

Training for better times

BY EMBRACING NEW TECHNOLOGIES, BUILDING TEAMS OF HIGHLY SKILLED EMPLOYEES, AND TOUTING THE CREDENTIALS THAT PROVE THEIR MASTERY, ASTUTE DISTRIBUTORS ARE PREPARING FOR THE EVENTUAL ECONOMIC REVIVAL.

■ *By Jan Niehaus*

Counterintuitive though it may seem, it appears that the belt-tightening measures implemented to cope with the recession and economic uncertainty have had little impact on training for the electrical distributors interviewed for this article. In fact, just the opposite is occurring in some distributorships.



"While the economy has been a challenge, we not only continue to train, but also have increased training opportunities," said Kelsy Friedman, director of training for Electric Supply in Tampa, Fla. "We want to make sure that when the economy recovers we are ready to service new customers."

"If anything, the economy has given us an opportunity to get even more training," added Tim Schlessler, corporate operations manager for Chicago-based Advance Electrical Supply. "With the recent downturn, we have had more time to analyze our internal processes. Salespeople are not as busy

Training offerings

As a primary link in the chain of supply, manufacturers are in the position to provide distributors with the training they need to succeed. Here is just a sampling of what's out there; be sure to contact your own suppliers to ensure you are taking advantage of the full range of offerings:

Corrosion College, offered monthly within a specialized facility in Gilmer, Texas, provides hands-on experience in understanding and combating corrosion. Designed for any engineer, distributor, or contractor needing continuing education or anyone with a need to learn more about corrosion issues, the course features two days of intensive instruction conducted by professionals in the corrosion protection field. Grants of 1.5 CEUs are available upon successful completion. Additionally, Corrosion College is approved for professional engineering education in all states through PDHseminars.com. For more information visit corrosioncollege.com.

Electri-Flex offers a complete sales training initiative that includes on-site training, online opportunities, and marketing materials. Training is available via easy-to-follow PowerPoint presentations. The sales team also provides on-site training that includes product demonstrations, plant tours, and an overview of the product lines. Training is also available to IMARK members through Bluevolt's training program. To help support training and product knowledge, a complete library of catalogs is available, which is also available digitally on CD. For more information, visit electriflex.com.

Kichler's landscape lighting installation training offering includes introductory and advanced troubleshooting and hands-on installation sessions that result in contractors winning more jobs and distributors selling more products. Kichler also offers edu-

cation for designers and decision makers. For more information visit kichler.com.

Littelfuse's Littelfuse University offers online training in 20-minute modules, customized webcasts (both live and recorded), and the newly introduced "Mini-Module" format where distributors can learn about the whos, wheres, and hows of selling Littelfuse—in just three minutes and with video. In the modules, specific products or markets are targeted with short, to-the-point lessons. Corresponding printed training materials are also available, with even more comprehensive technical information available online. To learn more, contact Dave Scheurman at LFUniversity@littelfuse.com or 773-628-0703 or visit Littelfuse University at littelfuse.com/training or the NAED Learning Center at naed.org/nlc.

RAB sales representatives are ready to hold lunch-and-learn training meetings for inside and outside salespeople. The topics may include an introduction to the company's full line of outdoor LED lighting, training in the use of its lighting layout software, an introduction to the application and energy engineering services offered, or an overview on how to sell energy-efficient lighting using RAB's Greendola. RAB also offers a number of training modules at rabweb.com/learn.php. Learn about the latest in LED outdoor lighting fixtures with a series of training modules on each new LED product line. Additional modules include how RAB can help with application engineering and using RAB on government and military projects. Learn more at rabweb.com or contact a RAB rep.

Siemens Industry offers free product training courses throughout 2011 at its Norcross, Ga., Chicago, and Little Rock, Ark., campuses. Also available are the company's quickSTEP online product courses. Contact your Siemens sales representative to enroll

in a class. To learn more about quickSTEP Online Courses, visit usa.siemens.com/step. Siemens also offers its Power Distribution Road Show, a self-contained traveling counter day and trade show exhibit. The 30' trailer is covered in Siemens product from four different Siemens divisions. Contact your local Siemens sales engineer to schedule a visit. Learn more at usa.siemens.com/roadshow.

Stahlin Non-Metallic Enclosures's SpecTECH Enclosures & Materials Boot Camp offers a hands-on, two-day educational experience designed to give participants an enjoyable but instructional opportunity. Session topics include the history of enclosure applications, the enclosure manufacturing processes, enclosure materials including comparative features and benefits, performance characteristics, properties of enclosure materials and relevance to applications, and codes and regulations specific to enclosure applications. To learn more, visit stahlin.com.

