

Profiting from Continuing Education

Michael D. Chambers FAIA FCSI CCS, MCA Specifications

Continuing education is a significant marketing, networking, and professional development opportunity for every member of the construction industry. Unfortunately very few industry members are taking advantage of it. Certainly, manufacturers are providing hundreds of hours of programs, design professionals are getting plenty of seat time, but is anyone really profiting from continuing education?

Unfortunately the program topics and quality of the majority of programs I have attended are very poor or at best limited to products or systems rather than useable design strategies and tools. I have attended programs at national conventions, local chapters, and firms and most suffer from the same malaise. The presenters think you want to hear what they have to say, when in reality, what is really needed are knowledge and skills that can be applied directly to daily design and construction tasks.

It is interesting to note that the most popular programs tend to fall into several categories. One is personal or professional development such as presentation skills, contract negotiating, or sketching. Another is leading edge technology or design strategies such as accessibility, way-finding, day-lighting, sustainability, or seismic resistant structural systems.

Design professionals are adult learners and adult learners respond directly to educational topics that speak to their self-interest. The notion of "WIIFM", "what's in it for me?" is critical to developing successful professional education programs. Unless current continuing education providers begin to find out what their audiences want to know, they will continue to produce the same tired product-centered programs that are boring the industry into a catatonic state.

Manufacturers are a key source of industry knowledge and expertise and they need to focus on their expertise rather than their products. In doing so, they can produce continuing education programs that are truly professional development rather than thinly disguised product sales programs.

On the other hand, design professional firms are just as much to blame for the sagging quality of education programs available. While many firms are moving away from manufacturer programs and developing their own from in-house resources, the majority of firms do not have those kinds of resources.

To try and stay current with AIA/CES requirements and the nearly 28 states that require continuing education, firms are allowing manufacturers to offer poor programs with little to no educational value. Oh, of course, the free lunch is another key, but conversations with manufacturers and reps from around the country indicate a rising resentment towards design firms whose first priority is lunch and second education.

Design firms need to take charge of continuing education and transform it into effective professional development. First, design firms should become AIA/CES providers. It is a simple process and very inexpensive. By becoming providers, design firms can develop and report their own in-house continuing education programs. Additionally, by becoming providers, firms will understand the larger CES program picture and become aware of how manufacturers should be operating within the system.

Second, find out what your firm members and principles want and need to accomplish their personal and professional development goals. Identify a firm member to be the CES coordinator and empower that person to direct the firm's professional development program. Most importantly, firms must develop and deploy a firm-wide continuing education programs with clearly defined goals and objectives.

Third, never accept a manufacturer's education program at face value. Always review the program with the local representative and make certain that the program complies with the firm's CES goals. I rarely allow manufacturers to present their standard programs for the reasons stated above. I review their program topics and then develop a customized list of issues that I want addressed. The manufacturers scream and say the program is approved by AIA and they can not change it. Baloney, AIA does not

approve anything. They review a manufacturer's initial program and then randomly audit programs. Any manufacturer can modify an already registered program under a new title as long as it is done 2 weeks prior to presentation.

Several years ago, when I was working for a large design firm in the mid-west, I asked a manufacturer to modify its program by showing us examples of drawings and details that caused them problems in manufacture and installation of their product. They were initially afraid to do so because they thought we would react negatively to the implied criticism. I insisted, suggested they sanitize the examples so no one would know who did them, and to tell us how we as design professionals made the project more difficult.

The program was a tremendous success. The manufacturer presented issues that really caused them grief and demonstrated, quite professionally, how modifications to drawings and specifications would benefit the owner, us, and themselves. The members of the design firm were impressed with the manufacturer's insights and immediately negotiated changes in detail and process with the representative. It was an incredible hour of education and enlightenment for both parties and transformed an already good relationship into a great relationship.

Unfortunately, I have had opposite results in requesting program modifications from manufacturers. On one occasion, a personal friend of mine requested to present a program. I provided a detailed outline of the issues I wanted covered. I also advertised the program to the 150 members of the firm and had a large response including 6 of the 10 architectural principles. The representative presented the manufacturer's standard CES program, completely ignoring my requested issues. After the program was over, each one of the principles personally confronted me and asked why the program was not as advertised. Suffice it to say I was extremely unhappy and a key manufacturer relationship was heavily damaged.

Manufacturers must discover what their audiences need to learn in order to successfully use continuing education as a successful marketing tool. I can promise you that if your programs speak directly to the design professionals needs and self-interest, their interest in your products will explode. As I have said many times, programs must be about SOLUTIONS, NEVER about products.

Design firms must take charge of the continuing education process and demand quality presentations on topics that provide their members with USEABLE knowledge not just a bunch of useful information. Endeavor to make education programs directly applicable to day-to-day design operations and it will transform your firm into a truly learning organization.

The current continuing education opportunity in the United States is being squandered by both manufacturers and design firms due to competitive self-interest and lack of emphasis on professional development. I encourage everyone in the construction industry to raise their professional education standards and to demand the same from those who provide continuing education to the industry.

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Michael D. Chambers FAIA FCSI CCS SCIP is principal of MCA Specifications, Construction Product Marketing Group of Daly City, CA. (San Francisco). MCA designs, develops, and produces guide specifications, technical data sheets, AIA/CES Continuing Education programs, and design guidelines for construction product manufacturers. MCA provides document reviews, education programs, and web site reviews to help manufacturers be more effective and strategic with their critical marketing tools. 415-239-6566 www.mcaspecs.com