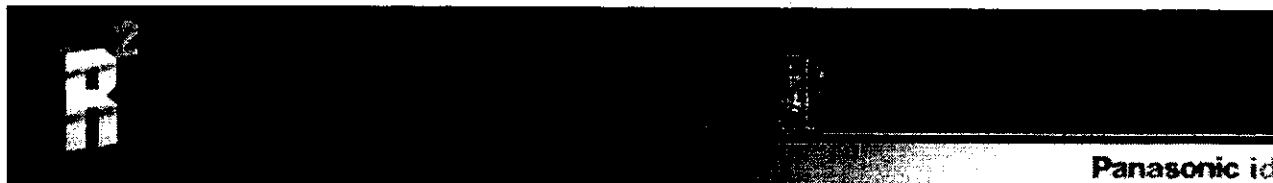


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Why Builders Are Scared of Hydronics

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by Kenton Pass

I am going to admit to what all HVAC contractors are likely thinking — when it comes to hydronic heating, we home builders are cheap.

That's all right, it's true. I'm building a custom spec house. I call the "tinner," throw in a forced-air gas heating system, and save \$20,000 to \$30,000. After all, most things being equal, that 20k to 30k might make the difference in selling my house over another builder's house down the street. And I've got to stay competitive, right?

While it's true that most of our clients are more concerned about good window efficiency, polished granite countertops, and tricked-out master baths than their heating system, the problem isn't just economics. Home builders also hate callbacks and warranty work.

Since most hydronic systems incorporate side-arm tanks, if the system breaks down, you lose the heat, as well as the hot water. Just the kind of call we builders love to make to homeowners.

While some home builders are slow to change, other builders, especially those who build spec houses, are always looking for something extra that makes their home stand out from the rest. Contrary to what some people think, most of us are committed to giving our clients the best home possible, including the heating system.

However, HVAC contractors must understand how we see it. For instance, when we followed the trend from Formica countertops to Corian to granite-slabs, we simply called a different shop, or in some cases, used the same shop for a different product.

We didn't have to change our scheduling system, it didn't add production days, and our superintendents didn't go through a meltdown. An easy change, no brain damage, and we now have cool countertops.

Making Adjustments

Let's examine what happens when we decide to use an in-floor, concrete-capped, radiant heating system.

- First, we have to become educated on the logistics. Where will the manifolds go? How many zones do we need? What are the various finished floor materials we are using? If we are using a nail-down, hardwood-flooring product, then we need to place sleepers in the concrete between the tubing.
- Does our current plumbing or heating-contractor install hydronic systems, or do we look for a new subcontractor?
- Do our house plans accommodate the extra 1 1/2 in. of concrete for ceiling heights, window placement, and header heights?
- What about our framers? Have they ever run double bottom plates on the wood floor systems? We can't forget to constantly remind them about the changed header heights or how the door openings will be too short.
- Did we remember to add the extra bottom plate material to our lumber takeoff? We don't want the framers sitting on their hands waiting for a delivery.
- What about the lightweight concrete cap? Who supplies it? Who pours and lays it? Are we going to pump it or wheelbarrow it in? Is anyone watching the pressure gauge during the pour, looking for accidental tubing breaks? In addition, before we poured, did we remember to get the tubing inspection that we're not used to calling in?
- Did we instruct our laborer *not* to nail into the concrete cap when installing temporary railing around the stairwell and he did so anyway? (Yes, this happened on my job.)
- How much did our schedule have to be changed? How much retraining did our staff and subcontractors need? How many days did it add to our production time?
- Most importantly, did all this change and heartburn translate into real benefits to the builder? And not just in dollars.
- Did our team come together for a rewarding learning experience? Was our reputation as a quality builder enhanced? Do we feel that our company gained both tangible and intangible benefits?

I have successfully used hydronic radiant floor heating in new homes and remodeling projects. I like it, and I think it's worth the extra trouble and costs.

However, am I using it in the three custom spec homes I currently have in the works? No. Our market in Colorado doesn't demand it at this time, and until the majority of my competition raises the ante, I'll stay where I am.

This doesn't stop me, though, from highly recommending hydronic heating systems to my pre-sell clients. When I sit down with new customers and discuss their needs and wants, I always explain the benefits and encourage them to consider a hydronic system.

Most of our customers are pretty sophisticated, and are generally eager to learn more, even doing their own research on the Internet (Watch out for the engineer types with their vast array of questions. You know what I mean).

The typical response I get after explaining all of the wonderful qualities of hydronic heating is, "How much extra is this going to cost me?"

I usually end up pricing the system to my clients as an option, and more often than not, it is one of the first things cut out of the budget when the numbers get crunched.

So, how does all this information help you sell more hydronic heating systems? Just knowing how some builders think should increase your ability to discuss their fears and concerns.

Take your builders to lunch. Talk to them one-on-one. Get involved in the local home builders and remodelers associations. Exhibit your systems at the next networking event. Talk it up. Educate.

Yes, we home builders can be cheap, set in our ways, and sometimes lazy. However, we're usually willing to listen. Especially over a free lunch.

Kenton Pass, CGR, is co-owner of Sawhorse Co., a residential building and remodeling contracting firm in Colorado Springs, CO. He may be reached at 719/328-1212 or by e-mail at kpass@sawhorseco.com.

A Contractor's Perspective

"A lot of my builders are scared to try hydronics," says Mike Bragg, owner of MJB Plumbing and Heating in Monument, CO. "They've either had bad experiences themselves or have heard stories about failed systems."

He adds, "Many builders are soured on hydronics because they tried it once and used installers who didn't know what they were doing, or they took an extremely low bid and the trade contractor got into trouble. We spend a lot of time fixing bad systems and then repairing the reputation of hydronics." Bragg has been installing hydronic systems in one form or another since the early 1980s. He tries to educate his builders on the benefits of hydronic heating systems, such as increased comfort, better efficiency, and low longterm operating costs.

"One \$5 part can bring down a \$30,000 system," Bragg says. "Furthermore, if the break happens on a Friday afternoon and the part isn't in stock, we're looking at several days to getting the system back up."

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