

Did I ever tell you
about the time

Mikko Iivonen

Somehow, people who have never met Mikko Iivonen still know about him. They hear about the Director of R&D, Research and Technical Standards in Rettig ICC, or read about him, or see him in the new LTR campaign. He is perhaps the most unlikely figure that you could think of to front a marketing campaign. In person he is quietly spoken, unassuming and modest, and seems an equal mix of academic and technical obsessive. So is he comfortable being front-of-house with the new LTR campaign?

"I don't mind, I was asked and I said yes," Mikko replies, matter-of-factly. "My role is to bring the truth to the market, and this is a way to share information so, yes, this is part of my role too. The truth is, the 15% idea is very good, but it is challenging to focus on just one figure. Of course all buildings are different, with different insulation, heating requirements and so on. The 15% is a rule of thumb, and the savings to be gained can often be higher. But we thought it was time to make a stand, to explain the figures, lay out the science. And that's my department, so to speak. So I didn't mind putting my face with the facts."

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In the heating industry there has traditionally been a 'friendly rivalry' between underfloor heating and panel radiators. The polarising effect of the issue once meant that you could only recommend one or the other, rarely both. The fact that Purmo Radson supplied (and now manufactures) both systems was once a source of some amusement and much lively discussion throughout the company. But as accepted wisdom now recommends both systems as the ideal choice, where does this leave the much-heralded 15% campaign, and the ProRadiator research before it? "The science stands," affirms Mikko. "The research is still valid, the proof is still proof," he says. "Radiators are still better at utilising heat gains, and they exhibit smaller heat losses. Over the past 30 years there has been widespread manipulation of consumers, from a marketing standpoint, about the benefits of underfloor heating. Comfort, that was the big push, always highlighting this by contrasting it with negative points about radiators. But now in low energy buildings, the marketing has changed; now they are being pushed in terms of energy efficiency."

The best way to challenge a scientist is to make an unsupported claim. Back in 2008, Mikko and a group of researchers joined forces to investigate some of the claims being made against radiators. The results are well documented in 'Pro Radiator', a fact-based defence that charts two years collecting 140 arguments from the field. To cut a long story short, it finally laid a lot of myths to rest and showed a number of remarkable differences between heat emitters in low-energy

buildings, using low water temperatures. The research recently evolved into the '15% energy saving' campaign "...which has made things easier for the sales force," says Mikko. "We hear a lot of positive feedback that the research is now easier to grasp, the facts are easier to explain," he says. "Which is of course great news. And for customers who also want to sell underfloor, we of course can offer that too."

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF SALES

Rettig ICC has a classic front office/back office structure, with a split between sales and marketing on one side and purchasing, production, logistics and operations on the other. Perhaps the only person who operates on both sides simultaneously is Markus Lengauer, CEO. But Mikko Iivonen has a history with sales that stretches back to the early days in his student career.

"I was 20, in the Helsinki University of Technology," (HUT) explains Mikko, "studying HVAC and mechanical industrial production technology. And I took a summer job in Southwest Finland in a radiator factory, welding radiators the old fashioned way, by hand. At this time I also helped the sales guys, helped them plan heating systems, and that

gave me a really good practical background, a real perspective on how sales people work, what they need, and how they think. So I have always appreciated that they need clear facts to work, and that was how I could also help. While I was doing this, I was working as a researcher in HUT, teaching HVAC to younger students, and then in 1984 I was invited by the owner of Lämpölinja to join his company in Finland. Soon after this, Rettig ICC acquired the company, and I have been part of the family since then," smiles Mikko.

The story behind the story of the 15% campaign

So how does a technical mind express itself in a world of mass production? "Ah, it fits very well. Of course, when I was young I was in love with engines, taking them to pieces, putting them together, and applying the same logic, the same curiosity to heating elements. This is why I began my study, to find out how these things came into being, and why." The natural progression led Mikko

to the product development side of the heating world, where design meets technology. "Yes, I was involved with integrated valve systems," he says, "and the radiator convection fin, its form and positioning, I have always had a fascination for such design questions."

KEY CHOICES STRIKE A REAL CHORD IN LIFE

His story could have been a lot different though, if Mikko's other early love had blossomed. "Ah yes," he laughs. "The Music Academy." This is a small glimpse between the lines of a modest man's technical CV. "I was also going to be a musician," explains Mikko. "Keyboards, heavy rock and Hammond organ, and, naturally, I was in a band and, of course, we were going to be great, like my heroes Uriah Heep and Led Zeppelin. But that was back in the past, when I had hair," he says, "and maybe we weren't really that great anyway. Besides, I'm very happy with the path I took. I have a

great family, two boys, and like every Finnish family we go on ski trails, in Summer we go to our cottage, and I'm also a sailor. And a golfer." It seems there is a lot more to the Director of R&D, Research and Technical Standards than first meets the eye. "Ah, there is much to tell," he smiles, "did I ever tell you about this time I was in a really successful advertising campaign?" ■