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With Energy Star almost a given, manufacturers put more focus on the look of their windows

John G. Swanson
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FEATURE ARTICLE

The number of products carrying an Energy Star label and the number of companies that signed up for the government's R-5 program provide ample evidence of that energy efficiency is a high priority for window manufacturers. But more manufacturers are also saying good performance numbers are not enough in today's market.

"When people buy windows today, they expect them to be energy efficient," says Maureen Faccia, director of marketing for Milgard Windows & Doors. "The result is that style has become an increasingly important element in product consideration."

"Energy efficient, high quality products earn credibility with the contractor and in turn get us in the door with homeowners. Energy efficiency is the price of entry with windows. But design and options differentiate," states Matt Samson, director marketing for Harvey Building Products.

The typical vanilla product may still account for the majority of sales, but the higher-end consumer in the replacement, remodeling, and new home builder segments wants products to "maximize glazing areas, minimize sight lines, and be available with a full complement of hardware options and finish options," says Anthony Bartolini of Inline Fiberglass Ltd. Pointing to demand for SDLs, woodgrains and custom colors, he adds, "All this criteria is required above and beyond consumer demand for a highly energy efficient and durable system."



Vinyl window manufacturers such as Simonton have upgraded their options to include oak interiors and brushed nickel hardware.

The growing importance of window style is certainly not new. Wood window producers have been touting the look of their products and expanding consumer options for years—and they continue to do so. What may be most noteworthy today are shifts in the vinyl window business, where many manufacturers have added many more color and finish options in recent years. A sidebar on page xx highlights results from a survey of vinyl window manufacturers examining their growing use of decorative options.

"We don't sell as many plain windows as we did four or five years ago," reports Tyson Schwartz from Gorell Windows & Doors. He points to more colors, woodgrains and SDLs on his company's vinyl windows, noting that such options has enabled its dealers to gain access into more high-end neighborhoods. "I do believe there is an evolution in the look of vinyl windows," he adds. "It's different from even just a few years ago. There are new locking systems that eliminate the need for tilt latches giving the windows a cleaner look. There are softer sash designs to give windows a more aesthetically-pleasing look."

"The knowledge level among consumers about energy efficient windows and doors skyrocketed in 2009 and 2010 thanks to the federal energy tax credit," says Mark Savan, president of Simonton Windows. "Now—in addition to increasing comfort and lower energy bills—homeowners are seeing that vinyl windows can enhance the overall beauty of the home when stylized with various interior and exterior color options, grids and special features."



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"Homeowners do not want to sacrifice aesthetics for energy efficiency when they are choosing replacement windows for their home," agrees David Rascoe, president of Thermal Industries. "We are excited to offer homeowners more options that enable them to enhance their homes' beauty while improving comfort and energy savings."

The shift in the market is not limited to vinyl replacement windows, however. "We've see an increased emphasis on style, primarily among higher-end custom home builders," report Chris Pickering, vice president of marketing for Ply Gem Windows. "We've also seen mid-level home builders begin to move toward entry-level products with upgrade options." In addition to these trends, he notes that many competitively-priced products are incorporating premium technologies, and are available in a wider selection of styles.

"We see this trend as being primarily driven by the movement toward building smaller homes that are more energy efficient," Pickering continues. "Homeowners want to make a bigger impact with less square footage, while builders want to stand out in the marketplace by creating differentiated neighborhoods." That market view led the company introduce The Designed Exterior by Ply Gem, which brings together not only its windows, but its siding and stone products in a series of historically-inspired, architectural design collections of products, he adds.

Emphasis on Design

"The line between functionality and style continues to blur across all categories, but particularly in ones in which style has been an afterthought," states Milgard's Faccia. "Take cookware for example. Once simply functional, it is much more visible in homes today and the category has experienced a style explosion." Windows are getting more attention in recent years, she states, and one reason she suggests may be that women are playing a growing role in product selection.

"Consumers today simply expect more, especially when it comes to home improvement projects," Faccia continues. "Design trends have helped, as well. Hardware, trim, architectural highlights—all are helping to reshape how people look at windows and how they fit into their home's décor."

