killers" to a boiler is short

cycling and when a boiler is too big, it will do nothing BUT short cycle. Maybe you should approach your customer with some suggestions, such as a *good, better or best* list of options.

Homeowners are looking for ways to save on their home heating bills. When you are there, sitting down with them at their house, present all the options. Talk to them about high efficiency boilers, about weather responsive reset controls. Explain to the homeowner how these devices work and yes, they cost more money than the standard "run of the mill" components. But, more importantly, explain how they can save money with these components!

Of course, not all of your customers can afford the top of the line products and systems. But who are we to at least not make them aware of their options...let them decide. By understanding how a heating system is supposed to work, you can at least provide the best system that your customer can afford.

With the advent of the internet and everyone (including oil heat customers) use "Google" to search for answers, there is a tremendous amount of information available. And yes, sometimes too much information can make a homeowner dangerous. But don't stick your head in the sand thinking this internet thing is going away. Rather, make sure you have the answers or at least know where to get them.

And where do you get this information? There are several avenues to take; your local supply houses, manufacturer representatives, local chapter meetings of oilheat service managers, Dan Holohan's website, www.heatinghelp.com. Another great source is books. There are several good heating books available through www.Amazon.com. And don't forget your trade journals (see box on preceding page).

If you have any questions or comments, please email me at gcarey@fiainc.com or call at 1-800-423-7187.