

Recycling thermostats: good for business and great for the environment

By Mark Tibbetts

Looking for an easy, extremely low-cost program to add value to your customer relationships?

And what if you found out that the program is simple to administer, will make your business more eco-friendly, and demonstrates that you want to protect the environment? What would you say then?

If you said yes to either or both questions, consider acting as a collection point for used mercury thermostats. We're all familiar with the product — manufacturers produced and HVAC wholesale distributors sold millions of them dating back to the 1950s.

Each mercury thermostat contains between 3 and 12 grams of elemental mercury and is likely the largest reservoir of mercury in homes today. While safe when in service, the thermostats are a potential source of mercury pollution when disposed of in the trash.

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that works its way up the food chain. In its various forms, it can be harmful to human health and the environment. In fact, you are probably aware of mercury pollution. If you have young children, it is likely that you have seen warnings for pregnant women and children to limit consumption of tuna or other large saltwater species that often contain mercury. And if you fish recreationally, you may be familiar with the consumption advisories likely posted by your state's fish and game department.

The proper management of this waste is also a political issue in many states. Legislation has been introduced and passed in over 20 states banning the sale or installa-

tion, regulating the disposal or mandating the collection of waste mercury thermostats. In fact, nine states require all HVAC wholesale distributors to collect waste thermostats by law.

Industry solution

Thirteen years ago, Honeywell, White Rodgers, and General Electric voluntarily formed a not-for-profit corporation to address the proper management of waste mercury thermostats. Now supported by 28 manufacturers and over 1,000 HVAC wholesale distributor locations in 46 states, Thermostat Recycling Corp. has

TRC provides HVAC wholesale distributors with sturdy plastic collection containers for a nominal, one-time fee, currently assessed at \$25 per container. TRC then assumes all costs to transport and recycle waste mercury thermostats.

All a collection point needs to do is promote the program to its customers, monitor the collection of thermostats, and when the container is full return to TRC using the provided pre-paid label. Once TRC receives the container, program staff empties it, inspects the container for damage, and returns it to the collection location to start



recovered over a million waste mercury thermostats.

That's more than 4.8 tons of mercury diverted from the solid waste stream and potentially, the environment.

TRC runs a simple, easy-to-manage reverse distribution program.

As Dan O'Donnell, of Honeywell and chairman of TRC says, "The founding members of TRC recognized the need to design a program that wasn't going to be a hassle for our customers to participate in — and that is exactly what we have achieved."

the process again.

"With the help of the Thermostat Recycling Corp.'s program, the U.S. Air Conditioning Distributors set up mercury thermostat recycling collection bins at our locations to collect and recycle used mercury thermostats from HVAC contractors. The ease of TRC's recycling program made it a convenient way for any of our contractors to dispose of any brand mercury thermostat," said Tony Albers, product manager for U.S. Air Conditioning

Distributors. "Our model of raising customer awareness about recycling mercury thermostats is easily adaptable by other HVAC distributors across the country and with the help of the TRC they can easily implement similar outreach programs to actively raise the awareness about recycling mercury thermostats. Currently nearly 25 percent of all mercury thermostats recycled in California are by USACD through the Thermostat Recycling Corp.'s program."

Value for contractors

Most HVAC contractors recognize they shouldn't throw mercury thermostats in the trash. In fact, many states specifically require the contractor that removed it from service to recycle it — they can't even leave it at the customer's premise.

Managing waste thermostats can be a hassle and expensive, particularly for small HVAC contractors. Old mercury thermostats have no residual value and hazardous waste firms can charge upwards of \$15 to properly dispose of a single thermostat. Some contractors, not knowing what to do with them, still toss them in the trash while others hang on to the thermostats, accumulating a big box in the corner of the shop — likely a violation of federal and state law.

By participating in TRC, a HVAC wholesale distributor provides a convenient way for contractors to properly dispose of waste thermostats. All a contractor needs to do is hang on to the thermostats that they remove from service and drop them off when they visit a participating location. Best of all, since manufacturers are assuming all

the recurring costs, it's free to both the contractor and collection point.

Promotion

Contractor awareness is what makes the program successful for both the collection points and TRC. TRC actively promotes the program through national and regional trade shows, industry publications, and partnering with industry groups like HARDI. TRC has found that participating distributors are often better positioned to promote the program, as they are the ones with the direct relationship with the contracting community.

To that end, TRC and HARDI have agreed to launch a strategic partnership. TRC and HARDI have agreed to work collectively on state implementation measures aimed at raising awareness of the TRC program, expanding the network of participants, helping HVACR distributors meet their regulatory compliance requirements where collection mandates exist, and increasing the number of thermostats recycled.

In support of this effort TRC is launching a new website and a downloadable marketing toolkit this week at HARDI's 2010 annual meeting. The toolkit gives participating collection points the materials they need to easily promote their affiliation with TRC and to let their customers know they accept mercury thermostats.

For more information on mercury thermostat recycling please visit www.thermostatrecycle.org.

Mark Tibbetts is director of recycling initiatives for the National Electrical Manufacturers Association.