

FROM THE FIELD

Product Support

BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Many years ago, when I was first learning how to pipe and install boilers, I often enlisted the help of Eddie Joyce. Eddie owned a small supply house in Falls Church, Va., called Capitol Hydronics.

At the time, I worked at Arlington Heating and we were primarily a forced air company. On the rare occasion I would run across a hot water boiler, I would sketch out the existing boiler and piping, measure the house for a heat loss calculation, get rating plate information, pump information, and note the type of radiation. This was long before cell phone cameras or even digital cameras. If I needed photos, I used a Polaroid camera sparingly, as the film was so expensive.

I would then head over to Eddie's office. We would do a manual heat loss using the old $I=B=R$ long form. Eddie would specify a boiler, pump, specialties, and PVF. I would call the office, get a PO, and order the complete system. Eddie would either hand-sketch a piping diagram, or go into his collection of drawings in a three-ring binder and print me a copy. I could not do these jobs without his help, as I had no idea what I was doing. Eddie gave me the confidence to take on these jobs with no experience, as I knew he would be there to help me out if I got into a jam.

Eddie's "go-to" boiler at the time was the old A. O. Smith HW series copper boiler. I put in a lot of these boilers. They even had an option for a Honeywell Magic-Heet modulating gas valve long before the advent of modulating boilers. Now these boilers were more expensive than the typical cast iron boilers available at the time (late 1980s), but Eddie's design and support made the additional cost well worth it.

After installing several boilers, I gained a false sense of confidence riding Eddie's coattails. To quote an old-timer who I worked with at the time, I was "wearing his feathers." I hardly had a clue what I was doing but it was easy when you were sitting on the knee of a master with 40 plus years of experience. Based on this false confidence, I sold a job in Alexandria, but rather than use Eddie's design support and more expensive copper boiler, I sold a plain-vanilla cast iron boiler that I got at a much lower price from our forced air equipment supplier.

This supplier only sold the boiler. They did not sell pipe, valves, pumps, or other hydronic specialties. They did not have a hydronics man on staff to support the boiler sales. They only sold you the box. But, they had a good price. You know where this is going.

I sold the job, installed it, and managed to botch up the installation any and every way possible. My confidence in my ability to do this job far exceeded my ability to deliver. I wired up the controls wrong. The system would not work properly and the client refused to pay. Looking back, I don't blame them a bit. After multiple call backs, I still could not get it to work properly. I was feeling the heat from the client, from my boss and from our bookkeeper when my client still had not paid. I could not ask for help from the supply house where I purchased

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the boiler as they had no technical support for hydronic systems. I was running out of options.

I swallowed my pride and went to my last option. I called Eddie Joyce and asked him if he would meet me at the site. I did not have the balls to tell him I did not buy the boiler from him. He would know soon enough. He readily agreed and we set up an appointment.

Eddie carefully walked the basement and studied my mess of a boiler installation. He knew instantly he did not sell this boiler but if he was angry or upset, he did not show it. He sketched in his notebook, traced out the wiring, made notes, all without showing any emotion. Meanwhile, all I felt was intense shame. What I did was not right. How could I have done this to someone who gave me his No. 1 resource? He shared his time and expertise with me and helped me gain the knowledge to install complex heating systems. How could I betray his trust for a few dollars saved on a less expensive boiler? I still remember that morning 25 plus years ago as if it was yesterday. I never made that mistake again.

We went to a coffee shop around the corner where Eddie gently pointed out my piping mistakes and sketched out the proper control wiring schematic. To his credit, he never mentioned the fact that he did not sell me the boiler. I would like to think he could sense my regret and that lecturing me would not make me feel any worse than I already did.

I was thinking of that morning so long ago as I walked the basement of a bungalow in Arlington on a Saturday morning a few weeks ago. The local rep had referred me to a problem job. The boiler was a Viessmann Vitodens 200; in my opinion, the finest hot water boiler made. Only this one wouldn't work. I stopped noting the installation issues when I came to the realization that Sawzall Surgery was the only way to save this one.

I started asking the owner questions. Where was the original installer? Who designed this system? Why was there no hydraulic separator (low loss header)? Where was the supply sensor? These were but a few of the issues that jumped out at me.

I eventually got the answers to my questions. The

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owner bought the equipment on the internet from an out of town supplier and had a local company install it. The problem was that the order was not complete. Pieces were missing. In addition, the local company had zero training or support on this sophisticated boiler. The results were predictable and I politely declined the job. The only way I would take it on was to remove it and re-install it to Viessmann specifications and industry standards.

By this time, the owner had phoned the local Viessmann distributor, the local sales rep as well as factory technical support. I can sum this up quickly. A very quick way to bankruptcy is to provide product support and warranty support on products you did not sell. A balance sheet with expenses but no sales is not long for this world. I also wonder how a manufacturer can provide technical support for a DIY homeowner when professional companies have taken the time to learn their products through local seminars as well as factory training classes.

I have come to realize that the client places the value on the box. As boilers are applied products, this value is misplaced. It is not a refrigerator or

washing machine that is simply plugged in. The value is 100 percent dependent on the skill and experience of the practitioner.

When my clients ask about online resources to review the products I

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recommend, I instead advise them to research me as well as any other contractors they solicit bids from. There is not a product I sell that is not available in minutes at any of hundreds of online resources. Here is what is not available online: My 30 years of experience. My lead tech, Brian Golden's, experience and skill with a pipe wrench. To paraphrase an old quote, wisdom is gained from experience, and experience is gained

through bad decisions. Using that definition, I have plenty of experience.

The solution is to educate our clients to trust our ability and experience. You must be able to sell your expertise and ability. Don't identify your company by the products you sell. Instead, your skill and professionalism should be your identity. Explain to your clients that it is the practitioner that will make or break the installation, not the box on the back of the truck.

I personally no longer install any equipment or materials supplied by owners as it rarely goes well when there are product or warranty issues. Back when I did, I used a waiver or disclaimer that I had the owner sign to absolve me of any product or warranty liability. I did not create this document. I modified a form that I got from John Barba many years ago. I would be happy to share this form with any of my readers. E-mail me for a copy. ●

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