

MBA: Mixing Business & AV

In my previous column, I discussed how very important it is to have a training and education program in your company. Just because there is no such thing (yet!) as an AV degree from college, that doesn't mean we shouldn't educate ourselves and our workers as much as possible. One area that is becoming more and more important for success in the AV world is a solid knowledge of business and management. Now, for many years, it was possible for a hard-working, technically-minded individual to open an AV company and work for an entire career without this classroom knowledge. The prevailing view in the industry matched that of executive coach and business professional Christine Comaford, who once said, "When it comes to success in business, an MBA is optional. But a GSD, which is only attained by Getting Stuff Done, is required."



Today, however, we face increased competition from related trades moving into the AV arena -- IT, security, consumer/home theater guys (if you are a commercial integrator) or commercial integrators (if you're a home theater guy). The economy is still tight all around and, with the increased competition, each company must be as qualified and as professional as possible to win the business -- and then each company needs to run each project and each job perfectly to maintain profits despite tight margins and higher costs. It is a real juggling act, at times, and business owners without inherent business acumen (or a lot of good luck) will suffer.

So, does this mean every AV company owner needs to go back to school and get an MBA? Not necessarily. Our industry associations have recognized the need for this sort of training and are making a concerted effort to educate business owners on the "business" end of things. A number of InfoComm Wednesday Webinars are on business leadership topics. In fact, an entire section of their webinar archive is dedicated to business topics. Some of the topics in the webinar archive for on-demand viewing include, "How to Manage Business Financials in 30 Minutes a Month," "Business Development: Business Insurance" and "Managing Transitions," to name just a few.

Going even further than webinars, NSCA has, for the past 13 years, held the NSCA Business and Leadership Conference -- a multi-day conference for business owners and executives in the low-voltage electronics industry. The BLC features networking events, breakout sessions, classes and roundtables on business strategies and management techniques. Registration is now open for the 2012 BLC, scheduled for March 1-3, 2012, in Dallas, Texas. Previous attendees rave about the breadth and depth of business knowledge they learn at the event each year. As Jeff Kindig, vice president of marketing strategy with AMX, says, "The Business and Leadership Conference is a superb collection of industry leaders discussing topical issues, providing the opportunity for attendees to meet the best of the best and better understand how to run their business."

Aside from industry education, AV Professionals and business owners located in the U.S. can get a lot of free education from their local Small Business Development Center. A program of the U.S. Small Business Administration, SBDC's are local agencies run state-wide or regionally within states as a partnership between federal, state and local governments in cooperation with colleges and universities. Like many of the other educational opportunities I've mentioned in this and my previous article, the SBDC events are generally free or very inexpensive. For the price of an afternoon of your time, you can learn about marketing, finance, management and much more. The SBDC program is so incredibly useful and yet so often overlooked by entrepreneurs and small business owners, it's a crying shame. Take advantage of their outstanding offerings... after all, your tax dollars pay for it... and it's far cheaper than going to grad school for an MBA.

Which, of course, brings us full circle back to going back to school for a Masters of Business Administration. Going for an MBA is a massive investment of both time and money, yet it can be amazingly versatile and beneficial to your career. Nowadays, with e-learning, life-experience credits, and a wide range of enrollment opportunities, going back for an MBA

isn't as impossible as it sounds for a business owner. I, myself, am three-quarters of the way through a dual-Masters program at the University of Maryland. I began the journey while working full-time as a partner at a small integrator in Maryland. Because of my work and family commitments, I chose to do the online courses rather than the classroom versions. With the aid of scholarships from both NSCA and InfoComm, I completed the Master of Science, Technology Management -- Information Systems, portion of the dual-Masters this spring. Right this second, I'm halfway through the first of three semesters solely dedicated to the MBA portion of the dual-degree, and if all goes well, I'll have the MBA by August of 2012. It has been an exhausting effort sometimes, but not impossible, by any stretch of the imagination. Plus, I cannot tell you how much I've learned in my classes that was immediately applicable to my professional life!

Regardless of whether you watch InfoComm webinars, attend the NSCA BLC event, visit your local SBDC for lunch-and-learns and seminars, or take the great leap and go back to school for your MBA, as an AV Professional and a business owner, you owe it to yourself and your employees to devote time to improving your education and skills on business and management topics. Your business will ultimately run smoother and be more profitable and, at the end of the day, that's what it's all about. Er -- unless you work for a non-profit. Even then, you can only benefit from professional education, so what are you waiting for?

To see InfoComm's archived business webinars, visit <http://infocomm.org/cps/rde/xchg/infocomm/hs.xsl/15721.htm>

To get info on the 2012 NSCA Business and Leadership Conference or to register for the BLC, visit <http://www.nasca.org/blc/home.html>

To learn about the Small Business Administration's SBDC program and locate an SBDC near you, visit <http://www.sba.gov/content/small-business-development-centers-sbdcs>

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