

back TO SCHOOL —why?

by George Joseph

“Companies have to look at what they’re promising and how they’re training their people to deliver on those promises.”

—Mario Guertin, *Painting in Partnership*.

ACCORDING to the old adage, “Knowledge is power.” But for the painting contractor, knowledge is so much more. Knowing your market, your customer’s needs—not to mention your product—can win you a job, earn you repeat business, and even save you from disaster. The bottom line? Your business will burst from the pack and run to win!

The power of knowledge is not a new concept to painting contractor Mario Guertin, owner of the award-winning firm *Painting in Partnership*. Mario entered the industry in 1989 and benefits from a solid business background, having earned MBA, CPA, and BBA degrees. Even with this impressive resume, however, Mario saw the need to go “back to school” with regard to painting. “I came into the industry knowing nothing about it,” he explains. “But I understood one lesson from my previous business ventures, and it was this: If I was going to succeed as a painting contractor, I had better hook up to a network of professionals who knew their trade well and who took pride in their craft.”

The Value of Chapters, Councils, and Seminars

At the time, there was no chapter of the PDCA anywhere near Mario’s business in Illinois. So in 1996 he set up the Schaumburg

Chapter, and in 1998 he founded the Lincoln State Council. “With these two groups,” Mario says, “I created an environment in which contractors could share knowledge with one another. Part of what I did was to organize seminars, to be held at least once a year. We would attract contractors from other states as well. Over time, I plugged into a network around me that shared my values, and that provided me with the knowledge I needed to make my business grow. Sharing knowledge with other contractors—that was a major source of my learning. And going to national conventions was an eye-opener. This type of education showed me how to handle my business in a different way. It really taught me what it means to run a painting company. It also helped me to train others within my company.”

Why Spend Time and Money on In-House Training?

Whether your company employs one or one hundred, ongoing training is vital if the business is to succeed. However, business owners commonly fear that if they invest in educating their employees, these employees will promptly quit and set up shop for themselves or go off and work for a competitor. “I don’t have that fear,” Mario says. “I think people will stick with companies that are committed to them. They’ll be loyal, they’ll be more

skilled, and they’ll be happy to give more of their talent. In other words, they’ll be better employees.”

Morale is another payoff. An employee who sees that his company is committed to him—and eager to see him expand his educational horizons—will feel more valued. And that employee will, in turn, become even more valuable to the company.

Still, some employers fear that education either in the business or technical side of painting is just too expensive. But a business that fails to invest in training its employees is not likely to remain in business for long. Timothy Crout, who runs Crout and Heller Painting Services in Arizona, explains why. “It costs money to replace staff,” he says. “Investing in education for the staff you have can reduce turnover and so save you money. For example, if a 100-person company had a 25-percent annual staff turnover rate, it could cost that company in the vicinity of \$100,000 a year.” That’s not a hit any company can afford to take.

What is the bottom-line benefit to the company that invests in training its employees? The payoff is twofold. First, educated employees will perform to a uniform standard. “You can have ten painters in a room with



ten different ways of doing things," Mario says. "Education prevents that." As a result, the business owner can confidently offer clients a consistent level of craftsmanship. "The training that my workers receive allows me to have the confidence that they can deliver on my company's promises," says Mario. "And when my workers deliver, that leads to repeat business and referrals—big time. In fact, some 35 percent of my business this year is repeat business—not referrals, mind you, but repeat business!"

Mario points to the second aspect. "My workers have the incentive to bring in their projects under budget," he says. "Over and

over, they've done this. They take pride in the accomplishment."

The PDCA offers its members access to the Craftsmanship Operating Procedures (COPs) that can help a contractor to achieve both of the above-mentioned goals. The purpose of the COPs program is to provide contractors with a practical, consistent method of training their employees. All the craftspeople working for a company learn the sequence required to complete a task in a standardized manner. They are taught what materials, methods, and safety procedures are required for each task. The result? Employees feel more confident that they can perform work that is of

a satisfactory standard. And contractors who provide in-house training using COPs can offer their clients a uniform standard of excellence and craftsmanship. A detailed description of COPs and its benefits can be found in the June/July 2007 issue of DECO.

