



Who will protect householders from the dodgy ‘green tech’ salesmen?

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In this month’s Soapbox Geoff Stow shares his personal reaction to how he has seen green technologies being sold, to householders anxious to improve the energy performance of their homes. His concern is that consumers are being left to the mercy of over-enthusiastic – and potentially downright dishonest – salesmen, when contemplating major investments. Where, he asks, is the reliable, and above all objective, advice?

Having run “green building” advice stands on behalf of AECB at the Homebuilding and Renovating Show in Birmingham and Grand Designs Live this year, I am increasingly convinced that the public is very badly short-changed when it comes to advice on “green” home technologies.

Running these stands doesn’t get the AECB any new members, but it does offer a service to an increasingly confused and, it would seem, deliberately misinformed public. Having done this for a few years I have noticed that as the so-called green technologies become more mainstream, the selling becomes pressured and more importantly, plain wrong.

For example, one couple I met were sold a system with a natural gas boiler and two air source heat pumps, both of which failed regularly, and failed completely after 15 months. I met a retired couple who were building a small extension; they had a gas central heating system already, but had been told that a ground source heat pump would be their best bet to heat the extension, rather than extending the existing heating system. Another couple were sold an air source heat pump system and had it delivered, only to be told that the grid would not allow it to be connected as the main was not capable of handling the load, and they would need to have a new main laid in at massive expense.

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Heat pump sellers were not the only ones to be mis-selling, but they were very noticeable. That said, a couple of the more reputable companies were very good in pointing out the importance of high levels of insulation and the advantages of using gas if you have it -- which made the issues more confusing for some people.

Some of the claims I saw or heard about seemed highly implausible. It is for example unlikely that two air source heat pumps will easily provide all the heating and hot water needs for a mansion with 6 en-suite bedrooms, as was suggested to one woman I met – and if they could, could the local transmission infrastructure cope? Do electrically heated windows really have an excellent U-value? Can you really have a CSH level 3 window? Can any solar panel really work at night?

Maybe this is what you should expect as the market “matures” and indeed I have heard some excellent presentations by some companies being very honest about how and where to use their product. But over-optimistic spin abounds, and as a result, someone wanting to do something worthwhile ends up buying something that performs way below their expectations.

The vast majority of people I spoke to were living in cold, underinsulated, solid-walled houses, in rural areas with limited access to fuels, and not wanting to use oil because of cost, delivery problems and risk of theft etc. Often these people were retired or on low incomes and spent a large part of the winter in cold damp rooms because they could not afford to heat them properly. So they thought if they went to a building show they would be able to look at what options were available.

So this is exactly the place that government funded agencies should be. It's an easy win, the clients come to you and will share the information with friends and neighbours. So where were they? A few years ago they did attend such events, but only to give away low energy bulbs and samples of insulating wallpaper.

Why were the national agencies not there with a range of experts offering one to one advice, fact sheets, materials, examples, publications, running seminars etc? People were desperate to find out what to do: they wanted to save money and to be greener, and were left to the tender mercies of dodgy salesmen (they were mostly men). If the funded agencies are not prepared to offer much needed high quality detailed impartial advice then perhaps the AECB needs to look at how it is provided -- or the government should pay us to do it for them!

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