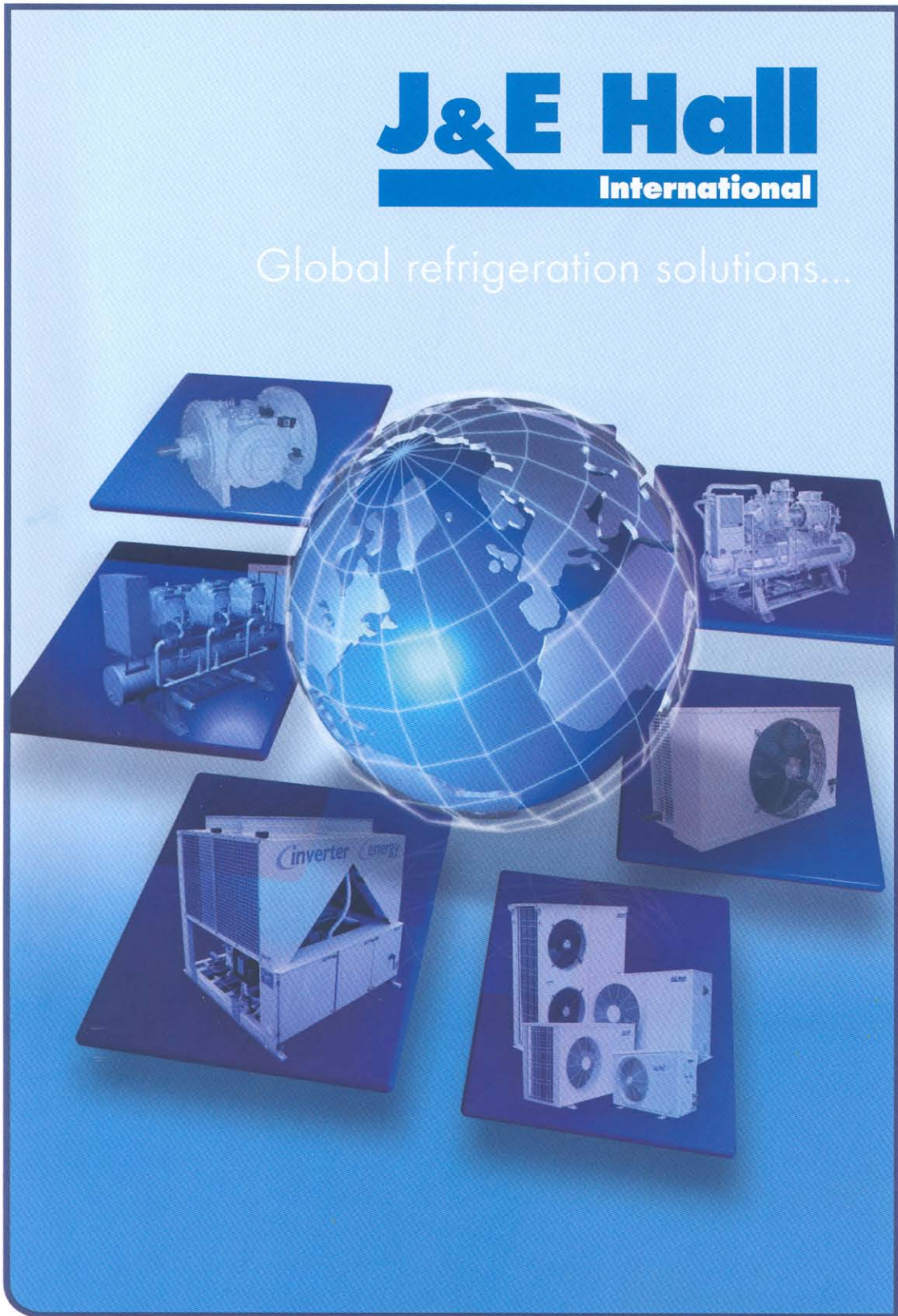


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Time to make heat pumps sexy

There has never been a better time for the industry to cash in on the domestic market. But it needs to radically revise its approach, argues **Bob Cowlard** in the second of our new opinion series

I have been in the air conditioning business for over 20 years. If I had a pound for every time I've sat in a sales meeting where someone has asked, usually with a gleam in their eye, "Is this the year the domestic market finally takes off?" I would be a rich man.

