By now you’ve probably heard it a thousand times: “We’re living in the Information Age.” To which you may well respond: “So what?”

After all, you deal in a product—something that must be manufactured, shipped, sold, delivered, installed and maintained. What does the Information Age—or the “knowledge-based economy” or any of those other trendy descriptions have to do with your business?

While such skepticism is understandable, today’s Information Age actually has had a dramatic impact on many aspects of the contracting.
home improvement and building products industries. One of the most significantly impacted areas is training.

In today’s competitive economy, companies can no longer rely on “natural born” salesmen. They can no longer dispatch installation crews who are simply “good with their hands.” And today’s complex and fast-changing supply chains require manufacturers and distributors to have more than just a “knack for the business.” In today’s industry, all these disciplines require training-of all types and at all levels of the organization.

Training—What’s In It for You?

A well-designed and consistently executed training program offers an excellent return for both the company that institutes it and the participants who take part in it. For customers, channel partners and employees, a carefully designed training program can provide valuable information on product features and benefits, installation and maintenance of products, and a variety of other subjects—even company history, policy and procedures. For the company, an effective training program can help improve employee morale, which ultimately helps employees perform their jobs more productively and effectively.

Typical courseware examples among companies in the building materials and construction industries include such familiar “standards” as sales training, product knowledge and installation training, along with newer curriculum entries such as management and leadership development, customer service training and, of course, general computer training and computer software courses. Such programs can help improve a company’s position within the industry by helping to generate more sales while improving profitability, increase customer satisfaction, improve work-force recruitment and retention, improve channel development, enhance results from product roll-outs and introductions, and generally increase manufacturing and inventory-management efficiency.

Key Elements of a Successful Training Program

Among adult learners in a business environment, a key requirement for any training program is flexibility. After all, not everyone has the time or inclination to sit in a classroom. And even if they do, a traditional classroom is not neces-
sarily the most effective way to deliver training.

Today’s most successful training programs offer participants a varied range of learning venues and formats—they may choose to study at home, on the job, in a regional location such as a meeting facility, or at corporate offices, using either traditional classroom settings, self-paced video and text programs, or state-of-the-art Internet learning technology.

The following list is by no means comprehensive—new approaches are constantly being developed—but here are a few of the elements that can be found in many of today’s most successful training programs:

**Instructor** — Led Seminars—The traditional approach to training, seminars are still among the most popular methods of conveying information. They can be held in a dedicated learning center, a hotel meeting room or any other location that accommodates the requirements.

**Video Learning** — Videotape and DVD-based courses provide your training program with added convenience and flexibility by enabling participants to access courseware regardless of time or location. In most instances, the course structure is similar to traditional instructor-led seminars, complete with workbooks and final exams.

**Internet-Based Learning** — With Internet usage growing rapidly, online delivery has become an essential part of any contemporary training program. As with video learning, Internet-based instruction offers both convenience and flexibility, allowing users increased accessibility to training content. In addition, online learning can enhance retention by breaking lengthy or complex subject matter into shorter modules. By the way, if you are developing an online program, be sure your IT and training consultants make allowances to accommodate both dial-up and broadband users, so that all participants find the courseware easy to use regardless of their connection speed.

**Mobile Training** — For even greater training flexibility, one leading building material manufacturer, Alcoa Home Exteriors, has developed a mobile training unit that is housed in a 53-foot semitrailer, complete with a video classroom, hands-on installation facilities, product demonstration areas and more. Within a few weeks of its introduction, this self-contained mobile training facility was booked ahead for six months and more by distributors who were eager to use it to provide added value and further strengthen their relationships with local dealers and contractors.

**Publications** — Creating a newsletter about your training program and its resources helps to reinforce the benefits and advantages of training, while also expanding the audience of potential participants. For example, a manufacturer may choose to mail or e-mail the newsletter to its customer base to introduce them to the program, and to keep them abreast of future new courseware offerings.

**Training Web Site** — A key component of any contemporary training program is a dedicated Web site, which generally will be linked to your main corporate Web site. In addition to offering online enrollment for seminars, and serving as an entry point for online courses, such a site can also provide access to current...
and back issues of your company’s newsletters and other communications devices. It also can serve as a host for forums that let training participants communicate with each other to share best practices, questions and solutions to common problems.

Other popular training-related Web features include an online “gallery” where participants can showcase photos and descriptions of recent projects, and an online “library” of books and articles related to specific courses or to your industry in general. Be sure to include links to online retailers where the items may be purchased.

Above all, the site should offer e-commerce capabilities. Your training program can quickly gain visibility and a sense of identity by offering wearables and other items with your company logo, augmented by the name and logo of your training program. A special section of the training Web site should be dedicated to offering these, along with special tools, products, sales support items or other related merchandise.

**Developing a Training Program That Works**

In addition to flexibility and up-to-date technology a successful training program must have one more important attribute: commitment. Your program will inevitably struggle-and likely be abandoned-if the responsibility for its design and delivery is just one more added duty for an already overworked manager. To succeed, a training program must be a high priority of your company’s top leaders-and the number one priority of the executive who is chosen to lead it.

Just as the term, “Information Age,” is accurate in spite of being overused, there is an element of truth in another popular phrase: “Knowledge is power.” In today’s building materials and home improvement industries, knowledge—and the training that conveys that knowledge—are integral to your company’s success. Whether you are a manufacturer, distributor or dealer, a multi-faceted training program can provide an important strategic advantage by helping you to improve customer loyalty and product usage, further channel your marketing efforts, increase efficiency and improve employee morale and retention.

**About the Author**

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