Part of the trend certainly comes from consumer demand, says Gorell's Schwartz, but there is also a need for replacement window dealers to be different. "I would say that the replacement industry is always trying to make windows look more aesthetically pleasing," he explains. "We work closely with our vendors on product design and options. And we certainly want to be more value added. By having some differentiation, it helps with the value added."

"Dealers have also driven demand for aesthetically pleasing, highly energy efficient windows," Pickering agrees. "Product lines in our Great Lakes Window brand are designed specifically for the dealer market, with unique features that differentiate them from other, more broadly distributed window lines." One element of that is ultrahigh performance, and he points to a new line windows his firm is introducing with an IG U-factor as low as 0.14. The line is also available with all the options homeowners are been asking for, he notes. "Following the trend toward personalized home styles, interior woodgrains, grilles and designer glass options are important to today's homeowners. And although white is still by far the most popular window color, we are seeing more interest in dramatic, darker colors such as red, architectural bronze and even black."

"Our windows now feature a broad range of design options—interior and exterior painted finishes and cladding, grids, interior and exterior trim, hardware finishes and even a screen that is more transparent," adds Harvey's Samson. Another reason all these options are required, he suggests, is the Web. "This is just another way the internet has transformed our business. Gone are the days when tin men offered two options and held control of all the information," he explains. "Now, consumers can go to the manufacturer's site and see all the options they offer, and then see what other homeowners say about the particular windows."

All these manufacturers credit technological developments for the many enhanced capabilities of windows—in terms of both energy performance and style. Consumers are opting for more colors, states Faccia, and one simple reason is the progress the industry has made on this front. She points to new powder-coat finishes formulated for Milgard's Essence fiberglass line, as well as a new line of color finishes it is offering for its vinyl products that now enable more choices.



Technological advances have helped expand exterior color options.

Advances in coating and laminating technology are making dark colors available on many different material types now, notes Pickering. He credits advancements in manufacturing processes in general for expanding the availability of options and the energy efficient performance, even in entry level product lines.

Energy Efficiency

Even with the increased emphasis on style and design options, these manufacturers agree that performance is still a key attribute for consumers and that they will expect even higher levels of

performance in the future. "Consumers today expect some level of energy efficiency to come standard, and these expectations continue to grow," says Faccia. "People go into the window buying process with the assumption that most, if not all, windows meet Energy Star requirements."

"Energy efficiency is still a major part of the decision," says Schwartz. "I do believe when homeowners see the Energy Star logo by one of our glass packages, they are confident in its energy performance." Noting that Energy Star is fairly commonplace now, he sees potential in the idea of Energy Star 'Super Star' program to provide greater energy performance differentiation in the future.

"Voluntary programs, such as Energy Star, still resonate with customers," Pickering agrees, but he sees many customers looking beyond those numbers too. "Many custom builders are early adopters of new technologies, and are demanding the highest possible energy efficiency from the products they choose. While Energy Star requires U-values in the .40 to .32 range—depending on the climate zone—many custom builders are requesting performance as good as .20 and below in order to meet their energy use and green building objectives.

Complete Package

As more manufacturers push the envelope of performance and expand their design options, it raises the stakes for all manufacturers, but it still provides opportunities. "The average vanilla consumer—for the lack of a better word—now has multitudes of options to select from and is more likely to consider manufacturers who offer more of a variety to their product line," states Inline's Bartolini. "From a manufacturing standpoint, all of these options and accessories can become somewhat overwhelming at first, but recognizing the shift can lead to increased sales."

"Windows have always been visible, but the emphasis on the look was placed more on what people did around their windows than what they did with them," concludes Faccia. Pointing to more vinyl colors, and the real wood interiors of Milgard's new fiberglass line, she sees newer technology allowing manufacturers to offer more in the way of window design.

"Our industry should not underestimate the power of product design and aesthetics," says Samson. Harvey as enjoyed strong results and growth with its many design options, he reports. "This shouldn't come as a surprise to our industry, do most people purchase the most fuel efficient car or the one that best blends efficiency, style and price? This analogy works for most product classes, windows are no exception."



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