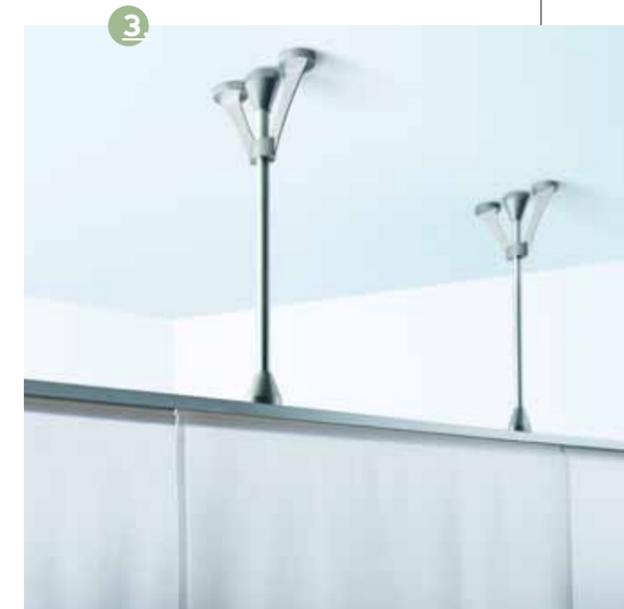


untapped potential

Retailers may be able to secure greater sales of panel glides if they encourage consumers to consider their use in broader applications. Dawn Adams reports.



Panel glides have long been considered useful for limited purposes but the latest developments in this category are beginning to change that perception. These advances broaden the possibilities for panel glides and highlight an untapped potential as they become suitable for a wider variety of locations. Well informed retailers now have the tools to encourage consumers to consider this option and thereby to capture added sales.

Recent developments include the fact that panel glides can be installed to 10 or 12-metre widths, be suspended from ceilings and turn corners to ensure they aren't gathered in front of a window. Steps taken to add stability to the product also allow for a wider variety of fabrics to be used.

Roman Empire sees untapped potential

The market for panel glides in Australia still has significant room for growth, according to The Roman Empire managing director Don Hailes, who is convinced they can be difficult for retailers to sell. "I don't think they get it," he says.

Hailes suggests the situation is similar to the sales climate when motorisation was first introduced into the market, with retailers reluctant to sell these options because they didn't fully understand them. "With motorisation, retailers stayed away because they were scared of it," he says. "Panels are the same. We have to teach them how panel glides work."

Asked whether panel glides' slow increase in popularity is due to their

limited potential for use, he suggests otherwise. "Every house has sliding doors and sliding windows and a smart decorator will also use them also as a room divider," he says.

Additional sales might be secured if retailers expand their vision for the category's use. He points to their suitability to compartmentalise spaces in one-bedroom units, rather than have one large area for multiple uses. "Every home has a computer desk; you can compartmentalise that area," he says.

A recent estimate of costs comparing roller blinds with panel glides, conducted by Hailes, found they required a similar price outlay. "It was pretty much dollar-for-dollar," he says. "Panel glides have an untapped potential."

And he urges retailers to tap into the knowledge of company sales representatives to find out more about the product. "The rep is able to help and guide them step-by-step on panel glides," he says.

Hailes points to panel glides as increasingly being chosen for the less formal areas of a home such as spaces allocated for alfresco dining. "People are after minimalist modern styling in the back of the house, the alfresco areas," he says. "And one panel glide track can go 10 metres wide. We could do more if we wanted to. Sales have been growing slowly but they are still increasing."

Silent Gliss track bends

Panel glides continue to meet demand in a niche market in Australia but their sales in Scandinavia, Norway and Denmark cement them as among the largest sellers in those regions, according to Silent Gliss general manager Grant Hagen.

He suggests the company's latest innovations in the category are expanding the use of panel glides to a wider variety of applications.



"We launched, over a year ago, the world's only bendable panel glide system and we have a worldwide patent," he says. "We recently installed the Flex system for a healthcare application in Adelaide as an alternative to the old-fashioned cubicle design."

Because it is capable of bending, this system allows for panels to be redirected to sit against a wall to ensure they don't gather in front of a window and detract from a view. Hagen describes them as providing a solution for the larger windows being designed by architects in modern homes while adding greater interest when used as a room divider.

