



## Exhibitions and Events

### Heart and Home Exhibition – Harrogate 11-13 June Show Review

#### Marketing and innovation produce results at Hearth and Home 2006

Peter Drucker, arguably the most famous American business guru, has a remarkable ability to simplify the most complex of issues. “Because its purpose is to create a customer, the business has two – and only two – functions: marketing and innovation. Marketing and innovation produce results. All the rest are costs.”

Exhibitions highlight the importance of marketing and innovation. They represent an unrivalled opportunity to communicate your new products and services to both existing and potential customers. Or, as Drucker put it, “..the best way to predict the future is to create it.”

The 2006 Hearth and Home exhibition is the third I have attended, and there were numerous examples of good marketing and innovation on display. Ceramic Gas Products had stepped outside the traditional scope of ceramic design with its UV products for electric fires which worked very effectively in black light. Warm Corner displayed a radical combined fire and air conditioning unit manufactured by French company, Fondis. They must believe in the product because they have applied for a worldwide patent – not an exercise to be undertaken lightly.

Not all innovations were immediately obvious. Steve Barson of Burley Appliances explained they had developed a unique fitted plate which greatly reduced the cost of installing – and subsequently maintaining - gas fires, primarily on new build properties. Clwyd Refractory Fibres introduced a range of vacuum formed shapes manufactured from Cerrofrax, an earth silica fibre. The NuFlame Evolution burner made impressive use of fellow exhibitor Skamol’s compressed vermiculite block to improve performance and consistency of flame.

I was impressed by both the e-flame control units and, in particular, the Plug1 gas connection fitting from Mertik Maxitrol. Plug1 is the gas equivalent of an electric plug socket and, assuming it can be used in the UK, would be a boon for patio heaters and other gas-fired appliances.

The rising price of gas and electricity was a key subtext to this year’s show. Appliance efficiency is big news in the industry and will soon filter through to the public as they start to understand the cost implications of input and output energy ratings. Industry statistics show that sales of solid fuel stoves have increased rapidly in response to energy inflation and the stove sector was strongly represented at the show. Surprisingly, the only company to make a headline statement about appliance efficiency was Town and Country Fires who quoted a figure of 84% efficiency for its Farndale product under the Carlsbergian banner, ‘Are these the world’s most efficient stoves?’.

My favourite small stand at this year's show was Certainly Wood. George Snell explained that for wood-burning stoves to operate at maximum efficiency they needed dried and seasoned timber. His primary marketing communication objective was to educate consumers to view Certainly Wood's products as 'bags of energy'. The 'bags of energy' on display were hardwoods from the Hereford area, 'thinings' arising from the process of good forestry management. Compared to some, George's team certainly had 'bags of energy' although this may be partly due to their eminently sensible decision – given the hot weather - to wear shorts and sandals. Gavin Scott of Gavin Scott Design also falls in to this select category as well. As usual, Gavin's striking open plan stand displayed his minimalist GRC (Glass Reinforced Concrete) designs to the full.

The Castelmonte range remains a favourite of mine for the colour and variety it offers, although I'm not certain there are many homes with the required colour scheme to accommodate the leopard-print stove featured this year! More classical, traditional designs were strongly represented by companies such as Pevex Heta, Broseley Fires, Aarrow and Aga

Prize for best company name at the show has to go to Firebelly who displayed their attractive and innovative hand-built wood burning stoves. Firebelly stated that it had ceased selling from its website and was looking to establish a national dealer network. There did appear to be a backlash against internet sales at the show with several companies including SinWi, Amicas and Focus Fireplaces making it clear that they only wanted to deal with independents. Given that the majority of visitors are independent retailers, it could be claimed that the show would, by definition, attract exhibitors that eschew internet sales. I'd prefer to think that the trend is recognition of the fact that good retailers do add genuine value to the fire and fireplace purchasing experience. The internet is two-dimensional; it cannot replicate the tactile and emotional elements of a visit to a good showroom.

At the top of this piece I quoted Drucker on marketing and innovation. When an organisation is small, new and entrepreneurial marketing is almost intuitive. Dan Harding's fantastic HotPod design stood out above all others on display at the show because it was the product of a maverick mind. The HotPod combines form, functionality and fun in a way which I'm sure appeals to all ages. My understanding, however, is that Dan sells HotPod direct to the public so I'm not convinced Hearth and Home was necessarily a good marketing move for him.

