



The Loft Series vent-free fireplace, shown with a decorative glass front, was displayed at the NPGA Southeastern Expo in Atlanta.

## Capturing a Piece of the Modern Fireplace Market

**T**he traditional fireplace with logs could eventually become a thing of the past. Instead, as urban lofts and condominiums have become more contemporary in recent years, more modern-style linear fireplace units are gaining in popularity.

“We see that trend starting to happen in the rural areas,” said Nick Bauer, vice president of sales and product development and fourth-generation co-owner of Empire Comfort Systems (Belleville, Ill.) “We decided we wanted to capitalize on rural areas catching up with the urban areas. The homeowner is looking for something different, something that their friends do not have.”

To capture that market, Empire this past March introduced its own brand

of fireplaces and burners with “unconventional styling”—the Loft Series. The Loft fireplace works as a vent-free fireplace or as an insert, and the Loft burner

can be installed as an insert in an existing fireplace, just as you would a gas log. But Loft is just a portion of Empire’s product offerings, which include space heaters and outdoor grills. All of Empire’s products run on either propane or natural gas, and the company manufactures all of its propane and natural gas products out of its 500,000-sq-ft manufacturing and shipping facilities in Belleville.

The company has been selling products that run on propane throughout most of its history. Empire has been a family-owned busi-



**Nick Bauer, vice president of sales and product development, represents the continuation of more than 78 years of Bauer family involvement at Empire Comfort Systems. Bauer’s great-grandfather, Henry Bauer, founded the company; his grandfather, Edmund Bauer, served as vice president and treasurer; and his father, Brian Bauer, currently serves as chairman.**



**Joe Brueggemann, vice president, sales management, discusses the new Loft vent-free fireplace with Bill Clemons, product engineer.**

ness since 1932, evolving out of a small sheet metal shop founded in Belleville in 1911 by Nick Bauer's great grandfather, Henry Bauer. The family later began making stoves, but almost by accident. Henry made a gas stove for himself, and his friends eventually asked him to make stoves for them. In 1919, Henry and a business partner patented a furnace that Henry designed. They officially formed Empire Stove in the 1930s. The company's involvement with propane continued to the late 1970s, when it began selling space heaters.

Bauer noted that Empire got into the fireplace business in the 1990s, once the space heating business began to decline. In 2001, the company bought the Broilmaster Premium Gas Grill line. The addition of this line helped keep employees working during the off-peak season for heaters and fireplaces.

Nick and his sister Jane Bauer represent the fourth generation for the family-owned business. Their parents, Brian and Pamela Bauer, are co-chairmen.

"We've always been in the propane channel, whether it is propane kitchen stoves, or the stove ranges we got into," Bauer stated. "The gas floor furnaces that we used to ship a lot of in the '50s and '60s all ran on propane. You had your gas circular heaters, and we even did air conditioners that ran on propane." The company still sells space heaters, but as the market for fireplaces has grown, Empire has placed a great deal of emphasis on that market. The fireplace market experienced extensive growth in the 1970s and 1980s. Fireplaces began looking a lot better, too.

"Would you rather pay the same amount of money for a space heater with little aesthetics in the corner of your room, or do you want a fireplace with flame and logs that can be the focal part of your room?" Bauer remarked. "Zone heating is what we've always done since 1932, and zone heating holds up during a recession because it's more efficient and more heat for your money. But the product has shifted from space heaters to fireplaces purely because of aesthetic reasons."

The Loft Series is just one product that Empire sells to address the growing fireplace market. In 2007, Empire introduced the Mantis, which Empire describes as the



**Mantis fireplaces undergo preparation for the final assembly line at Empire. Mantis is a 90%-plus efficient fireplace.**

world's only 90%-plus efficient direct-vent fireplace on the market. Direct-vent fireplaces are typically about 60% to 70% efficient, meaning they lose 30% to 40% of the propane's available energy during use, Bauer noted. He added that the Mantis is so efficient that it is vented with PVC pipe. Empire in 2009 updated the style for the Mantis brand, and will introduce a contemporary style next March.

Bauer has noticed that propane dealers have been receptive toward the contemporary fireplace styles. Marketers located in medium-sized towns near larger towns have been looking more for contemporary styles. Bauer pointed out that his company decided to offer products in the \$500 to \$700 range to appeal to more value-conscious customers who can't afford \$3000 to \$5000 fireplaces during these challenging economic times. "The consumer is definitely trading down, but they want to get the same quality," Bauer stated. Empire is looking to offer quality products, with modern aesthetics and the best warranties, at value prices.

Adapting to changing consumer needs is important to staying in business for a long time, and Bauer likes to talk about his family's longevity in the gas-fired products business. In addition to being fourth-generation owners, he and his sister Jane are the fourth generation to exhibit at the National Propane Gas Association's Southeastern Convention. This past April marked the 62nd consecutive year that Empire has exhibited at the show. "Two years ago, we were the second-longest-running exhibitor. We first exhibited at the propane show in 1948," he stated. He also mentioned Freeman Gas, a South Carolina propane dealer that has been doing business with Empire for more than 50 years. Brooks Gas in Missouri was also a customer of Nick and Jane's grandfather, Edmund Bauer.

"What I notice—from the manufacturers to the distributors to the dealers—it is a family business," he commented. "Most of our customers we've been doing business with for 10, 15, 20, 30, 40 years in some cases. It shows how awesome the propane channel is, how family-oriented it is, and why it's such a great industry."

—Daryl Lubinsky