

FOCUS

Hydronic and Radiant Heat Products

10

LOCATION, DEMAND IMPORTANT FACTORS FOR HYDRONICS PROSPECTS

Contractors who've added hydronics services to their portfolios admit it's not as difficult as it seems.

12

EFFICIENCY, COMFORT, AND INNOVATION DISTINGUISH RADIANT MARKET

Radiant heating and cooling is establishing a foothold in the residential HVAC market.

14

AWARENESS, VERSATILITY DRIVING HYDRONICS MARKET

Hydronics growth is being driven by a number of trends, including contractor awareness, application versatility, and more.



12



14



10

Inside

INDUSTRY NEWS

- Energy Prices Trending Downward 1
- Geothermal Industry Confident in Federal Tax Credit Renewal 1



01

HYDRONICS ZONE

- Revitalizing the Hydronics Industry's Aging Workforce 18



18

VENTILATION ZONE

- The Ghost in the Duct System 19

HUDSON, INK

- It's All About Me – Not You 20

DEPARTMENTS

- Achrnews.com 4
- Advertisers 21
- Classifieds 21
- Extra Edition 22
- Facts + Figures 16
- Guest Column 22
- Newsline 5
- Opinion 4
- What's New 8

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12 INNOVATION IS KEY TO COMPETING IN RADIANT HEATING MARKET
Radiant products are touting higher compatibility and efficiencies

14 AWARENESS, VERSATILITY DRIVING HYDRONICS MARKET
Hydronics products are becoming more energy-efficient and consumer friendly

Location, Demand Important Factors for Hydronics Prospects

Offering hydronics adds another dimension to a contracting business

BY NICK KOSTORA
THE NEWS STAFF

Hydronics is simply the use of water to transfer conditioned air from one medium to another. For many contractors, offering these services has extended a worthy return on investment.

“Manufacturers and their reps are always eager to help, so, for those contractors reluctant to jump in — get some help,” said Rich McNally, eastern region sales manager, Watts Water Technologies Inc., in regard to the hydronics segment of the HVAC industry and how it’s becoming a more accessible option for contractors nationwide. “The learning curve is short, and a world of opportunity awaits you.”

He’s not alone in this thinking, as contractors and manufacturers alike are touting increasing demand and interest in the residential hydronics market.

GETTING INVOLVED

The big question for most contractors is whether hydronics will be a viable addition to their businesses, especially considering first-cost obstacles that may seem too steep to overcome.

For many, location is key.

“I became involved with hydronics in 1995, when I went to work for my father’s company selling Infloor Heating Systems as a manufacturer’s representative,” said Michael Wilburn, president, Infloor Heating Systems, Buena Vista, Colorado. “I also worked for a wholesale supply company that was heavily involved with hydronic heating. I performed heat-loss calculations on radiant projects and designed the hydronic heating systems for both radiant applications and hydronic baseboard applications. There’s a large demand for hydronic products in our market. Since we’re based in Colorado, and many of the homes in Colorado do not require cooling due to their geographic location, it’s made for a very strong hydronic heating market.”

“My apprenticeship in 1973 was with an ex-Navy man for a company that serviced boilers in addition to conventional



PERFECT PIPES: A technician with Woburn, Massachusetts-based Central Cooling & Heating Inc. completes a hydronic installation at a custom home near Boston. The variable Delta-T pump provides circulation for a multizone hydronic system served by Zone Sentry zone valves.

forced-air systems,” said Martin Hoover, Empire Heating & Air Conditioning, Inc., Decatur, Georgia. “The nature of silent, gentle, moist heat appealed to me, and I have carried on that tradition in my company.”

“We’ve been doing hydronics for more than 30 years and have seen a lot change in that time,” said Jim Godbout, owner, Jim Godbout Plumbing, Heating, and Air Conditioning, Biddeford, Maine. “Education and experience is a must with all the new technologies we have before us today. We provide ongoing education through our partnerships in the industry.”

Atlanta is a cooling market, for the most part, said Hoover. “We do not have a lot of residential boilers here, and most companies don’t service boilers at all. It’s been a nice niche market and a somewhat unique service we offer. We do install some replacement boilers, but the only new hydronic systems we’ve installed are radiant floor heating systems.”

Location is important to Godbout, whose company is situated on the southern coast of Maine. “We have many second homeowners looking for efficient comfort for the cold and hot weather we get throughout the year,” said Godbout. “Equipment selection is based on great service by our wholesalers and manufacturers. The relationships that develop with them are most important to me.”

While geographic region is important, Wilburn noted the hydronics market is turning heads nationwide.

“I find that the demand for hydronics has increased in many parts of the country, even in climates that are not generally cold,” said Wilburn. “We provide many hydronic systems in Southern California, where cooling is not generally needed but you still need heating and floor warming.”

THE TRANSITION

While transitioning from forced-air HVAC to water-based hydronics may seem daunting, those who’ve added these services to their portfolios admit it’s not as difficult as it sounds.

“The transition to hydronic heating from HVAC is quite easy, in my opinion,” said Wilburn. “We are still performing heating and cooling calculations before a project starts. Whether you’re moving air or water, many of the same laws apply. We’ve found that many of our geothermal customers have become very good hydronics professionals. Many of our HVAC customers have made the transition to hydronics and continue to do both HVAC and hydronics in many parts of the country due to the need for cooling. A large amount of combined radiant heating and HVAC [forced-air] systems are being considered.”

According to Wilburn, getting over the first cost of a

system is the biggest obstacle to hydronics becoming more popular. This is because the initial upfront cost can be higher than traditional systems.

“However, this is offset with a much higher operating efficiency,” said Wilburn. “Many hydronics systems operate at a much lower cost than traditional forced-air systems. The hydronics systems typically require little maintenance and will normally last the lifetime of the structure. I’ve seen more demand for good hydronic systems as the evolution of radiant floor heating has progressed.”

Hoover also brought up some other practical reasons customers may turn to hydronics, such as when people have an aversion to forced-air noise, dust and balance

option and be informed how this option could be beneficial to their project. Both geothermal and solar/thermal are additional hydronic options that are not often considered but can have a great efficiency benefit on a hydronic heating system.”

Hydronics adds diversity to a contractor’s offerings, said Godbout. “It also offers the utmost in comfort. Based on our diverse offerings, we always maintain a very large workload in front of us.”

“Some [customers] come to us looking for hydronics, having researched the products or having had a system previously in other locations,” said Hoover. “Once they experience it, they’re hooked.”

So, how do they get the chance to experience it and



WORKING TOGETHER: Ike Beyer, owner of Islip, New York-based Integrated HVAC Systems and Services Inc., works with an employee during installation of Laars Rheos+ boilers at a retirement facility.

issues, or “if they want the best heating system money can buy.”

He said his company is rarely converting a customer away from the dominant forced-air option unless they’re specifically looking for a hydronic system.

“Over the last several years, hydronic heating has become more popular as more and more people become aware of radiant heating options,” said Wilburn. “Many customers are aware of the options of hydronic radiant heating today. I believe this has become more popular due to the amount of information on the Internet, though, many of the customers still have to be presented with the best hydronic

become hooked? What, exactly, is the first step contractors should consider when presenting hydronics to consumers?

Contractors must make customers aware of the potential advantages hydronics has to offer,” said Wilburn. “Water is a much better heat transfer medium than air, thus giving the customer a more efficient system. We have to educate the customer on all the different types of systems that can be provided using hydronics. Once the customer is aware of their options and the increase in efficiency these systems generally carry, they’ll generally choose to use a hydronic system.” ■