

Lower outlay,

Motorisation is becoming increasingly affordable as imaginative new

Greater affordability and innovation in product ranges are ensuring the customer base for motorisation is on a growth curve. In today's market, micro battery-operated options offer new solutions, solar and wireless motors ensure electricians are often not required for their installation and give-aways add incentives for consumers to buy.

Reasons to purchase are changing; while some consumers still seek a simple up-down solution, others are encouraged to purchase sophisticated systems that link in with advanced technologies like sun and wind sensors or home automation systems. The entry of smart phones to operate motors may contribute to the growth of an emerging audience purchasing these products because they are hooked on the latest technology. Demand continues for quieter options while growth opportunities are evident for external window coverings such as folding arm awnings that are heavier to manually control.

Blindware controls motor by smart phone

Blindware director Grant Norton describes the firm's latest innovation, motors that can be controlled by smart phones, as a 'game changer'. "These motors present a way to reposition how motorisation is targeted to the masses," he says. "People won't buy motorisation; they will buy what they can do with their smart phone."

The company will promote the range to end consumers through forums such as social media. "Our marketing approach will become very targeted," he says. "And we are committed to establishing an international distribution network; products like these will set us up as different."

Norton is convinced the uptake of motorisation will continue to accelerate as the cost of motors becomes more accessible. Similarly enticing is expected to be the lower cost of their integration through the latest Blindware technology designed to link their control with smart phones. "We are creating these products with our design flair as opposed to buying off-the-rack items," he says.

An auto recommissioning feature ensures the motors will automatically remember previous limits and settings in the event of a power loss. "They can be used on straight and bent tracks and work across the whole range of applications catering to roller blinds, romans and curtains," he says.

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The new range of integrated motors will work with smart phones including iPhones, Android and Windows 7 technology. "The system allows the motors to talk directly to their smart phone with no additional control system required," Norton says. He suggests this advance eliminates the need to spend up to \$20,000 on a control system. "We've developed a very inexpensive system that doesn't need that technology to talk to a smart phone," he says.

The smart phone control will be standard for the firm's entire collection and older motors can be altered to include this feature. "They are backwards compatible," he says. "If a motor is two or three years old, it can be incorporated with this technology at a minimal cost. They are a very low cost option, very accessible and make this technology truly available to the mass market."

Norton also highlights the firm's new curtain motor, suggesting it is one of the first accessibly priced AC options in its category. "This will be a very important product for us domestically and for offshore markets," he says. "There are very few AC products in the market and this one is at the right price point." Key features include touch start and an inbuilt clutch to ensure the curtain can be retracted manually if there is a power loss.

higher uptake

technologies enter a crowded marketplace. Dawn Adams reports.

Elero motors a German technology

To retain and grow market share, Elero highlights that its range is made in Germany and offers a strong alternative to the many basic up-down control motors in the market. "If people want motors that do more, they need to look at the larger companies like ourselves," managing director Michael Powell says.

He points to a new S type motor that has been added to the range in the last 12 months and has features not available in the budget end of the market such as parallel wired, electronic limits and obstacle detection.

With a wide selection of motors in its range, Powell says noise and speed are the two biggest factors determining a purchase decision. "Nobody wants a clunky noisy motor for the roller blinds in their new home," he says. Similarly, he says quieter options are sought out for home theatres.

"Speed is a factor, in particular, for long drops that can be 10 or 12 metres in the commercial market," he says. "Also important is being able to link them with sophisticated control systems. In commercial buildings, they might want things like sun tracking and motors need to be integrated with these features."

Powell observes that a lot of new players have entered the market in the past 12 to 18 months, ensuring it is an active environment in terms of new developments. While he acknowledges this situation makes the market more competitive for every business in the field, he also suggests it enables more people to find out about motorisation. "The profile of motorisation is raised in the market when more people are talking about it," he says.



Elero

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Elero director Michael Powell

Micro motors from JAI

JAI has released a Micro range of 25 mm battery powered motors to fill a perceived void in the market. These motors are designed to provide an alternative to the 240 volt motor which, the firm's Phil Horner says, come with a cost out of reach for a lot of consumers due to the need for an electrician.

The Micro motors are promoted as capable of easily and reliably lifting a roller blind 2.2 metres by 2.4 metres. Their battery life is approximately one to two years and they offer an option of a single or five channel remote control.

