



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Reprinted from

June 19 2016

NEWS

RAY WELLS

Poppy Szkiler, managing director of Quiet Mark, right, says products developed for lower noise help promote calm and good health



Bliss: silent rise of the quiet home

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DISTURBED by a powerful hairdryer blaring at dawn or house-proud neighbours vacuuming late into the night? Help may be at hand.

High street retailers are facing growing pressure to put noise ratings on household appliances as sales of “soundproofed” products reach a record high.

Some domestic items, including vacuum cleaners, already often provide decibel ratings but others, such as food processors that can make a racket of up to 90 decibels—the same as a passing train—do not reveal their noise output.

Consumers are increasingly choosing products, ranging from barely audible extractor fans to quiet food processors, that have been endorsed for making less noise. The trend comes amid mounting evidence that prolonged exposure to loud noise can cause health problems including raised blood pressure and heart rate.

This weekend, John Lewis released figures showing sales of products that it promotes for their lower noise output have risen by 33% year on year.

Almost half of British consumers consider sound levels an important factor when buying home appliances, research for the retailer found. This increases to 62% of those with an open-plan kitchen, lounge or dining room.

Some of the quietest products stocked in John Lewis include the Magimix 5200 food processor, which produces 76 decibels, the AEG Lavazza 6000 coffee machine, which produces 55 decibels, and the Miele Complete C3 EcoLine vacuum cleaner, which produces 72 decibels.

Sales of Dyson fans and GHD hair-dryers, which have comparatively low decibel levels, have also risen.

Poppy Szkiler, managing director of Quiet Mark, an organisation that provides accreditation for the quietest products, said: “Noises in the home can be disruptive and bad for the health and there should be noise ratings on all products. Consumers now want peace and quiet.”

Szkiler, the granddaughter of anti-noise campaigner John Connell, who founded the Noise Abatement Society charity, said it was not just decibel output that could irritate consumers, but also the tone and variation in the noise.

She said manufacturers were beginning to realise that acoustic design was a key part of the product.

Szkiler launched Quiet Mark, the trading arm of the Noise Abatement Society, in 2012. It provides accreditation for 70 brands across 45 types of product from dishwashers to garden tools. Its rating is based on decibels, sound patterns, frequency, pitch and tone.

An EU energy label is compulsory for white goods, such as washing machines and fridge freezers. It can also include a decibel rating but this is optional for manufacturers.

Companies are racing to produce the quietest products. Magimix, Panasonic, Philips and Mitsubishi Electric are among the brands with Quiet Mark accreditation. Johnathan Marsh, buying director for electricals and home technology at John Lewis, said the trend was in part being driven by smaller house sizes and more open-plan properties.

“The public awareness of Quiet Mark is resonating much more,” he said. “We are starting to see a spike in certain categories where customers are prepared to change the brand they are using for a quieter product or pay a bit more

for a quieter product.”

According to a report two years ago by the financial services firm LV, the average size of a family home fell from 98.8 square metres in 2003 to 96.8 square metres in 2013.

The range of products with reduced noise outputs covers the entire home and includes shower pumps, a paper shredder, desk fans and cordless lawnmowers powered by lithium-ion batteries. Even alarm clocks can be accredited for their lack of irritating noise. The manufacturer Philips, for example, makes a clock with a light sequence that silently mimics dawn rising.

The Good Housekeeping Institute, a consumer organisation, is working with Quiet Mark to incorporate sound tests into its monthly testing of a range of products.

The World Health Organisation has warned that noise is an environmental nuisance and a public threat to health that can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. It says the main indoor sources of noise are ventilation systems, home appliances, office machines and neighbours and recommends that continuous indoor noise should not exceed 30 decibels.

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