WattStopper's eCampus is a free, interactive learning center. Designed for influencers, including electrical contractors, distributors, ESCOs, and specifiers, the courses cover control applications in residential, commercial, and industrial settings. The site features two offerings: eWards, where participants earn points redeemable for merchandise from the companion storefront; and eCredited, which offers AIA- and NCQLP-approved courses for professionals interested in continuing education credits. Find it at ecampus.wattstopper.com/eCampus.

WattStopper also conducts in-person, one- to two-day training programs at its two training locations (Birmingham, Ala., and Santa Clara, Calif). In addition, district sales managers and sales reps can provide training at on-site lunch-and-learns and counter days. Learn more at wattstopper.com.

as they used to be; a number of courses have been completed, and more lunch-and-learns have been conducted.”

“The bottom line is that training equals better service to our customers,” said Tina Jett, vice president of human resources for Fenton, Missouri-headquartered Butler Supply. “Top management believes that the investment in training is reflected in employees’ ability to serve customers better.”

Jett, who manages the training and development of 200 employees at 28 locations across Missouri and Illinois, added that “Training also gives our employees opportunities to grow. They are building a better future not only for themselves, but also for the company.”

“Why does City Electric train its employees?” asked Brian Gates, IT manager and training director with Syracuse-based City Electric. “Our owner and president, Sandy Rosecrans, has a strong belief in training. She has been in the industry long enough to understand the importance of having well-trained employees. She believes that when sales, counter teams, finance—whatever the department—know more, they perform better.”

At Advance Electrical Supply, too, performance tops the list of reasons to train.

“Training is important to maintain our competitive advantage,” said Schlessler. “From a product knowledge standpoint and in terms of sales skills, we feel that our inside and outside salespeople are simply more knowledgeable—and more skilled—than our competitors’.”

A TRAINING CULTURE

It would appear that top management’s view of training determines the role of the training function inside a company. This is certainly true at Electric Supply.

President and CEO George Adams Jr., in his December 2010 letter to the company’s more than 120 employees, demonstrated the company’s culture and the central role that training plays:

“Similar to my responsibility to maintain a healthy balance sheet, I am also responsible to see that each of you has the tools you need to be your best.

“While the obvious tools include equipment and supplies, no tool is more important than knowledge and the ability to apply it. Experience and mentoring are the only classrooms for obtaining ‘street smarts,’ but ‘street smarts’ alone are not sufficient to succeed in the future.

“As a result, we have an iron-clad commitment to ongoing training for every Electric Supply team member.

“Our individual annual training goals are not just something to do while at Electric Supply; this should be a life-long commitment for each of us to carry well beyond our years at Electric Supply.

“I hope that you share my enthusiasm and commitment for being a life-long learner. Learning allows us to evolve and reinvent ourselves.

“Over the years, you have accepted and met many new challenges as you exceeded my expectations, time after time.

“At Electric Supply, we will continue to learn as a team and realize even greater success. After all, you are the best!”

Given this level of confidence and encouragement, are Electric Supply’s legendary retention rates surprising?

“People come here and they don’t leave,” said Friedman. “Our employees have been here forever. We have one 35-year employee, two 20-year people, and 10 15-year employees.”

TRAINING ROI

In addition to retention, what are some other measures of training ROI?

“I can’t say that I have anything tangible,” Jett reported, “although I have witnessed that employees feel more confident in what they’re doing when they have been trained.”

Schlessler, too, has no hard metrics: “We haven’t tracked the ROI of training. It would be good to establish benchmarks and measure, but it’s not as easy to do with training as it is with sales or on a particular piece of business.”

Searching for ways to monetize the value of training, Gates recalled a training manager position he held previously: “I traveled with the salespeople and played the part of product expert on sales calls, and I helped them close sales. You could say that this product training contributed to increased sales.”

The truth is, it’s almost impossible to definitively establish the ROI in training. Take sales as an example. Let’s say that revenue jumped immediately after an outside salesperson attended a selling skills workshop. But what if, at the same time, one of his key accounts hired a manager with whom the salesperson had collaborated at some other company? What if a major electrical manufacturer just released a new set of product brochures and video demos? And then there’s the possibility that events occurred that the salesperson knows nothing about. Perhaps a sales rep at a competing distributorship has fallen ill and his or her management failed to pick up the reins.

Myriad variables influence sales revenue—and almost every other corporate outcome and employee behavior. Trying to tease them apart to find clear cause-and-effect relationships is an exercise in futility. How much, if any, of the salesperson’s success results from training, the introduction of a friend into a customer’s buying cycle, a vendor’s sales support, or a competitor’s slack performance?

“You just have to have leadership that believes in the non-tangible benefits of training,” said Gates. “I’ve talked to so many different trainers in so many different industries. Upper management has to see the value in it.”