At that point, the barriers to cracking this market would be trotted out: installed cost too expensive, access rarely easy, and the design of systems not right. Well folks, what do you know, these barriers have now been overcome. And, guess what? The domestic market now accounts for – a mighty one per cent of sales. So what's to be done?

My prescription starts with getting the words right. Heat pumps are a great technology, but no one except industry insiders and technology geeks know what they are. We need to call them simply a heating product, rather than 'cooling and heating' and muddying the water. We have to keep it simple.

Secondly, we need to use water as the heating medium. No one out there has a clue about the magical fluid we call 'refrigerant'. It gets in the way of a clear understanding, and is a barrier to sales.

Thirdly, we have got to get the marketing right. Knock on a front door and try and sell the homeowner an 'air to water heat pump' and you are likely to get the dogs set on you. Jehovah's Witnesses have it easier.

A number of manufacturers are investing serious money in targeting the residential market. But, in many cases, the message is just whistling over end users' heads. You have to ask: "How often does the sales person talking directly to the customer understand the technology?"

Unlike a gas boiler, which delivers a constant performance unaffected by ambient conditions, an air-to-water heat pump is massively affected by such outside factors. The initial figures look great. But with an average 45degC water flow temperature, is under-floor heating likely to become the preferred domestic heating solution for the masses?

Does anyone really think the British public are ready to throw their radiators away overnight? Where would they dry their socks?

The situation is similar in relation to ground source heat pumps. Again, this is fantastic technology, but when mis-sold, about as useful as a chocolate teapot.

I had a call recently from a homeowner desperate for some advice. He was being quoted £10,000 for an 8kW ground source heat pump to serve an extension. It was designed to deliver water at 35degC, and would require two 2 m-deep, 40 m-long trenches in his garden.

It was not going to be linked into his existing boiler system, and therefore he would have neither top-up or back-up facility. The company could not give him any idea of the payback period, and could not show him a successful installation, as this was their first one. The man's question: "Do you think I should go ahead?"

As with all new opportunities, the horror stories usually happen in the early days. With this kind of approach and the limited application knowledge in the field, we risk losing the market before it even gets off the ground.

Simply put, end users do not understand what heat pumps are, or how they work. Taking energy from the ground or the air is not a concept that comes easily to the average householder. The challenge is to communicate better, which means making it simple – and, dare I say, sexy.

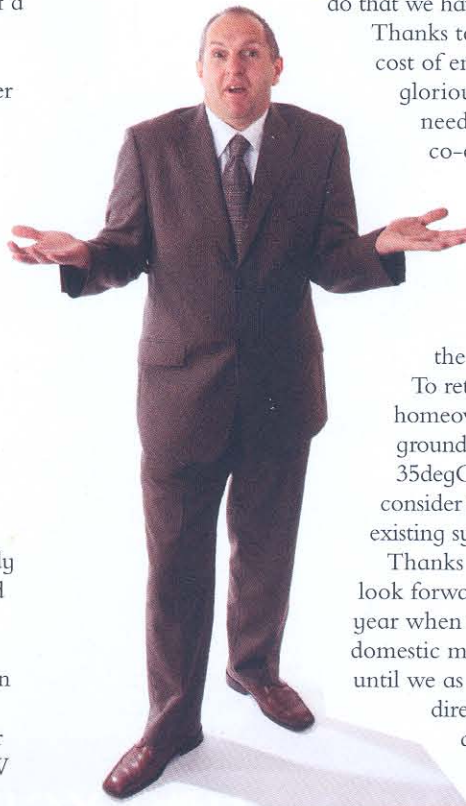
You can often hear such burning topics as the difference between HD-ready or 1080 LCD TVs being discussed in the pub. But how often do you hear: "What COP do you get from your ground source?" It has to come, and to do that we have to make it accessible.

Thanks to new legislation and the soaring cost of energy, we as an industry have a glorious opportunity presented to us. All it needs is the right approach and a bit of co-ordinated effort.

A good start would be some high quality, simple-to-understand information posted on the internet by our industry body. We don't need high-tech sales speak from companies, with the obvious bias they would employ.

To return to that call from my worried homeowner. Would I put in a £10,000 ground source heat pump for 8kW at 35degC water flow? No. However, I would consider it if it was integrated with the existing system.

Thanks to this opportunity, I can now look forward to at least two meetings this year when the topic of the final arrival of the domestic market will be discussed. However, until we as an industry can pull in the right direction, I still think I know the answer. Unfortunately, it's still not a good one.



The author is managing director of Oceanair Distribution Ltd.