

DON'T JUST SELL SEER SELL COMFORT

by David Debien

SEER (Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio) is a dead issue! What? I repeat, SEER is a dead issue! Comfort is what you must concern yourself with.

Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratios have replaced high efficiency as the latest "buzz" word in the industry. The term is used daily — today's customers compare systems based mostly on their SEER rating, adding to their belief that HVAC equipment is a commodity. Yet SEER ratings should only be one factor when making a system selection.

The term SEER came into being when the good intentions of our government were politely foisted upon this industry. On that day, the Energy Efficiency Ratio (EER), which was used when electric consumption was based on actual electric use, was gone. By using more sophisticated computerized designs to achieve an average efficiency over a broad range of conditions, the Department of Energy (DOE) created the "Seasonal EER."

This new standard became part of our daily language as an acronym freely interchanged with the word efficiency. But the truth is another matter.

Recently, a new home builder pointed out to me that the air conditioning units installed in his projects were "high SEER." They were rated at 12+ SEER. When I asked him if this was high efficiency, he replied that it was indeed. When I commented that I don't use air conditioning and asked for a deduction for a low efficiency unit, he told me

there is no such thing as low efficiency!

Equipment with an 8.0 SEER was tagged high efficiency just a few short years ago. Now 10.0 SEER is the standard and it could rise even more. Contractors sell equipment based on these numbers and try to "out-SEER" their competition.

This whole system is a disservice to the consumer. The United States is a vast area with broad comfort demands.

"Comfort is THE product we must provide. Efficiency without comfort is a half-baked idea."

What works in Houston, doesn't work in Anchorage. Does your customer need higher SEER in areas where run-time in the summer is low?

Houston's cooling run-time is, on average, 2,400 hours. Higher SEERs in this climate are more justified than in, say, Ohio. Yet manufacturers have concentrated on SEER ratings almost exclusively and comfort has become a by-product of system design.

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provide. Efficiency without comfort is a half-baked idea.

Any system can remove heat efficiently if the proper equipment is selected and installed. What's proper for a given design condition is the big question. This is apparent when a customer taking multiple bids is totally confused by the different approaches to their design needs. They tend to select the most SEER for the money.

How many times have you heard the statement "You're all doing the same thing, so why do you charge more?" The quotes I've received are all for 12+ SEER equipment."

If you can't convince the customer, you'll be "out-SEERED" on the dollar amount of your bid versus your competitor.

The customer needs to understand that all 12+ SEER systems do not perform the same. The key is proper selection of equipment, proper installation, and proper refrigerant balance. It's unrealistic to put a 12+ SEER design with a fixed orifice metering device and expect the same performance as a properly sized and installed expansion valve control. Yet they are both 12+ SEER. There's a difference!

How many times has a 12+ SEER condenser been installed on an old coil only to create an overcharged system with a resulting failure? These systems are installed by quick-buck artists who install good enough to last "their" warranty. The manufacturer picks up the tab on future failures and the customer curses both of them.

Manufacturers are clamping down on the contractors who do this type of work, but not fast enough. It's competition, we're told. It'll always be there and we must adjust to each job's unique challenges.

High efficiency equipment lasts

longer than low efficiency equipment. This is another fact used to sell higher SEER. Manufacturers bundle equipment packages with longer warranties and lower pricing, to make them more attractive to consumers. Tomorrow is sacrificed for today's dollar.

Depending on the amount of use it receives, standard equipment will serve the needs of most clients for a long time. In some areas, run-times are so excessive that longer warranties can be more beneficial to the consumer than higher SEERs. It should be the customer's decision, not ours or the manufacturer's. As contractors, our job is to present the facts and offer options.

Since the oil crisis of the 70's, we've been led to believe that higher efficiencies are the answer to everything. We're saving the environment and using less energy. While this may be true to some degree, it's all simply overstated, oversold, and forced on customers through rebates.

Rebates! Rebates are a form of deception. Do customers need rebates to make a decision? I don't think so. Customers need an intelligent approach to equipment selection. Every component must be selected based on system design and the needs of the consumer.

Why is SEER So Overstated?

When you buy an automobile, doesn't it have an EPA rating? You bet it does! Is that the mileage you attain if you purchase this vehicle? Hardly! What if you live in Denver? There are no adjustments for your altitude. But common sense says you must interpolate for the conditions of your area.

What about SEER ratings? Will all equipment selections work in your area and provide the actual ratings as listed in the book? Manufacturers provide such ratings without regard to specific geographical and climatic situation.

These ratings are based on conditions that don't necessarily exist in the real world. We must install the comfort system for the worst conditions that exist.

