

An empty space on the label

There's an empty space on the label – the label which the European Commission has designed to tell us what they think we need to know about the environmental performance of appliances.

Visit any white goods or kitchen equipment store in the European Union and you should see that the stock has environmental labelling, but with some differences, depending on the function of the appliance. For example, a refrigerator does not require water usage to be given, whilst a washing machine does. The upper part of the label is adorned with brightly coloured bands for grades of energy efficiency, whilst down at the bottom is the empty space, waiting for noise levels. Sometimes there are two empty spaces, as for a washing machine, giving the opportunity for washing and spinning noise to be shown separately.

With the exception of some of the refrigerators, the noise information is missing. But, as noise is given as the A-weighted sound power level in watts re 1pW, perhaps its absence is less confusing to the customer than its presence would be! What does a numerical value of the sound power of, say, 40 dBA, mean to the customer who is trying to decide on a machine? What does it mean to them if one appliance is labelled as 39 dBA and another as 40dBA? Not a lot, except that one is a little noisier than the other (but by an amount which it would not be easy to

detect by ear). There is no explanation to the customer of what the labelling means, and they are unlikely to have much help on this from the sales staff.

Sound power is a difficult concept for the uninitiated. They do not understand the way in which the sound will be affected by the installation and by the acoustic environment of their kitchens; that the sound pressure level will be numerically lower than the sound power level. Of course, for similar spectra, the A-weighting gives a league table of appliance noises, but two different machines, for example freezer and washing machine having the same dBA levels on their labels, will not sound the same.

There are circumstances in which the fixation on A-weighting is unhelpful. And this is one of them. Some American appliance manufacturers give appliance noise in loudness (sones), also difficult for the customer to interpret, but it does avoid the situation in which, by pushing more of the noise into the low frequencies, the A-weighted level can be reduced, whilst the perceived loudness actually increases!

No doubt, when the noise labelling is fully operational, manufacturers will be vying to shave off a decibel or two, hoping that this might swing the customer over to them. Let's hope they don't do it by manipulating the A-weighted measurement to their advantage.

EU directive

A draft noise directive could have serious effects on concerts, nightclubs and discos – even putting some out of business, according to HOTREC, an organisation representing the European leisure industry. The European parliament notes that service employees are often at greater risk from excessive noise than workers in manufacturing industries. At issue is whether staff should wear ear protection. Bar staff wearing ear muffers? “The Noise Directive goes too far,” says Liz Lynne, the British Liberal Democrat MEP.

noise notes