Larger companies with portfolios of brands catering for different market segments have to adopt a more structured and 'scientific' approach to marketing. Chris Stammers at Dimplex explained that he was using the elasticity of the brand to introduce new products which filled gaps in their range. However, this did not preclude innovation. The Burlington, a narrow cast-aluminium fireplace, incorporated ingenious concealed outlets which efficiently distributed fanned heat; 'Alternative to Art' used a thin film LCD screen to display both fireplace images and seasonal scenes such as windblown mountain tops – complete with sound effects!

Darren McMahon of Valor has three strong well-known brands to manage: Valor,

Wonderfire and Baxi. Wonderfire is a premium brand for independents and, according to Darren, takes its design cues from high-end fashion. I particularly liked the combination of the Airflame burner and ceramic matting on the Splendour bowl which combined to produce a striking straw-like flame effect. On the Valor range, 'black gloss is the new stainless steel'. Primary design influences here included the impact floral patterns have on home décor.

As a general rule, I'm not enthusiastic about enclosed stands which can often feel claustrophobic and exclusive. The Faber stand just about manages to avoid this, and the products on display make entering well worthwhile. The emphasis was on black steel in the Emotion, and on nostalgia in the Hestia range. I spoke to several exhibitors at the show who stated that they had upgraded their websites, but when pressed were unable to clearly define what benefit this would generate for their clients. Annemieke Hilberts of Faber was an exception to this rule. She explained that the dealer-only element of the Faber website would soon be extended to the UK and would allow dealers access to the complete family of product specifications and associated data sheets. Faber was joint winner of this year's 'Strangest name for a product' prize. The Straight – for that is its name – is an exceptionally tall and narrow fireplace ideally suited to.....? Anglia Fireplaces and Design was the other recipient of this prize for the Vrtikl an attractive gas fire from US manufacturer, Hearth and Home, with a very realistic woodburning flame.

My favourite medium-size stands belonged to Continental Fires, Flamerite and Petra Hellas.

Well-known for marketing the range of Barbas fires, since the last show Continental has added the Bellfires brand. The stand was an outstanding example of how to combine two brands in one space and Keith Arbuthnot – despite having lost his glasses – was an enthusiastic guide. The Barbas Vento multifuel and gas fires are very attractive, particularly the corner versions. The pick of the Bellfires range was the Jersey suite.

If you were seeking an example of 'less is more' in terms of stand design there was no need to look any further than the superb room setting in the centre of the Flamerite stand. The colour scheme was brown leather with neutral or green accessories which together provided an excellent showcase for the Sans Sino wall mounted electric fire. The room setting also drew attention to the rolling presentation on the large format plasma screen above the fire.

Some visitors may have noticed that this year Hearth and Home clashed with the World Cup! If you're going to theme your stand to coincide with an event like the World Cup it has to be done wholeheartedly and Petra Hellas really went to town. The sales team wore England kit; the whole stand was framed by goalposts and netting; and, 'specials' had been manufactured incorporating the cross of St George. It was bordering on kitsch, but it reinforced the key messages that all their products are manufactured in the UK and they can produce striking etched and inlaid micro marble fireplaces

Best stand for a newcomer was the eye-catching black format created by Amicas

Fires which displayed the company's electric fires and suites to fine effect.

Stone and marble fireplaces accounted for a large number of the stands, and it was striking how international this aspect of the industry has become. Marble Creations used Italian and India Marble; KM Creation imported from Pakistan and India. Marbelina sourced product from Iran and, I believe, was unique in combining glass and marble to create highly original fireplace designs. Global Marble and Granite emphasized the potential additional revenue which could be generated if retailers sold slips with each fireplace. On the Monday of the show, I tried on several occasions to speak to Tim Small on the FF Marble stand but his team was always busy – so I assume he had a successful exhibition.

There were some exceptional limestone fireplaces this year on the Calder Masonry and Wessex Stone Fireplaces stands – both companies with a stonemasonry background. The Wharfe fireplace from Calder is a large, imposing, traditional design which remains one of their bestsellers. In addition to their limestone fireplaces, Wessex also displayed a beautiful honed marble fireplace which stood out amongst the many polished examples in the show. Newman Fireplaces has opened new manufacturing facilities in Portugal and has also established a new company, New Image Fireplaces, specialising in micro agglomerate and natural marble.

My favourite use of natural materials was the slate hole-in-the wall fire surround on the JIG stand, a company better known for its reproduction cast iron fireplaces. This year JIG also displayed some outstanding reproduction cast iron radiators – similar to the ones I recall from town halls and large Edwardian properties.

