



Turn up the heat

Having warm, comfortable customers during the colder months of the year is the best way to keep your business sizzling. By Kerry Ramsey

Keeping your customers warm can be as easy as a wood heater pumping out warmth in the dining zone to offering woollen blankets in a large open space. The right heating, for both inside and out, depends on a number of factors—the size of the space, efficiency of the heating unit, environmental impact, budget and style. Even when the temperature plummets, however, Australian’s can’t resist dining al fresco.

“With the cost of rents today and the cost of what councils are charging for outdoor seating, restaurateurs can’t afford to have those areas empty,” says David Diamond of Climate Australia, a former restaurateur who now runs an innovative heating range. “You can’t have the outdoor areas empty for half the year so you have to make your customers feel comfortable.”

The popularity of outdoor dining is partly due to the implementation of smoke-free laws across the country. “If people want to have a cup of coffee and a cigarette, they’re going to be outside, even in the coldest months,” says Kevin Smith, managing director of Keverton Outdoor heating.

In-floor heating in the dining zone has also become a favourite device for architects who opt for polished concrete flooring,

particularly in restaurants with a hip, warehouse feel. Companies like ComfortHeat (www.comfortheat.com.au) can install in-slab cables into the concrete, releasing warmth 24 hours a day.

For a cosy ambience, wood heaters are a modern take on old-fashioned firewood, providing “a warmth no other energy source can rival”, according to Demi Brown of Australian Home Heating Association. Modern wood-burning heaters come as inbuilt appliances or can be freestanding, and feature a range of facades and mantels.

While electric or gas radiant heaters are popular to warm up outdoor areas (see opposite page), it’s also handy indoors, particularly near the entrance. “Many front tables are empty because customers can’t cope with the wind every time the door is opened. Installing wall-mounted heaters can solve this problem,” explains Smith.

Dining outdoors potentially increases your business, even in the chilliest months. Whether the venue has a skinny dining zone on the sidewalk or a beer-garden-size venue out the back, various heating options are available to suit your style and budget. Effective heating is a great device that encourages patrons to congregate and dine longer—day or night.

For a cost-saving option that blocks the wind, consider a vinyl structure, such as folding awnings or four-sided outdoor rooms. Alternatively, a heated shade umbrella, such as the Heatray by

Celmece with integrated electric panels or infrared heaters, has a contemporary look (visit www.celmece.com.au).

Pioneered by restaurateurs, mushroom-shaped gas-fired patio heaters push out radiant heat, warming diners without heating the surrounding air. Safe and sturdy, they will warm a radius of up to five square metres, although windy conditions affect their performance. Earlier ranges were inefficient but the new medium-wave infrared products are more cost- and environment-friendly, and have become a popular option for caterers.

Climate Australia's portable Firesticks range has gone gang-buster since its launch in 2010. According to managing director David Diamond, the portable heater "is more effective than a traditional patio heater plus it's less expensive to run". Since it has a real flame, it creates warm ambience to the eating zone. With a variety of colours on offer and heats up to 20-25 square metres, it also doubles as a lighting unit. There are no installation costs—making it popular for catering events—and is available in LPG or natural gas. And watch out for the soon-to-be-released 2.3-metre high Fire Lamp, as well as the Fire Fountain. Visit climateaustralia.com.au for more information.

An electric or gas infrared radiant heater reaches full operating temperature within a couple of seconds and heats up to four-by-four metres, making it a popular option for restaurants. Infratech heaters from Keverton Outdoor (www.kevertonoutdoor.com.au), for example, are highly efficient as the medium-wave beam is unaffected by wind and has no naked flames or gas emissions.

This also makes them environmentally friendly, with an option of being fitted with a separate motion sensor. "The medium-wave infrared beam works on the same principle as the sun but without the harmful ultraviolet rays," says Smith. It can be wall, ceiling or custom mounted.

Finally, heatstrip panels are a solution that is ideal for a compact balcony or other enclosed areas. The electric radiant panel heater will heat approximately six square metres.

See the commercial range from Outdoor Heating (www.outdoorheating.com.au) or Bromic Heating's weather-resistant, wind-resistant Platinum Smart-Heat electric heater (www.bromicheating.com.au). ○

Money-saving energy tips

Alan Pears, senior professor at RMIT University and co-director of Sustainable Solutions, lists four easy ways to cut energy costs and keep customers cosy.

1. Reduce the need for heating. If people are sitting outside, the big heat losses from their body are due to wind and radiant heat loss to the sky and cold surfaces around them. So effective screening from the wind, such as insulated umbrellas, can help.
2. If screens are insulated and/or have heat reflective coatings (eg, window films with low-emissivity coatings, known as 'heat mirrors'), they can reflect heat lost from people's bodies. Even thin insulation in membranes can make a big difference to heat flows because sheets of plastic have little insulation value—they just reduce the wind.
3. 'Skirts' around tables could allow people's legs to be warmed more easily by trapping warm air.
4. Offer free blankets and throws for customers.