

## **Continuing Education, An Opportunity Being Lost?**

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At the recent AIA/CES Providers Conference in San Diego, a troubling issue came to light that I have long suspected to be the case. In conversations with many AIA component executives, I have learned that many of the larger AIA components are not soliciting or even accepting continuing education programs from Manufacturer providers. This was confirmed at the AIA/CES Provider Conference by literally every component representative in attendance. They are not interested in AIA/CES programs offered by manufacturers for one very simple reason; the programs are poor quality sales presentations not professional level educational programs.

According to survey research conducted by Architectural Research Associates of Princeton, NJ, the top 100 architectural firms are developing internal continuing education systems similar in scope and intensity to the program already in-place at AIA components. Additionally, there is a definite trend towards using internal expertise for education content rather than external providers, particularly manufacturer's AIA/CES programs.

While I am disappointed by this trend, I am not surprised. I have spoken and written extensively over the last 3-4 years about the opportunities inherent in providing continuing education programs to the architectural community. I have also clearly pointed out the risks to national sales management in developing these low-quality, thinly disguised education programs to present to architects. Oh, of course they have been sanitized, (i.e., generic and non-propriety) but they are so biased and partial towards the manufacturer's products they become nothing more than blind sales presentations. Since AIA refuses to recognize that generic and non-proprietary is not an effective definition, the marketplace is speaking and essentially refusing to accept these low-quality sales presentations.

If the manufacturer providers do not begin to immediately reverse this trend, the best marketing opportunity to be offered to the industry is going to go away. Until manufacturer providers begin to develop genuinely excellent educational programs for the architects and AIA components, they are going to kill the golden goose. While I realize that most sales management can't conceive of offering real education, they are going to have to learn that excellent AIA/CES programs are about branding not sales. Especially since architect don't buy products.

Additionally, and more important to sales management is about the local presenters establishing themselves as the technical resource for the particular topic or system. It should be understood that presentation skills are more important than the quality of the programs. Even the highest quality program will not survive a bad presenter.

Fortunately there are some excellent exceptions to this "slide to the dark slide" which were represented at the AIA/CES Provider Conference by recent AIA/CES award winners. These manufacturers have senior staff marketers who are responsible for developing excellent AIA/CES programs and ensuring that the presenters are trained and supported. However, despite these leaders, if this trend continues, manufacturers are going to increasingly lose access to the professionals and firms that they became providers for in the first place.

AIA is doing its level best to audit programs and demand higher quality levels; they do not have the resources to effectively police the continuing education market. It is incumbent on the manufacturer providers to reverse the trend and demonstrate to the design community and AIA components that they have educational materials worthy of merit and inclusion in component education systems and the growing number of in-house education systems being developed in the larger architectural firms.

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