

Quality Control: Evaluating Continuing Education Programs

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The quality of continuing education programs presented to architects is unfortunately fairly poor. The majority of programs are either thinly disguised product sales presentations or technical programs presented by well meaning but inexperienced presenters. Since the advent of national continuing education requirements in the mid 1990s, the quality of continuing education for architects should have improved, in this writer's opinion, it has not. Why is this the case, what is missing in the continuing education process? One element in improving continuing education programs is make certain they are evaluated by the attendees and the evaluation results worked back into the programs.

Evaluation Tools

Generally, a simple check list or survey type evaluation is the easiest to be utilized after a presentation. While an evaluation instrument can consider a wide range of issues, it should, at a minimum, consider 3 elements, program quality, speaker effectiveness, and applicability of content to the audience. An evaluation asking the appropriate questions about these issues should return a significant amount of useful information that can be iterated back into the education programs. The actual form of an evaluation is beyond the scope of this article, but for ease of use, questions should be answered by a range from high to low or agree to disagree. A simple range of 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest level of agreement or quality and 1 the lowest.

Program Quality

Rather than ask if the attendees thought the program was good, ask questions that deal with quality of content, understandability of the material, applicability to daily practice. Asking attendees if the content was understandable or appropriate is far more effective than asking if the program was good or interesting. Ask a question about the usefulness of the handouts or better yet will they keep the handout for reference. Most importantly ask how the program could be improved. Here you can use a fill in the blank or provide a list of answers. Another key question should be about the interactiveness of the presentation, ability to ask questions, interact with the material, etc.

Speaker Effectiveness

Again, rather than asking opened ended questions or general questions about the speaker, be specific. Was the presenter understandable, too fast, or too slow. Did the speaker really listen to questions and respond appropriately? Was the speaker serious and focused on the topic? Was the speaker knowledgeable? How could the speaker's presentation be improved? The answers to these questions are not much fun but can dramatically improve the overall quality of the program. In this writer's opinion, a successful program is 95 percent presentation skill and 5 percent content.

Applicability of Content

The most important element of any presentation and most particularly education presentations is whether or not the material presented is applicable to the audience and immediately useable by them in their practice. Here is where an education program becomes the most effective marketing tool in the world or fades to black 30 seconds after leaving the presentation. If the content of the program is not directly applicable to the attendees the program is essentially a failure. Ask questions that will give some idea of how the attendees will apply the information rather than just asking if it is useful. Also ask questions that look for ways to improve the content.

Evaluation Forms

There are literally hundreds of ways to structure an evaluation form and dozens of ways to ask the critical questions. The point is to worry less about the form and focus on the questions. It is imperative to ask

questions that give you real, applicable information. Asking the simple-minded, opened ended questions found on most evaluation forms only serves to mask the real issues and gives the presenters a totally unrealistic sense of the quality and effectiveness of their program.

Resources

There are many resources available on the internet for developing effective evaluation tools. A simple Google® search will provide dozens of potential evaluation forms and related materials. Next time you attend a presentation that has an evaluation form check it out to see if it has anything useable. No need to reinvent the wheel when you can “borrow” it.

Direct Evaluation

Another way of getting feedback on program effectiveness to have an independent 3rd party conduct an evaluation of the program material and then to interview attendees to determine the effectiveness of the program and its applicability to practice. This writer has conducted a number of this type of evaluation and they are immensely effective and provide immediate feedback on the critical program issues and how well they work and how they can be improved. It is an intense process but highly effective in determining and improving the quality of continuing education programs and presentations.

In the end, evaluations only work if they get filled out. To encourage attendees to fill out the evaluations, save the giveaways for the end and trade them for a completed evaluation. Or, get a business card with the evaluation for a final drawing for a door prize. If programs and presentations are not evaluated on a consistent basis, they will never improve, and the ability to judge effectiveness is completely lost. An attendee's “nice program” is not substitute for a written evaluation.

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