DOCUMENTING THE BENEFITS OF TRAINING

Friedman identified some of the benefits of training that Electric Supply enjoys: “Training helps us fill open or new positions quickly, with little or no disruption to our customers. Training helps keep employees motivated and engaged, and when you have motivated and engaged employees, you tend to have higher levels of job satisfaction and customer service.” Electric Supply has metrics to substantiate these outcomes.

“Electric Supply is known for its customer service, and we

For many companies, the investment in training is reflected in their employees' ability to better serve customers.

make that very clear to new team members from day one," said Friedman. "We do an annual customer satisfaction survey where our team members are rated on their knowledge, friendliness, and other items. As long as we are happy with the results, we know the training is working."

City Electric also pays close attention to customer feedback, as Gates explained: "We hear from owners of companies that they love working with City Electric because our counter and salespeople know what they're talking about. We hear from our salespeople that our customers recognize that we go above and beyond."

A second annual survey assesses the satisfaction of Electric Supply employees. "We ask whether their managers motivate them and if they are satisfied with their work, HR, and training," Gates explained. "Training is a part of our culture. We want to make sure that everyone who comes through our doors has an opportunity to learn and grow, and we like to promote from within."

In addition to the results of its internal survey, Electric Supply has third-party confirmation that its focus on employee satisfaction and development is working: "There's an annual 'Best Places to Work' survey in Tampa, and we were No. 12," Friedman said.

NEW MINIMUM TRAINING MANDATES

2010 marked major changes in training at Butler Supply, City Electric, and Electric Supply, where company-wide minimum mandatory training standards were established.

Jett described the transformation inside Butler Supply: "In the past, training was hit or miss. But we are really, truly trying to change the culture of the company, and there's support from top management. There's a new requirement in 2010 that everyone has to complete a minimum of eight education credits a year."

Employees can attend seminars, complete vendor product training, take online courses, or attend college classes. "The training needs to be structured, not just on-the-job training," Jett explained.

At City Electric, when 20 hours of training per year was mandated at the start of 2010, Gates needed to expand employees' concept of training. For many, training takes place in a classroom. "Now they are getting the mindset that every time they're learning, that's training. Every time a sales rep came in with a new product, that counted. We also had inside



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lunch-and-learns and online courses at our six locations," Gates explained.

As with any new program, there were start-up challenges. "It was difficult for employees to find time in the work week to jump online, and they didn't have a tool to record their hours of training," Gates said. "However, we built a database utility so employees can record their training with just four clicks. Most employees did get the 20 hours."

Electric Supply implemented an even more rigorous training requirement: 24 hours of training a year for each employee. "Fortunately, everyone met that goal, and most team members exceeded it," Friedman reported.

Butler Supply, City Electric, and Electric Supply employees have a great deal of flexibility in meeting the training requirement. For example: "If they want to read a business book that was recommended, they can get credit for a couple of hours of training. They just need to submit a book report or talk with me about it," Friedman said.

"If an employee says he or she would like to take a public speaking course and it will benefit the job and the company, then it's accepted," Gates added.

TRAINING TECHNOLOGY

Squeezing 24 hours of training into an already packed work schedule might not have been possible were it not for one dominant trend: online training.

"In the past five years, I have seen training evolve to more of an online experience, allowing learners to train at their own pace and their own schedule," reported Friedman.

Jett concurred: "There are definitely more online digital options for training."

Looking ahead, Gates said, "We'll see a lot more online resources and tools because they are more cost-effective than pulling people out of the office. We're also seeing that people are becoming more savvy with PDAs and smart phones. They need to learn how to use them to make their jobs easier." Accordingly, City Electric has purchased licensed online instruction on a wide variety of software applications.

feature **STORY**

Gates and Friedman are looking at the same landscape. Said Friedman, "I am starting to see trends moving to mobile learning. So many people have smart phones. We have not yet implemented mobile learning, but we have been talking about it. We have a lot of salespeople out in the field who need access to information on demand—such as information about new products—while they are meeting with a customer. Mobile learning could also help fill in some of their downtime while they are waiting to meet with customers."

In addition to technology, some electrical distributors are placing greater

emphasis on formal credentialing.

"Certification for inside sales and outside sales is becoming more important," said Jett. "Certification brings a sense of professionalism to our industry. It helps employees from a confidence point of view, and it is a validation of their expertise."

City Electric is also placing more emphasis on certification. "One of our employees just completed the inside and outside sales training through the NAED Learning Center and took the exam to be a Certified Electrical Professional. I believe he is the only person in the state of New York who has re-

ceived CEP certification. The reward for employees who complete NAED's EPEC program on electrical products has been an increase in salary and company recognition," Gates reported.

Looking ahead into 2011, Schlessler anticipated, "We're going to increase the availability of training and focus not so much on product knowledge, but more on developmental skills such as sales skills." ■

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