



# A SMART INVESTMENT



## CUSTOM AIR HANDLING EQUIPMENT BEATS MODULAR IN THE LONG RUN

When facility managers are considering the purchase of air handling equipment, they face the choice of a modular unit versus a custom-designed unit.

And when making that decision, there are several factors to weigh, including serviceability, durability and cost.

“With custom designs, the unit is designed specifically to fit the space and the application requirements of a particular business,” says Val Fenti, northeast regional sales manager for Air Enterprises. “A modular unit typically requires the customer to modify the space where the unit will be located in order to suit the equipment and serve the application.”

Space to service air handling parts such as motors, fans and coils is also required, so when making choices, the facilities manager must assess how much room will be available to work in the area in which the unit will be housed.

Fenti cites a recent client example. About a year ago, Air Enterprises sold a custom unit to a company that had also considered a modular unit. The modular unit it was considering was 12 feet wide and 7½ feet high, dimensions that would have left very little space in the room to service the unit. But the room had a high ceiling, so Air Enterprises offered to create a custom unit that was 8 feet wide and 11 feet high, gaining the company 4 feet of space to service the equipment. But there was an additional complication in that the equipment would have to be brought in through an 8-foot-tall doorway. Air Enterprises overcame this impediment by bringing in the unit in 3-foot sections and field-building it.

Because the custom price was close to the price of the modular unit, the owner agreed to the purchase.

“He said, ‘If I can gain 4 feet in service space, I’ll pay the extra 10 percent,’” Fenti says.

When making a purchase, facilities managers must also consider the durability of an air handling unit. Modular units are typically made of galvanized steel and last an average of 20 years before rust starts to take its toll. Custom units made of aluminum, which is more durable and lasts 40 to 50 years, mitigate the need for replacement.

“I’m working on a job right now where the equipment is going to be buried in the center of the building,” Fenti says. “The passageways to get it in are narrow; the doors are 3 to 4 feet wide and 7½ feet high. To install equipment in there and then have to replace it in 20 years would be very disruptive, and the owner would basically have to shut down the facility just to change out the air handling equipment.”

While custom units are typically priced higher than modular units, they often are able to make up the difference within a few years because they are more energy efficient. Fenti says that Air Enterprises was contacted about a year and a half ago by a large manufacturer that had been leaning toward going the less-expensive route and installing a modular unit. However, it was willing to consider a custom unit.

“We showed them that, even though our price was 40 percent higher, their payback would be less than three years because they would save 20 percent in energy costs compared to the modular unit, and they would be getting a unit that was all aluminum, versus galvanized steel.”

In the end, it was an easy choice, and Air Enterprises landed the order. ▲