With the company's panel glide sales increasing 20 per cent in recent years, Hagen also points to a hanging rod system as sparking greater interest. "The track can be suspended from the ceiling in, for example, warehouse applications," he says. Added accessories like a fascia plate complement the appearance of the design.

In Australia, Hagen is convinced panel glides will remain a niche product with steady growth and will not challenge other more popular window coverings for supremacy.

But he also stresses that they are providing new solutions in situations where they might previously not have been considered as an alternative. "In the premium end of the market, windows might be six, eight or 10 metres wide and look onto a fantastic harbour view," he says. "A panel system can run 10 or 12 metres and provide privacy and darkness. Customers don't want multiple blinds with gaps."

1,2,3,4. Silent Gliss



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Perfect for modern homes

Panel glides are a classic product perfect for modern homes where bi-fold and large sliding doors are becoming increasingly common, according to Australian Window Furnishings national marketing manager Jenny Brown. She suggests they are more sophisticated than a vertical blind but just as easy to operate.

"The wide panels of fabric really allow the colour and texture to shine through," she says.

"The Luxaflex Window Fashions Panel Glide Elite System features a whisper quiet operation as well as the option of an Elite bottom rail."

Available in hundreds of different fabrics, a variety of colours, textures and opacities can be selected. Brown attributes the firm's steady sales in this category as due to the product's versatility and the wide range of fabrics offered.

NBS sophistication

National Blind Suppliers makes its selection of panel glides using the Uniline Glissade track because of its sophisticated appearance. "The Glissade is the only track I've seen that doesn't need anything over it," says the company's Francois Habib. "It's smart and classy and in finishes like chrome."

The firm also makes panel glides with batons that have an appearance similar to a roman blind. Habib notes better quality fabrics that are textured and in a blackout are in favour, although light filtered and mesh screen are also chosen.

Neat look from TWC

TWC points to the neat look achieved using the Acmeda system for panel glides with a base rail featured at the top and the bottom. "Although it's a bit more expensive, we feel it looks better," general manager Mark Watson says.

The firm simplified its pricing structure in recent times which assisted sales momentum but Watson is convinced this category is unlikely to develop into a market leading product.

Batons for stability at Suntex

New advances in the way panels are being produced are allowing for softer fabrics to be used, according to Suntex's Stephanie France, who is responsible for the firm's marketing. "The introduction of batons is allowing us to use softer fabric that can't be used on a roller blind because it needs stiffness," she says. "We sew in the batons to offer the panel more stability. And we can use a timber valance to cover the track with a matching timber baton across the panel."

France notes a change in preference for fabrics, away from a plain and neutral appearance to a designer look. "The colours are still generally greys and neutrals and blacks," she says. "In the past, people thought they had to choose from the Suntex range but we do custom fabrics as well."

Being able to use custom fabrics to personalise the selection can assist in ensuring the panel glide is a feature in a space.

"It is a feature window covering as opposed to a standard blind in a bedroom," she says.

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Motorisation an option from Peter Meyer

Blinds By Peter Meyer claims to be the only window furnishings company providing motorised panel glide tracks. Launched around two years ago, managing director Simon Meyer says the system features a locking mechanism for the panels rather than relying on velcro. "With traditional velcro, the panels can fall down or lose their glue," he says. With the locking mechanism, the panels sit in grooves enabling them to glide more smoothly and to be removed easily for cleaning.

The firm is about to release its Signature Collection of fabrics, with Meyer noting sheer fabrics or those with a decorator appeal are most popular for panel glides. "Panel glides are being used as a backdrop or to add interest to a wall," he says. "When installed as a room divider, a sheer fabric on a panel allows you use to see through and not feel so boxed in."

The Signature Collection includes the Jardine range of 100 per cent polyester fabrics from Belgium. "They have a nice sheer transparent finish," Meyer says. Thinner than the Fusion range also marketed by the firm, this selection is expected to offer an enhanced performance.

Meyer says people often like woven bamboo or woven timber for panel glides but their thickness needs to be considered to determine whether they are suitable for this purpose. "They can have an elegant look and be beautiful as a room divider but [it is also] important to select the fabric that will be suitable," he says.



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