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With their Comfort First Filter Diffuser, Comfort First Products is Helping to Improve Indoor Air Quality in the Workplace



Jan Northcutt
CEO
Comfort First Products
<https://www.comfortfirstproducts.com/>

Contact:
Jan Northcutt
714-550-4971
800-804-3366
Sales@comfortfirstproducts.com

Follow us on:



Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: *Ms. Northcutt, there is a long history for Comfort First Products. Would you give us a brief description of the company, and what your focus is today?*

Ms. Northcutt: We have been producing a range of air filtration products to improve indoor air quality and office comfort for a little over 24 years now. We started with a product called the Control-A-Flow. How it came about is that Dave Northcutt, who was the co-owner with me, was in an office back then, and he got cold, so he put up a folder to shut off the air coming from the vents just above him in the morning, and then took it down at night. However, he figured that there had to be a better way to control the airflow, so he developed a product that first used a magnet and later a clip to attach to the T-bar rails on the ceiling, allowing you to open and close the panels like closet doors. That way, if you feel cold or uncomfortable because of the cold air blowing through the overhead vents, you can shut them in the morning, and if you feel hot in the afternoon, you can open the panels. It comes with an adjusting wand to adjust the panels from the floor.

From our research, we concluded that office HVAC systems need to filter the air more than the standard vent or AC unit filters. So, we developed a filter that would go with the Control-A-Flow. Then, customers were saying, "We want a product that looks like a permanent solution." Therefore, we developed the Comfort First filter diffuser, and it has louvers on four sides. We patented the diffuser in 2003. It has a filter inside the diffuser covering the louvers and allows you to control the direction of the airflow and prevent air from dumping down on people. Often, someone sitting in a cubicle may be cold, and someone in the cubicle next to them is not getting enough air, so they are hot. This way, you can control which way the air blows. The diffuser comes with either a Merv 12 or a Merv 14 filter.



Comfort First Introduction and Installation

We have been selling both products for over 20 years and continue to try to get people to realize that there are solutions to improve the comfort of the office ventilation system. Sometimes people say, "We filter the HVAC systems," however, they do not realize that if they are in a 30-year-old building, and their filter systems are 90% efficient, they have got 30 years of harmful elements accumulated in the ductwork because of that 10% inefficiency, which is blowing down on people through AC vents, making them sick and non-productive.

CEOFCO: *Do companies or businesses pay enough attention to air quality and air flow in their buildings, in their offices?*

Ms. Northcutt: Companies have started to pay more attention to indoor air quality, especially during the pandemic. I believe a lot of facilities personnel forget that many people are sensitive to allergens and get sick from dust, mold, pollen, and other particles present in the air. We are trying to reach people, educate them on indoor air quality, and let them know we have solutions including the Comfort First Filtered Diffuser and the Filtered Control-A-Flow.

CEOFCO: *Did Covid-19 help with increasing the interest in better air quality? Has it made a difference?*

Ms. Northcutt: I think people are now focusing on improving indoor air quality with filter machines, UV lights, and vent filters. It has brought us some positive news. Our sales have not gone up to the level that they were before Covid-19, and I think that one of the reasons could be that many employees are not back in their office. We only sell when there is someone in the office complaining that they are either getting a draft or they are allergic to the germs, dust, and pollen. I believe that more companies are concerned about Indoor air quality, and we need more concerted effort to let people know that we have a viable solution.

"Improving indoor air quality will have many benefits - clean up the air that everyone is breathing so that they stay productive and healthy." Jan Northcutt

CEOFCO: *How do you reach out? What is your strategy?*

Ms. Northcutt: We used to participate in trade shows, however, trade shows are not as effective now. We have tried facility trade shows and Human Resource trade shows. Both would be very concerned about keeping your employees working, healthy and more productive.

Right now, we are spending our time and money on optimizing the website, improving our SEO, issuing press releases, and improving our social media presence.

CEOFCO: *There seems to be many products that claim they can do something, claim it will clean the air, and claim it will be effective. How do you get the background, the quality, the real value across to potential customers?*

Ms. Northcutt: This is the real challenge we all face. Our diffuser is a powder-coated steel diffuser with an aluminum louver that allows you to control the direction of the airflow. It also comes with a hospital respirator type of MERV 12 or MERV 14 Filter. The filters are cut to fit the diffuser and are marked with the directions to place on the diffuser to improve the loading efficiency of the filters. We continue to improve the design of our products and strive to let more people know that our product can improve indoor air quality and reduce draft complaints.

CEOFCO: *Do you sell nationally or internationally?*

Ms. Northcutt: We sell nationally across the United States and in Canada. Smaller quantities are shipped via Federal Express, mostly ground. If they want a bigger quantity, we will ship LTL on a pallet.

I have a customer who had been with one company that had bought about 200 of our diffusers. He has now moved to a new company and really likes our products, so he is starting to do retro upgrades in some of the different buildings associated with his new company, ordering our products.

It is good when you have a loyal customer that moves from one company to another, and then continues to buy the product!

CEOFCO: *Do you work through resellers as well as direct?*

Ms. Northcutt: Yes, we sell direct from the website, and we also sell through heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) distribution warehouses, like Johnstone Supply, US Air Conditioning, United Refrigeration, Allied Refrigeration.

CEOCFO: *Are there new methods of manufacturing, new technology, new materials that you are able to take advantage of, or is it pretty tried and true in your process?*

Ms. Northcutt: In the beginning, we were making many changes and modifications. Right now, the Control-A-Flow, works well for what it is designed to do, which is to control the draft. It also can come with a filter. The Comfort First Filtered diffuser, we had done a lot of improvements on it the first few years and now it is working well.

We worked with a company to try to develop an adjustable filtered diffuser made from fire-rated plastic. Their engineers could not figure out a way to attach the louvers on the side, even using aluminum louvers, and attach the filters and open the diffuser to change the filters. Therefore, we ended up postponing the project.

CEOCFO: *You have a number of videos on your site. Do you find that your customers take a look at those and pay attention?*

Ms. Northcutt: I think the videos help, especially some of the installation videos, and videos for how to decide what size or type of backpan customers should buy. Many times, if a consumer finds it, they may use the videos to understand our products and be better informed consumers.

CEOCFO: *Do you see more interest from consumers?*

Ms. Northcutt: When an employee sees our products, they can go to the HR or facilities and say, "I am getting sick at work, there is a solution, I do not have to suffer – please buy me this."

CEOCFO: *Comfort First Products is a woman owned business, as shown on your site. Does that make a difference in business?*

Ms. Northcutt: I think it helps. Many government agencies track their minority purchases and have minority spending goals established. We are one of the very few HVAC diffuser manufacturers, which is a minority small business.

CEOCFO: *What is next? What are we looking at a year or two down the line?*

Ms. Northcutt: Reach out to more people, and let them know there is a solution to improving indoor air quality and office comfort. We are looking to develop more air quality products to sell that will expand our solution and product portfolio. Let people know even if you have air filters already in your office, there are many ways to improve your IAQ.

CEOCFO: *What if anything might someone miss when they look at Comfort First Products, that they need to understand?*

Ms. Northcutt: Our products are relatively easy to install. When they install the diffusers, they need to establish a plan to change the filters. The Control-A-Flow will eliminate drafts that make people uncomfortable. The CAF can use our filter, so if you have bought a CAF, you can always add a filter. Improving indoor air quality will have many benefits - clean up the air that everyone is breathing so that they stay productive and healthy.