Many people squirm at the thought of incorporating gimmicks on stands to attract customers – but one of the aims of exhibiting is to maximise your 'share of time' with key visitors. Gimmicks, or attractions, also help add interest to visually mundane products or intangible services. 'Gastec at CRE', the testing and compliance specialists, had a table football game, and several exhibitors handed out footballs as a promotional gift. The Daddy of them all, however, was the golf simulator on the Specflue stand. From my experience, the simulator was in constant use and, according to Bill Garratt, bought the Specflue team the time to tell customers about their products, including the new comprehensive CD.

Specflue was one of many companies at the show selling flue pipes, cowls and similar fireplace components. There is a temptation on such stands to display as much product as possible; the danger is the stand risks looking like a market stall. Colt Cowls overcame this with a very smart display of their products on plinths. Peter Stedman explained that whilst Colt still designs its cowls in-house, all manufacturing is now done overseas. According to Peter this has enabled Colt to achieve the double-whammy: increased quality and more competitive pricing. John Hortop from Brewer Cowl explained that his company manufactured a lot of specials for clients. Amongst the standard range of products was a very attractive new design of stainless steel spark arrestor which could be fitted to chimneys ranging in diameter from 6" to 10".

The market for fires and fireplaces appears to be going through a rather sticky sales period at present. To combat this, retailers can improve their marketing, seek to increase the monetary value of each sale, and look to sweat their floorspace by displaying new associated product ranges. J Atherton included a wide range of stained glass fire screens alongside their traditional companion sets and log baskets. Mirrors – such as those displayed by Smart Supplies and Picturesque – are a favourite complementary product. An alternative may be to consider selling original artworks such as that on the striking Gifted stand. I suppose one issue with art is that beauty is very much in the eye of the beholder, and it may be difficult to judge where to pitch your offering.

Seasonality can be a problem in the fireplace market. Firebelly's garden stove is a novel way to add a related summer product to your range. A more radical opportunity was offered by WJ Courts in the form of its Purepsa range of spa baths. Traditionally associated with castings, Paul Crook explained that WJ Courts was now offering fireplaces, gas fires and electric fires under the brand names of Purestone and Pureglow – so in name at least, Purespa is natural extension! Peak Fire Surrounds has used its moulding expertise to create a very attractive range of hand basins and sinks under the Grantech name. The sinks can be complemented by stand alone oak vanity units.

Several exhibitors used marketing approaches which caught my eye. Oliver Morton from Royal Cozyfires coined the phrase 'age of enlightenment' to sum up the company's drive to be seen as a one-stop shop for retailers by offering full-suite packages. Stratique, a marketing company specifically targeting the fireplace sector, displayed touchscreens which could add value to retail displays. However, the award for the simplest, cheapest and most effective marketing tool goes to Truestone Castings who displayed testimonial letters from satisfied customers on their fireplaces to great effect.

Successful exhibition stands are those which combine outstanding products and outstanding personalities. I can't believe many visitors got past Graham Vialls on the Anglia stand without succumbing to his knowledge and enthusiasm for Bodart and Gonay's 'active soft heat system'. The same could be said for Andy Cox of CK Fires, a manufacturer of gas and electric fires which was only established last autumn.

The distaff side is represented by the vitality of Lynn Brereton of OER and Sue Magnall of Unex. Since October 2005, OER has represented Manhattan Style in the UK and when I spoke to Lynn on the Sunday she had already signed up 8 new stockists to add to their existing family of 60. OER also displayed its own extensive range of stone, marble and solid timber fireplaces. Unex uses Pyrolglow - a fibre-free, lightweight, high temperature material - to create shapes for use in gas and oil fires. It also manufactures realistic brick linings – President Boards - for fireplaces. The focal point of the Unex stand was a 4' branch manufactured from the Pyrolglow material.

In conclusion, there was one company which impressed me more than any other. Its stand team were welcoming, well-presented and had strong product knowledge. Its products were attractively displayed on a stand which was busy and vibrant.

The company was SinWi from Holland. To quote Peter Drucker for one last time: “Whenever anything is being done, I have learned it is being done by a monomaniac with a mission”. In Drucker’s terms, Frederik Sins – Director of SinWi – is a monomaniac with a mission. He exudes conviction; knows his products inside out; and when he says a product will arrive on Monday I believe him. Already strong in Ireland, SinWi represents fifteen different manufacturers of which four were displayed on their stand - visit their website [www.sinwi.com](http://www.sinwi.com) to find out more. Frederik’s recipe for success? “Keep it real. Do what you say.”