

NEFF believes that the 'accessible' market is such a prospect for kitchen retailers that it's marking the 20th anniversary of one of its most iconic products with a focus on just how big the opportunity is..

The hidden OPPORTUNITY



When NEFF launched its Slide&Hide® concept 20 years ago, it knew it had something special on its hands but even a brand that's home to so many market-leading products couldn't have imagined just what an icon it would become.

But now, as NEFF celebrates that two-decade milestone, it is not only still discovering the true scope of the features and benefits the technology offers but is also being inspired to view its whole portfolio with a totally new perspective.

And that's by asking one simple question - just how can designers use their products to truly offer kitchens that can be used by everyone regardless of physical ability?

Traditionally separated off into its own niche called the 'accessible' market this concept has now rightly evolved into 'universal' design for all and NEFF is using its presence at kbb Birmingham this month to shine a spotlight on the massive commercial opportunities this



NEFF understands that the oven has been designed to mean anyone can use it whatever their age or ability. Good design always wins.

Adam Thomas, kitchen designer

presents to its retail partners.

And it's not a hard argument to make when you look at the staggering numbers involved.

According to disabled business organisation Purple, there are more than 14 million disabled people in the UK with an incredible combined spending power of £249 billion.

And yet, Purple says, only 10% of businesses have a disability strategy to access this market.

But, of course, that represents a massive range of individual circumstances – of that 14 million just 8% are wheelchair users, for example, and 80% have a hidden or invisible disability such as a mental health condition or moderate learning disability. Two million people are living with sight loss and 1.2 million with hearing loss.

And the universality comes when you discover that all that means 50% of people have a disabled relative or friend in their close network.

Kitchens are vital for independent living, but also multi-generational and universal living. Put simply, anyone who lives in, or comes to, your home should be able to use that kitchen with no restrictions.

Designer Adam Thomas (pictured right) is widely acknowledged as one of the leading proponents of this principal and, as a wheelchair user himself, has a personal perspective on what makes products genuinely useful and usable.

This, he says, doesn't mean that products need to be designed specifically for disabled people. Good design, he believes, should be defined by its universality.

The NEFF Slide&Hide® is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year



"NEFF has come up with some incredible products," he says. "And either through default or by design many of them are very useable and accessible. But I would always use the word 'universal' as it needs to be usable for everyone.

"I'm sure that when the designers were coming up with the Slide & Hide, for example, they were trying to develop something different to offer the market, but equally I'm sure they had enough nous to realise how many different groups of people that mechanism would help. Just something as simple as being able to move the door out of

the way is a life-changing thing for anyone who finds it difficult to get food in and out of the oven.

"But sometimes with manufacturers it takes someone elsewhere in the organisation to say 'wow, we should be promoting that and letting people know about it.'"

For NEFF, that person is group marketing manager Sue Flowers. This is, she believes, such a clear opportunity for retailers that she is working with Thomas to dedicate part of NEFF's kbb show stand to a working live kitchen designed to demonstrate the possibilities - including the benefits

of its Home Connect system that gives users the ability to control their appliances remotely.

"There's no question my eyes have been opened to the opportunities this presents," she explains. "I've been on such a steep learning curve and I've had a series of light bulb moments that have convinced me that we need to move into this space as a strand of our communications.

"When you look at what we can do with existing products through this multi-generational lens and then add on the Home Connect it's a massive opportunity. It's another amazing feature for Slide & Hide, as an example, but Adam is right that it probably wasn't designed with this specifically at the front of mind. However, it was designed with usability in mind and that keeps coming through in all these conversations.

"I sometimes get people asking me 'what's the point?' when it comes to Slide&Hide® and I'm sure retailers get asked too, but this is just another one of many credible answers. Looking at all the statistics, it's a massive commercial market to approach and it doesn't need anything new in terms of product to do that, just a new message."

The big change here is the move away from thinking of it as a specialised market that only needs its own specific products. Thomas, although he would modestly claim otherwise, has undoubtedly been one of the architects of that movement in the kitchen arena.

"Everyone always looked at accessible design as a niche product, a small, tiny segment of the market

where you have to have specialist knowledge and if you don't then you can't do it," he explains. "So we decided to simply change the name, and we came up with the broader 'multi-generational'.

Universal design as a concept goes back many years and the definition of designing for all is something the bathroom industry, as an example, has really picked up on. They came together as a group and looked at it and now if they're designing, say, a new tap they're not going to design one that a third of the population might find difficult to use."

Perhaps the difference in the kitchen sector is that, from a manufacturing perspective, it is made up of lots of different channels, of which appliances is just one. That's why, for its stand at kbb, NEFF has teamed up with the like-minded Symphony to collaborate on the full working kitchen using its Freedom range.

"We're very reliant on the kitchen



This is a huge commercial opportunity that doesn't need retailers to change, just expand the horizons of what they do best

Sue Flowers, NEFF



much safer for anyone who is visually impaired because they have audible controls which can include braille, plus they don't stay hot and are available in a variety of sizes including panoramic. The sleek surface also means you can slide pans safely across to the worktop.

"I have the big NEFF fridge," Thomas says. "It has pull-out shelves and the access that allows me is incredible.

"And the fact that hobs and extractors now talk to each other and you don't have to reach up to control the extractor is life-changing if you've never been able to do it."

But the real game-changer, as far as he is concerned, is voice control and the Home Connect option.

"Anything that you can make voice-activated immediately increases the usability of that product for a huge amount of people, it's literally life-changing. Imagine the empowerment for someone who doesn't have the mobility to cook for themselves but can operate the oven with their voice. It's incredible."

An enormous part of the leap forward in this market is the interest of the mainstream and making it part of everyday kitchen design. It's not lost on Thomas that the commitment of big brands like NEFF and Symphony represents that mass market appeal.

"I cannot tell you how excited I am," he says. "I really have to pinch myself when I think about the possibilities and potential of what we've got here. For companies the size of Symphony and NEFF to be involved means we can all work more closely together

towards a common goal. There's no downside to this, there's only bonuses. "What NEFF understands is that universal design doesn't cost a penny more to do, the oven has been designed right so it means anyone can use it whatever their age or ability. Good design always wins."

And for Flowers, that win-win situation is what makes this such a positive message to promote on the kbb Birmingham stand. "We just see this as a huge opportunity as our appliances are just so relevant to the market. We just want people to think about them differently and not just in the usual mainstream way.

"This is about retailers and designers doing what they do best and listening to clients and seeing how we can make their everyday lives work better." **kbb**

So what are some of the benefits? It's clear that even just a slight change of mindset reveals some very simple things. This is especially true if you're one of the 50% of people who have family members or friends with different physical abilities.

Induction hobs, for example, are



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