AVPro, Educate Thyself!

I've talked at length about the importance of evangelizing our industry and about new technologies and trends that are coming down the road. Yet, I'm shocked to discover that I haven't outright addressed the single, number-one, most important thing that you, as an AV professional, need to do – the one thing that can make a difference between success and failure, personally and corporately. You need to get an education.

Now, I know I've said before, because AV is still a "hidden industry," there simply aren't any AV degrees out there. Plus, it is a wonderful thing to still have an industry -- particularly in tech -- where skilled and talented folks can still go out and have a long-term, well-paying career without a college degree (and the crippling debt that accompanies that sheepskin nowadays!). Yet, the most successful individuals in the field, and the most successful companies -- especially in a down economy -- are those individuals and companies that are truly educated on our technologies, our products, our best practices and how we fit in to the "big picture" of the modern corporate world.

Unfortunately, training and continuing education is one of the first things to get cut from most companies when the economy is down and belts are tightening. Now, I get it. I was part-owner of a small firm, so I get the economic realities of plunking down a substantial time and money investment when revenues are down. I get the hesitation to spend on employees that may or may not remain with your company for the long haul. It's a scary thing. But when you don't spend that time and that money on your employees, performance will suffer. First, it will suffer because the employees don't have the full knowledge and tool-kit of the latest tech -- or the latest tricks and tips -- to make their jobs more efficient and ultimately more profitable. Yes, you can lose money by not taking time to train. Second, performance will suffer because your employees will become demoralized. "Why should I care about this guy's company when he doesn't care enough about me to train me?" In fact, time and again, employees who don't have an opportunity to train will leave for greener pastures where they can get more education. The fear of employees leaving ends up as a self-fulfilling prophecy where the employees do leave.

So, what's a business owner to do? First, get over yourself. Yes, you might spend time and money training up Timmy-the-Intern and he'll leave… but you also might end up with a loyal and valuable, trained employee who sticks with you. Like all else in business, it is a risk, but it is a risk you can't afford not to take. So make a concerted effort to encourage training and education among your employees. In fact, make it a requirement for some internal advancement or incentivize it among your staff. That will encourage those who don't care about education to pursue it, and will further reward those anxious for it.

Today, there is very little reason NOT to have an active education program in your company. Our AV manufacturers do a FANTASTIC job of providing FREE, INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC training to all of their dealers. These dealers will also pay for meals at training and many will even cover travel and hotel expenses if the training involves going to them. Granted, this is training on their products specifically, but if you are one of their dealers, you need to learn about their products to effectively sell and install it. Plus, I haven't attended a single manufacturer's training where the instructors didn't first give a good overview of the theory and basic technology in play before covering their specific products and solutions. (Extron, in particular, is great about providing equipment-agnostic training on the basics first, then delving into their solutions.) In the case of manufacturer training, nine times out of 10, the only expense or cost to the employer is the fact that those employees aren't in-house or in-field making money on those days. Otherwise, it's all benefit to the company.

On the other end of the spectrum are industry courses provided by InfoComm, NSCA and companies like SynAudCon. Most of these courses are paid courses, but the benefit is that many can be taken online. This means workers can take their classes in the evenings, on weekends, or even in the office on slow days. Plus, many of these courses count as Renewal Units for certifications… and provide excellent prep material for those same certification tests! In addition to the online courses, the paid classes are often found at the shows and events – InfoComm, GovComm, Almo E4 AV Tour events, Stampede Big Book of AV Tours, InfoComm Roundtables. Keep an eye on the calendar for these industry gatherings that provide tons of education on a variety of topics, in one location and one trip. The paid courses are very often the general, industry basics and fundamentals that all AV professionals should have… so take them already!

Of course, if you want the best of all worlds -- inexpensive/free plus non-manufacturer-specific plus non-time-intensive – look to many of the free webinars and white papers out there. InfoComm provides free webinars each week with its Wednesday Webinars series. Some are business-based, some tech-based, but all provide a good hour's worth of free education online. If you miss the live webinar, InfoComm also archives the sessions to be viewed on-demand via the InfoComm website. Other organizations and companies that provide great, free webinars include Almo Pro A/V, CEDIA, AVI-SPL, and most of the industry magazines and blogs. All of those sources usually also provide white papers or resource guides on various topics as well. Contact InfoComm's Professional Education and Training Committee (PETC) or visit the education section of their web site. Or just keep an ear to the ground and an eye on your social networks. Most of the AVTweeps share details on pertinent webinars via Twitter and links to these webinars can also be found on LinkedIn and Facebook. If you don't already participate socially with other AV professionals, DO IT! They are an invaluable resource for educational leads and business advice. Plus, they're all-around good people.

No matter how you approach it -- online or in person, paid or free -- education is vital for your ongoing success in the AV industry. Every company, from the behemoths (AVI-SPL, etc) to the tiniest mom-and-pop shop, needs to understand the value of professional education and make sure that educational efforts do not go by the wayside.

Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence. – Abigail Adams

Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere. – Chinese Proverb

To read about an industry that HASN'T educated itself and is now suffering the ill effects, visit http://www.fastcompany.com/1787101/leadership-training-advertising-agencies and see how not training your employees hurts more than just your company!

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