What About Entry-Level Training?

Technical schools, such as the Lehigh Career and Technical Institute in Pennsylvania, offer three-year courses geared toward high school students. These courses closely follow the Wheels of Learning instruction manuals. In the 1980s, the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) organization developed the "Wheels of Learning" craft training curricula. The PDCA makes the Wheels of Learning instructions manuals available to members at a very reasonable cost. This competency-based, task-oriented training program combines instruction material classroom activities conducted by trade teachers.

Why should young people be interested in choosing painting and decorating as a career? Dr. Hornberger, President of the Lehigh Career and Technical School, says: "A career in Painting and Decorating offers an individual great diversity of tasks and challenges each day. The field allows individuals to develop skills and expertise that are in high demand from both new home owners and those who own historic houses that need restoration. There is also a great need in the commercial and industrial field. A career in painting and decorating provides personal satisfaction because you're immediately rewarded by seeing the visual impact of your work." And what about job security? "Craftsmen can look forward to highly competitive wages and full employment," says Dr. Hornberger.

The PDCA also offers comprehensive courses in both the technical and business aspects of the painting industry. A detailed description of the PDCA's Contractor College Curriculum can be found on the PDCA web site. Timothy Crout, who is a member of the Arizona PDCA

Council, says: "The most popular courses are the Brushing and Rolling Paints and Coatings, the Spray Painting, and the Low-Pressure Water Cleaning courses."

Why these particular courses? Timothy explains: "I believe they're the most popular because they incorporate lab training where students have the opportunity to use and fully understand the tools of the trade." The level one course costs \$525 for 80 hours of training and the level two course \$575 for 110 hours of training.

Of course, those already in the trade—of which there are some 500,000 in the United

States—can also benefit from going back to schools such as the Lehigh Career and Technical Institute. Dr. Hornberger says: "We also offer evening courses for adult students tailored to the groups interests. For example a contractor may need a course on installing 54 inch wall coverings. Our Venetian Plaster and Commercial Paper Hanging have been our most popular courses in recent times."

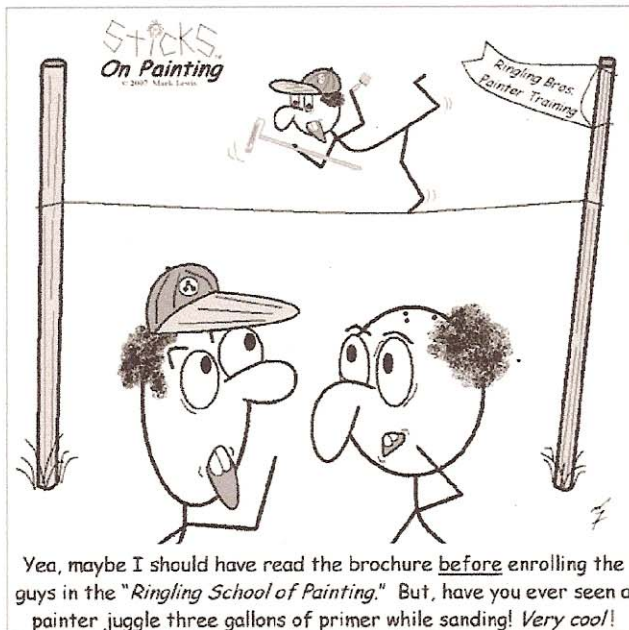
Why should a contractor be interested in hiring a well-trained, entry-level employee? Dr. Hornberger sums it up succinctly. "Ask any contractor," he says, "and the answer will be the same: Well-trained employees make you money."

The Benefits of Going Back to School

Contractors who are willing to invest in on-going training for themselves and their staff are setting themselves up for success. The staff will work cleaner, faster, and more safely. Your company will gain a reputation for craftsmanship, quality, and ethics.

"If you don't invest in educating yourself and your staff," says Mario Guertin, "you're very vulnerable to market conditions and to changes in product." Mario's motto? "You can't thrive—or even survive—without education." 📖

sticks on painting « by Mark Lewis



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