How often do you have Manual J conditions for your area? Maybe 10% of the time on a yearly basis? Hardly! But you must design based on these con-

ditions or your customer will call you on a hot day and tell you all about that lousy system you installed. It doesn't matter how high the SEER rating is when a customer is uncomfortable. Comfort is the solution, efficiency is the result, not the other way around.

Sell Comfort, Not SEER

When selling air conditioning, we often hear the question, "How much will I save with this new, higher efficiency unit?"

If you answer with a dollar figure, invariably you'll receive an angry phone call when the customer's utility bills don't drop significantly.

Yet this question is asked of me so many times, I now respond with a question instead of an answer: "What are your goals in making this investment?" You'll be surprised — their objectives may be different than your think.

The customer will generally say "We want to reduce our electric consumption."

My next question is, "Are you comfortable now?"

"NO," is usually the response.

Then, in my detailed response on saving energy I say, "If you keep your house as miserable with the new system as you keep it with the old system, your electric bills may go down 60%." But is that what you want?"

When they answer no, I say, "Do you want your electric bills to go down and at the same time your comfort to go up?"

"Yes," they say, nearly every time.

Because this is reasonably attainable, I make only the following promise: "Your electric bill will be as low as possible with the system we install. If we raise your comfort level to a higher setpoint with more efficiency, your elec-

tric bill will be comfortable and so will your house."

That's all anyone can promise.

Want some examples? In Houston, the local electric utility gave rebates for high efficiency. We sold against the whole concept. Here, humidity is a given, and we don't live under ARI test conditions. We have approximately 10% more heat and double the humidity of the average U.S. city.

In one house, we designed a system to be comfortable at 78F with 50% relative humidity (RH). This is no easy task, but applied engineering and experience showed us that proper equipment selection and sizing could accomplish it.

A family of five lives in this 2,600-sq. ft. house which has five tons of cooling. Based on our design and equipment selection, the highest utility bill they've had in three years was only \$118.00. This, in an area where electric rates are about 9.5 cents per KW and consumption is the highest per capita of the 10 largest cities in the U.S.

Yet, their air conditioning system was deemed not efficient enough to qualify for a rebate based on the utility's SEER requirements. This performance was accomplished with near perfect design and a simple one-stage cooling system.

In 1980, in my own house, I installed 12 tons of cooling using four systems. The equipment is rated at 9.0 SEER, yet my cost to cool the house comfortably is 40% below similar designs we encounter today.

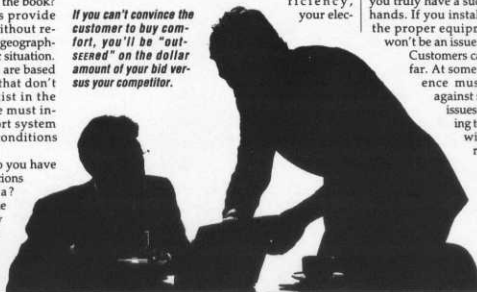
Integration of comfort, efficiency, clean environment, and personal health knows no bounds.

If you provide for the consumer's needs without compromising anything, you truly have a success story on your hands. If you install any system with the proper equipment, SEER ratings won't be an issue.

Customers can only lead you so far. At some point your experience must take over. Sell against SEER. Show the real issues. Consumers are trying to hire someone who will fight for what's right for them.

When you sell against the SEER rating, you don't totally de-emphasize its importance. Explain to the customer that SEER is important, but

If you can't convince the customer to buy comfort, you'll be "out-scared" on the dollar amount of your bid versus your competitor.



V I E W P O I N T

it's only part of the equation. Proper engineering and system selection to meet their needs is the other part of the equation. These factors involve proper duct designs, correct coil sensible heat ratio selection, better air filtration, proper furnace selection, and the unique way you differ from the competition.

If you offer the same thing as everyone else, price will be the only differentiating factor between you and the competition.


Several years ago, I ran into a contractor in New York having problems selling gas furnaces. He claimed that the gas company was giving them away with long term financing. People didn't care about furnace effi-

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ciency, only cost. He said they were putting him out of business and asked how he could isolate himself from the competition.

I told him to look the customer right in the eye and say the following, "We only sell gas furnaces. We don't sell gas. We live and die on doing a better job than the utility company. They don't address your needs like we do."

Sure, you'll still lose many potential sales to the giveaway and yes, the competition is brutal. But you'll appeal to human nature and can succeed because you aren't status quo. Customers can get status quo from anybody.

Your job is to offer the customer outstanding service and value that only your company can deliver. When you do this, SEER is a minor detail. Customers are already oversold on SEER. Look beyond the obvious! 

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