

Twin-Star's *Electric Fireplaces Heat Up the Marketplace*

by SHARON SANDERS

Electric fireplaces have long been regarded by hearth retailers as purely decorative luxuries. Over the past 15 years, however, the electric fireplace has undergone a transformation that would impress even the most diehard hearth purists.

With the advent of new technology, this often-misunderstood appliance has become an easy, cost-effective way to add ambience to any room in one's home, in addition to becoming an efficient zone-heating source. Everyone—from the apartment dweller to the homeowner—is warming up to the idea of today's modern electric fireplaces, and sales are reflecting that fact more every year. As a result, hearth retailers are dedicating more of their precious showroom space than ever before to electric fireplaces.

Twin-Star International Inc., manufacturer of ClassicFlame electric fireplaces (based in Delray Beach, Florida), has been a pivotal player in the evolution of electric fireplaces, stoves, and heaters. It has poured a tremendous amount of effort into research and development, creating a fresh niche and a new generation of customers for electric hearth products. The company started, in 1996, as a manufacturer of heirloom-quality home furniture.

A few years later, CEO Mark Asofsky (and his partner, at that time) began looking into the business of electric fireplaces. They recognized, almost instantly, that all of the major players in the electric-fireplace business were heater or appliance companies that possessed little or no knowledge of how to showcase their products. "The companies would put their fireplaces in a simple wood cabinet that did nothing, visually or functionally, for the fireplaces," Asofsky says.

A NEW ERA

As a company with furniture roots, Twin-Star saw an opportunity to take electric fireplaces to the next level by producing heirloom-quality furniture and mantels to frame the electric inserts. "It was the perfect marriage. We were able to turn a simple fireplace into the focal point of a room," Asofsky says.

The company quickly caught up with its competitors, in terms of fireplace technology, and it has become a leader and innovator in the electric-appliance category. Twin-Star created the ClassicFlame brand in 2004 and began selling its fireplaces to specialty hearth retailers.

ClassicFlame quickly pulled away from the pack when it became the first manufacturer to develop and use LED technology in its fireplace inserts. LEDs were able to create

a realistic flame effect that had never before been seen from an electric fireplace. Alexia Rouquette, director of marketing and public relations, says, "I've witnessed many people walking up to our fireplaces and actually trying to warm their hands over the flames."

LEDs make a huge difference in energy savings as well. A typical electric fireplace uses incandescent candle-labra light bulbs, which require up to 120 watts just to operate the flame effect. LEDs use only 11.2 watts. Rouquette explains that energy savings vary, depending on a number of factors—including how often the fireplace is used, its temperature setting, and the local cost of electrical power.

"What is unequivocally true, however, is that turning down a home's heating system and using a zone heat source—only in the room you're in—can save money overall," she says. All of ClassicFlame's electric fireplaces can be used with or without heat and are perfect for zone heating. "The power that an electric fireplace is drawing from the outlet, except for the watts for the flame effect, is all converted to heat, so the cycle is 100% energy efficient," she adds.

NO LIMITS

Now that electric fireplaces can rival their wood-burning and gas cousins, consumers are taking notice and looking for opportunities to incorporate them into their living spaces. "With electric, the romance of a fireplace is possible in a bedroom, den, playroom, kitchen, and even a man cave," Rouquette says, "without the mess, danger, venting, and negative environmental impact."

She adds that many homeowners who already have wood-burning or gas fireplaces in their living rooms are interested in electric fireplaces as well—because they can easily add them to other rooms that lack fireplaces, for a fraction of the cost. She says, "Especially in a housing market like the one we have right now, it is really one of the most cost-effective ways to change the whole look and feel of any room."

ClassicFlame was founded on the premise of marrying fine furniture and electric fireplaces, and it continues to innovate in that area. A few years ago, the company began



Top: ClassicFlame combines heirloom-quality furniture with electric fireplace inserts to create a beautiful, functional focal point in any room.



Left: The Baxter console is a consumer favorite that has been recognized for its design innovation.

putting its fireplace inserts into media consoles; today, these combinations are one of its best-selling products.

The consoles include a fireplace insert, electronic-component storage, wire management, vented shelves or back panels, and storage for CDs and DVDs. "Media consoles are the modern alternative to the huge armoires of the past," Rouquette says.

ClassicFlame introduced one of its newest consoles, the Baxter, at the 2011 HPBExpo in Salt Lake City, Utah. The unit artfully combines the functionality of a media console with an electric fireplace insert and a thermoelectric wine cooler. It also has solid-wood stemware racks, adjustable shelves, and locking cabinets to protect wine and entertainment collections. The Baxter was a finalist in the furniture category for the 2011 Housewares Design Award (from *HomeWorld Business*, the New York International Gift Fair, and the International Housewares Association), which recognizes product innovation.

"We feel that we are perfecting the art of functional furniture," Rouquette explains. "By taking our electric inserts and putting them into high-quality furniture, we have raised the bar once again in the electric category, which has become our passion."

ClassicFlame recently partnered with Duraflame (Stockton, California) to create a line of electric stoves and small home heaters, as well as an infrared quartz heater that is generating a huge buzz (and huge sales). The PowerHeat by Duraflame is resonating with consumers because it

can heat a space of up to 1,000 square feet using evenly distributed, radiant heat.

It is small but powerful, at 15 inches wide, 20 inches deep, and 17 inches tall (about the size of a small side table). It is sold as a cash-and-carry item through specialty hearth retailers, hardware stores, and a number of other outlets. The company sees the demand for this product continuing to grow, with no signs of slowing.

In 2011, ClassicFlame is committed to partnering with specialty retailers to increase exposure and consumer awareness for electric fireplaces. The company has developed an in-store display, called an H-Wall, that retailers can use to showcase up to eight fireplaces.

"We're often asked to help our retailers merchandise our fireplaces, and this is a great way to create an impressive display. All they have to do is power up the wall and then plug the fireplaces right into it. There's no need to run a ton of cords across the floor or from the ceiling," Rouquette says.

The company also offers customized literature and point-of-sale materials to major customers at no cost. It places a large emphasis not just on the satisfaction of ClassicFlame's own customers, but on the satisfaction and overall experience of retailers' customers as well.

ClassicFlame is excited to be a part of the future of electric fireplaces. Going forward, it plans to continue to put money behind research and development so that it can continue to manufacture the most cutting-edge technology (in addition to designing beautiful electric fireplaces). Rouquette says, "Consumers will continue seeing more on-trend, high-quality, functional products from ClassicFlame and Twin-Star in the coming years." ■