Advanced features to be released in the future are expected to include a solar panel that can be easily attached to a window and a rechargeable battery installed in the motor. "This, coupled with the ability to use our current range of 38mm tubes, will help make motorisation even more accessible to more of our customers' clients," Horner says

The latest range complements the Intro and Autoline motorised roller blind and curtain products marketed by the company for the past five years into Australia and New Zealand.



Jai

Externals a specialty at Imex

Europe is still well ahead of Australia in terms of embracing motorisation for window furnishings, according to Imex Creative Products general manager Dale Butler. But he suggests a much bigger swing towards automation is becoming evident in the Australian market as options become more affordable. He estimates the cost of motorisation has plummeted by 50 per cent in just three or four years.

"People are looking for alternatives because blinds are getting bigger and they can't easily manually operate them," Butler says. "They are increasingly being called for in al fresco areas with zip channel style blinds."

He also points to the evolution of folding arm awnings as larger and heavier, making them harder to wind in and out. "I believe the popularity of motorisation will snowball over the coming years," he says. "Our motorisation program is only small, at this stage, but we are looking at expanding it into other areas."

The firm entered the motorisation category for external blinds two years ago working with a supplier from China to ensure the options it produced would suit the Australian market. "If you spend the time and effort, you can get a good quality product and the factory we use backs us up with a five-year warranty," he says. The firm is also committed to providing substantial backup and support for its customer base.

Other features designed to make its offering attractive include a fabric re-tensioning ability and quick mount coupling for easier installation. "We're also looking at programs to motorise internal blinds," he says. But no time frame has yet been set for the introduction of these products.

Awning motor growth anticipated by Windoware

Windoware is offering complementary sun and wind sensors with the purchase of motorised made-to-measure folding arm awnings as an extra incentive for consumers to make a purchase.

"This offer gives our customers an edge over the competition, something extra they can use to close the sale," says Windoware general manager Michael Sullivan. "If consumers go for motorisation for their folding arm awning, they get a sun and wind sensor for free."

Sullivan suggests these products will also ensure awnings are safer. "We will get less call-backs about awnings that have been left out in storms," he says. "If people are out shopping and it gets too windy, the awning will automatically retract and similarly, when conditions change for sunshine. The sensor reacts to a certain level of light, to extend the awning to keep the house cooler in summer and to cut down on energy bills."

The firm released a new selection of motors around four months ago that include two models each for awnings, curtain tracking and roller blinds. They can be operated by remote control or hardwired into home automation systems. "The awnings motors are new to us and have been well received by the market," he says. And he points to plans for other new products to be added to the range into the future.

Windoware is also marketing an external receiver that enables another brand of motor to talk to the firm's remote. "We have a 15-channel remote that can accommodate a whole house or more," he says.

A remote control has been designed specifically for curtain tracks to allow a sheer and blockout on the one track to be controlled by one channel. This dual control remote is expected to help retailers to encourage their customers to invest in motorisation. Producing motorised curtain tracks for the past eight years, Sullivan says the Windoware system can accommodate the many variations in design such as bends, bay windows and right angle turns.

He anticipates growth across the motorisation category and is particularly interested in the prospects for folding arm awnings, since this is a new area for the business. "For bigger ticket items like folding arm awnings, the cost to motorise is 10 per cent of the total cost of the product," he says. "It has come down a lot; five years ago, motorisation would have been around 20 per cent of the total cost."

SolarSmart adapted for external blinds

CW Products has adapted its trademarked SolarSmart technology so that it can be used for external blinds. It has already been growing market share for its use with roller shutters after four years of product development and testing.

"We began testing SolarSmart for external blinds two years ago and started selling it at wholesale for the past six months," says marketing director Danny Elassaad.

Four or five manufacturers are already choosing to use the technology with the firm offering product training for their sales staff and installers. "We show them how to install the system to optimise its features and to make sure it's reliable in the long run," he says. Training for sales staff focuses on the application of the product, its benefits and where it is most suitably placed.

SolarSmart is a stand-alone system that requires no wiring, ensuring no electrician is required to complete its installation. A multi-channel remote can control five or six blinds at a time. As the solar panel requires direct sun, extension panel kits have been produced to ensure the panel can be positioned as much as 15 to 20 metres away if required. "However, in the majority of cases, the panel is on the pelmet of the blind," he says.

The SolarSmart system was developed by Dr Ibrahim Elassaad, a mechanical engineer who has also gained a PhD in solar engineering.

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