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Heating Innovations that Can Heat Up Home Sales

By
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Owning your own home is not only a joy it's also one of the most important financial investments most of us make in our lifetime. Every addition, renovation and improvement can affect the outcome of how well that investment pays off when we eventually sell it. Some improvements, like updating the kitchen or adding a bathroom, are almost guaranteed to increase resale value. Yet upgrading your home's heating system, which can be equally significant in raising the comfort level of every day living, is less likely to be noticed and appreciated by future buyers. It's a conundrum that's especially perplexing in times like these when energy costs are so high and energy efficiency is considered so important.

So what can home owners do to increase the comfort level of their houses today and enjoy a profitable return on their investments tomorrow? Actually, quite a lot, thanks to some sophisticated innovations that are available both for new construction and in older dwellings.

Home Inspections: Proof that buyers value energy efficient heating systems.

According to Linda Fogerty, broker for Coldwell Banker Residential in Tinley Park, one of the main reasons buyers are willing to pay for home inspections is to make sure that furnaces and hot water heaters are working well. Buyers also routinely ask to see the home owners' utility bills for the past year or two. After all, if they buy a home with a faulty heater they may be facing an immediate expense of thousands of dollars. Even if it's working, an older heater may cost them hundreds more to use than a newer model might.

And yet in a recent survey conducted by the National Home Builders Association, buyers indicated that they would only be willing to spend \$5,000 of home purchase money toward an energy efficient heating system - even if it saved them \$1,000 a year. The truth is a new furnace rarely sells a house in the same way as a new kitchen does. At best, it may keep an offer from being withdrawn or perhaps make the buyer more willing to pay the full asking price.

So just what improvements can you make to save money on your current energy bills, increase the comfort level of your home and assure the biggest possible profit when you sell? Let's consider some options.

Energy Efficient Furnaces to Save Money and Fuel.

Richard Dykstra, general manager of D. M. Dykstra & Company, one of largest heating contractors in the area and a winner of the coveted title "Carrier Distinguished Dealer," can testify that investing in a new furnace will pay for itself in utility savings in just a few years.

As Dykstra explains, today's heaters offer a minimum of two operating speeds, producing more heat when its needed and less when it's not. A thermostat monitors the room's warmth and how it compares to the programmed temperature that's been keyed in by the homeowner. During mild weather a slower speed is sufficient to maintain the temperature setting, but when days grow colder, the second stage automatically kicks in to provide the desired degree of warmth. Running for longer periods of time than older models, two-speed furnaces assure a more even flow of heat, quieter operation and increased fuel efficiency.

A more recent technological advance – the variable-speed blower – is an enhancement that makes a two-speed heater even more energy efficient and less expensive to run. Running on DC instead of AC current, a two-speed heater with a variable-speed blower uses only one-sixth of the electricity needed by other heaters. So it costs just \$35 a year to run compared to \$375 a system powered by AC current costs. Plus, a furnace with a variable-speed blower reduces monthly utility bills still further by assuring an Annual Fuel Utilization Efficiency (AFUE) rating of up to 96.6%.

Clearly, an energy-efficient heater can save you a significant amount on your monthly living expenses. But what if you're planning to move within a year or two? Is a new furnace, no matter how energy efficient, worth the expense? Obviously, if your heater doesn't work you need a new one in order to sell the house at all. If you're just concerned about increasing your system's overall performance, Mr. Dykstra suggests that you have a reliable contractor do a safety check of your furnace including taking an infrared video of the inside. This will give you a clear idea of the general health of your system. You may find it just needed a good cleaning to work more efficiently.

New or old, as Mr. Dykstra points out, heaters like any other large ticket purchase involving mechanical technology, should be serviced on a regular basis to keep them running at optimum efficiency. For heaters this means a checkup once a year and filters changed every few months.

Aeroseal: To improve the performance of your old furnace without replacing it

Scott Vanderwiel of Hawthorn Heating, Inc., Wauconda, IL, (also honored as a "Carrier Distinguished Dealer"), has another suggestion – consider sealing the duct work with Aeroseal.

Aeroseal is a new product that was developed under the sponsorship of the U. S. Department of Energy in the mid 90's. Originally invented by a scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory at the University of California, the technology is now leased through franchises. Nicor holds the franchise for Illinois and offers the process through Nicor Home Services and specially authorized heating and air conditioning dealers such as Hawthorn Heating and D.M. Dykstra.

Aeroseal was specifically created to solve a problem that costs American consumers \$5 billion every year – namely the loss of conditioned air from heaters and coolers through the ductwork. An average home has approximately 180 feet of ductwork. Typically, 20% of the energy used to heat air in cold weather and cool it when it's hot, is wasted because of cracks, splits and other openings these ducts. Sealing these leaks effectively automatically raises the heating and cooling efficiency of the whole system and reduces energy bills.

The Aeroseal process involves repairing the inside of all the ductwork with small dry adhesive particles by means of a patented computer-controlled injection machine. These particles are deposited directly on the edges of the holes in the ducts – bridging the openings and sealing them shut.

According to Scott Vanderwiel, the customer satisfaction surveys conducted after the installation of Aeroseal are so high, “they sound like the company made them up!” Indeed, the process has been deemed so successful that California has recently passed legislation making Aeroseal mandatory in new construction as of 2005.

If this example is followed in Illinois, an AeroSeal treated heating system could well be an enhancement most buyers would recognize and appreciate. So while the cost to seal the ducts in an average home with AeroSeal is considerable - approximately \$1500 - you should still be able to reap a return on your investment in lower utility costs now and greater resale value later.

Heated floors and driveway. A luxury for some, a necessity for others.

But furnaces and ductwork sealants are only the start of heating innovations that are now available to homeowners. For example, Robert Schutay of Realty Executive Ambassador, Orland Park has found that, “In more expensive homes, especially those selling in the high six figure range – amenities such as heated floors in the basement, garage, bathroom and kitchen are becoming more common and in demand.” Whether the warmth is provided by electric radiant heat or a hydronic system, heated floors in frequently used rooms such as the kitchen and bathrooms, offer an additional element of comfort to the homeowner’s lifestyle.

Of course, using heated floors in areas like the basement that are normally difficult to warm, effectively expands the living area of the house. And since today’s buyers put home offices and separate family rooms high on their list of preferences, a basement area that is truly comfortable all year around could well increase a home’s value.

Heated sidewalks and driveways for safety in every season.

Heated garages, driveways and sidewalks are other features found in higher-priced houses that are becoming increasingly popular among homeowners with more modest incomes. Scott Vanderwiel observes that, “older residents find these amenities especially appealing.”

These outdoor areas are also heated by a radiant system. Scott recommends a hydronic product by Wirsbo featuring special tubing placed every nine inches in a cement bed. Water runs through the tubes, heated by a separate boiler that's housed in a box about the size of a central air conditioning unit and placed outside or inside the garage. The heating unit turns itself on automatically in reaction to ice, snow or freezing rain hitting the area's surface. At a cost of \$10 to \$13 a square foot, installing a Wirsbo heating system in an average driveway of fifteen by twenty feet would run from \$3,000 to \$3,900.

The benefit? No need for shoveling off the driveway whatever the weather and an altogether safer environment for those most likely to suffer a fall on a slippery surface.

Remember, whatever work you decide to have done on your heating system, there are three elements to keep in mind: The initial cost to install and maintain it, the additional value it adds to your property and the competence of your heating contractor. When you are confident about your decision in all three areas, installing a heating innovation should be a truly hot investment.

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