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Saved by the meeting bell

Hold the presses! I have always wanted to say that, but despite my many years churning out news stories by the thousands, I really never had the opportunity. Besides, when one has spent most of their media years working for the national broadcaster, "hold the presses" doesn't seem to work the same.

The reason for my outburst is that the final call from your editor had left me in a state of panic. There was nothing new to report and real journalists would never admit they had nothing to write about.

It's summer down here, so all of our air conditioning people in VASA have their heads down and bums up as 40-degree Celsius temperatures cause the collapse of air conditioning systems across our member nations (Oz and NZ). Nobody has time to talk to me.

Then, just as I was about to regurgitate a story from the archives, hoping that the editor wouldn't notice, the VASA Board of directors met, right on MACS ACTION™ deadline day, and in a surprise move, gave me the story of the year.

This is a magazine scoop. Truly.

The Board was discussing the latest developments in the fight against the infiltration of hydrocarbon refrigerants into the auto sector. This has become a regular and thorny subject at most Board meetings these days.

Never afraid to attack the HC pushers, the VASA team suddenly realised that after 20 years of battling this scourge, the good guys were not really winning. Quite frankly, it was starting to feel a bit like Iraq and Afghanistan. We know that something has to be done, but are we going about it the right way?

Then our new President, Ian Stangroome, who hails from the Australian hotbed of hydrocarbon, South Australia, stopped the meeting in its tracks with this: "It has become obvious that the natural refrigerant industry has some support within governments because environmental issues are at everybody's top of mind. I reckon the only way we are going to beat this is to extend the current national licensing scheme to cover every refrigerant, regardless of its global warming potential."

To recap: the licensing regime in Australia, introduced in 2005, is now well entrenched and working well. The problem is that it is based on environmental grounds, meaning that it is intended to apply only to those refrigerants which are greenhouse gases. R-134a certainly falls within that category, but hydrocarbon refrigerants are not covered because they have almost no global warming potential.

The VASA theory is that if it can convince the government that the licensing plan should be extended to cover every technician who handles any refrigerant, there will be a much better chance to introduce the needed controls and technical standards to the industry. Regulators can then control the way refrigerants are used and the training required to safely handle them. We think we can convince the regulators that there will be a better overall environmental result if hydrocarbon refrigerants were brought under the same umbrella.

Because no national standards apply to automotive air conditioning in Australia, an all-embracing licensing regime could well be the way to introduce them. What tends to happen here is that the moment a product is subject to a use licence, standards must naturally follow.

At the moment, hydrocarbon refrigerants operate in an environment not dissimilar to the American prohibition years, when booze became the currency of the black market.

One of the problems with the hydrocarbon industry is that everybody knows that these people are breaking the current laws on a daily and hourly basis by venting R-134a from vehicles in workshops.

Everyone who touches a system charged with R-134a must hold our national licence, regardless of what sort of refrigerant they intend to put back into the system. But because no licence is required to handle and charge systems with hydrocarbon, they let the R-134a escape into the atmosphere and recharge with hydrocarbon. If they are challenged about what happened to the R-134a, they just look shocked and say, "The refrigerant had all escaped before the car was presented to us."

VASA is going to draw up a major submission to government to begin its campaign for blanket refrigerant handling licences for Australia. In the meantime, we are going to try some other ideas.

Wholesalers of refrigerants, including hydrocarbons, will be presented with a challenge to deny sales of hydrocarbon to any technician who does not have a current refrigerant handling licence. The notion here is to prick their conscience by intimating that they are encouraging unlawful venting of greenhouse gasses by selling hydrocarbons to unlicensed technicians.

Looks like a busy year coming up for me. Who do you think has to prepare the submission to government? *