

## **A View from the Back of the Bus**

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### **Responding to Design Professional's Continuing Education Program Requests**

In my perspective from the back of the bus, I often wonder why product manufacturers and product reps ignore design professional's educational wants and needs on applying and specifying products. Architects have been accused of being distant, arrogant, superior, and a host of other things less printable, often with good reason. Yet, almost without exception, the vast majority of construction product manufacturers and representatives are so certain that they know exactly what design professionals need and want to know that they are making architects appear humble and teachable.

The level of arrogance and disdain displayed by product manufacturers and representatives in their continuing education programs is incredible. Far worse, this arrogant attitude is a strategic marketing blunder that demolishes the hard earned credibility of the manufacturers and threatens the most effective marketing opportunity ever handed to the construction product industry.

#### Design Professionals' Bottom Line

Generally speaking, design professionals do not care about manufacturers, product reps, company finances, history, capabilities, or how much better products are relative to the competition. At the end of the day, design professionals need the following questions resolved clearly and completely:

1. What class of products will solve my design problems in a competitive, industry standard application?
2. How do I develop an competitive industry standard specification that satisfies the owner's program and budget?
3. What is the range of competitive systems in the industry and what systems are appropriate for my project and how are they documented in the drawings?

In research commissioned by McGraw-Hill Sweets, specifiers were asked what they wanted from manufacturer's and product representatives. The responses are quite instructive and almost completely ignored by the product industry. 92% responded asking for "recommended uses & application of products", which translates to NO features and benefits. 88% responded requesting "guide specifications", or help us write industry standard specifications. In the end, only 40% of the respondents were interested in "manufacturer's history, experience, overall capacities & range of products".

Why then, is it that the first part of every continuing education program is about the manufacturer and their history, experience, on and on and on. The need to justify our existence to the audience must be overwhelming. Continuing education programs must be about solutions, not about manufacturers or products.

#### Continuing Education Marketing Strategy

Most product manufacturers appear to spend their educational resources on trying to circumvent AIA's requirement for generic and non-proprietary programs. Since the inception of mandatory continuing education, the quality of programs has plummeted. 90% of the programs I have hosted over the last 5 years have been thinly disguised product sales presentations. Oh, they have been scrupulously generic and non-proprietary, but the content and presentation are so biased and partial towards their own products that the result is a program that accomplishes nothing.

The key marketing strategy inherent in presenting non-biased, impartial education programs is

demonstrating to design professionals industry expertise, ability to use and apply products in an industry standard manner, and writing specifications that minimize substitutions. It is so simple and so easy to do. Just develop and present a program that educates the design professionals on the critical design and specification aspects of your industry and products. The immediate result is that you remove yourself from the role of peddler and elevate yourself to the role of expert and consultant.

### Competitive Advantage in Continuing Education

Most experienced marketers and salespeople understand the need to establish a competitive advantage in the sale of products. Typically, it is defined in terms of features and benefits, uniqueness, exception quality or value. Successful salespeople demonstrate their product's competitive advantages as a key part of the sales process.

In marketing design professionals, competitive advantage is defined by the ability to demonstrate industry expertise, knowledge, use and application, specification development, and competitive product knowledge. In the end, the only thing you can sell a design professional is yourself and your expertise.

Continuing education is a highly effective way of establishing and demonstrating competitive advantage. If your education programs are industry standard, cutting edge, solution based programs, excellently presented by obvious industry experts, what does that say about your company and your products? Consider the growing demand for continuing education in the design profession. Excellent education about use, application, and design solutions is going to become a tremendous competitive advantage for product manufacturers and representatives who want to work closely with design professionals to get specified. For example, in the Washington, DC area, key architectural firms are scheduling programs 6 to 9 months in the future. How are you going to stand out in that kind of chaos? Very simple, quality programs, industry expertise, and real solutions that can be immediately applied to projects.

No one argues the value and competitive advantage of having strong relationships with design professionals. There is no better or more effective way to begin the relationship process than with an outstanding continuing education program.

### Responding to Specific Educational Requests

Most of the time when a representative calls to schedule a continuing education program, I provide very specific input for what I want them to talk about. Generally, it includes an industry overview, specific examples of how to specify the product or system, competitive analysis of other products, and examples of poor details or coordination. The reason for demanding specific information is that most of the available continuing education programs are rather basic and boring.

Even more frustrating, is that I go to a lot of effort to provide the product representatives with a very clear agenda and outline of the topics I want them to cover. I discuss it with them, get their approval, and then send an email program description to staff. What generally happens is that when the program is presented, the rep thanks me personally for hosting, specifically notes that I had asked for certain topics to be discussed, indicates that they will be covered later, and starts in on the basic manufacturer's Powerpoint presentation. My specific requests for information are completely ignored. Of interest, is that after the presentation, I have firm principles and senior staffers come up to me and ask why didn't they talk about what you said they were? Gosh, that feels good.

### No More Competitive Advantage

Now, what happens to your competitive advantage when you deliver defective product? You damage relationships and industry leadership that you have worked on for years. What happens when you refuse to deliver continuing education as promised? You don't get asked back, you don't get specified, and you lose the opportunity to develop relationships.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. In the 8 years I have been hosting continuing education

programs at Ellerbe Becket and ATS&R, 90 percent of the product representatives have refused to respond meaningfully to suggested program issues. I do, however, remember very clearly, the few presentations that responded to my requests. They were fun, informational, my people asked for more, and the reps got invited back. Are these not a key part of competitive advantage?

Continuing education is not a static process any more than specifications, product development, or the design process. The ability to respond specifically and directly to design professional questions and issues has always been the hallmark of effective product representatives. The same response to specific issues in continuing education programs is critical and will become a significant competitive advantage for product manufacturers and representatives.

There is no excuse for not presenting programs that respond to design professional requests. The AIA/CES program guidelines are flexible enough to develop programs that can be appropriately modified on demand. The reality is that most programs are scheduled long before the 2 week limit imposed by AIA for registering programs. Finally, I don't care if you can't register a program for my specific topic, I can easily self-report programs for my staff if necessary.

Just deliver the continuing education I request and I will respond accordingly. That's my view from the back of the bus, welcome aboard; come on back! Let me hear from you.

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