

by Emily Patterson

Plant tours are one of the most effective and fun ways to educate your marketplace.

A field trip is the highlight of just about any kid's school day. Even once we're adults, travelling to see and learn something first hand from an expert isn't just a fun change of pace, it's one of the best ways to learn about a topic. In the spirit of field trips, component manufacturers (CMs) are using plant tours to educate construction industry professionals about the structural building components industry. The second in a series on WTCA's Truss Technology Workshops (TTWs), this article looks at how CMs are bringing this TTW format to professionals and educating them about component construction by opening up their plants.

Educating Professionals

Plant tours stand out from other educational formats because tours can foster an environment to show the structural building components industry on a personal level. "They have a whole new appreciation for the level of engineering and quality that goes into trusses," said Tracy Roe of Stock Components in Hampshire, IL, about the way attendees reacted to tours that his plant has hosted.

In October 2007, on behalf of the WTCA-Illinois Chapter, Stock hosted a tour for members of the Arlington Heights Illinois Fire Academy, as the result of a Carbeck Structural Components Institute (CSCI) initiative to increase the number of tours offered to this audience. Last year, CSCI began contacting fire academies across the country to see if their members would be interested in attending a plant tour. The feedback was positive, so CSCI and WTCA worked with the local WTCA Chapters to pair interested groups with CMs.

During the tour, managers of the engineering, manufacturing, delivery/distribution and scheduling departments explained each area of the plant and addressed attendees' questions about the business. Roe said the group was particularly interested in the manufacturing process, and that the tour proved to be the perfect opportunity for attendees to see components in a new light. "They honestly came in thinking that trusses are like a commodity. They thought that someone calls up and says, 'I want some trusses' and we pull them off a shelf," said Roe, commenting that this is a common misconception about trusses.

Roe said attendees were impressed with the tour and the level of custom engineering and code compliance involved in designing and manufacturing components. It was eye-opening for the tour group. "[The firefighters] were surprised at the customization involved. Just as big a surprise was the level of quality control," he noted. Roe explained to the group that his plant is In-Plant WTCA QC certified. The Illinois Chapter also provided the group with binders of information about components created specifically for firefighters, which included a host of industry resources such as a Carbeck CD, fire service resources flyer, WTCA member listing and SBC articles.

Stock's tour also included a plant tour favorite—a plate pulling contest. This activity is a good way to get attendees involved so they can literally see and feel the strength of a truss joint. Not only is it fun, it is important to demonstrate the strength of the product to audiences who, like firefighters, tend to be skeptical toward the industry. "We took two 2x4s and spliced them together with a plate and had a hammer handy for them to try to pull them apart. That's a huge hands-on thing where they can see

What Are Component Plant Tour TTWs?

A component plant tour is a live walking tour through a component manufacturing facility led by the person most familiar with the facility—you! This makes the process easy because the person most knowledgeable, proud of and able to talk about the facility is involved. With stations situated throughout the tour, participants gain a first-hand understanding of the industry. Plant tours are appropriate for all groups because they illustrate that this is a high-tech and creative industry with a commitment to quality that fosters built construction to be what it is today.

WTCA can help your facility plan, organize and put on a successful plant tour. WTCA staff is here to help in areas such as:

- Assisting with invitations
- Recommending and compiling handout packages
- Providing ideas and resources of stations at a tour, such as WTCA's barrel burn protocol

And just like any other live TTW, truss plant tour TTWs can qualify for continuing education (CEU) or professional development hour (PDH) credit for the group you are educating. WTCA staff can help qualify a tour for the specific CEU/PDH requirements of your audience. Be sure to contact WTCA in advance to allow time to research and complete the steps to qualify your tour.

To start planning your next plant tour, contact Trish Kutz at WTCA at 608/310-6768 or tkutz@qualtim.com.

how strong the plates are," said Roe.

At the end of the tour, attendees said they saw the value in other firefighters receiving the same training. "They were very appreciative," said Roe. And reaching out to this group also proved fruitful with a request to set up permanent training for the academy. Two of the attendees, who are in charge of training for the department, raised the idea of arranging additional tours. "In a follow up conversation, they said they would be interested in making this a regularly scheduled event as part of their yearly curriculum," said Roe.

TIP: Inviting groups into your plant often opens the door for ongoing educational opportunities that put a positive human face on our industry.

Changing Minds

Component manufacturers often credit plant tours with clearing up any misunderstandings that attendees may have about components. In September 2007, the WTCA—Northeast chapter hosted a plant tour for a half dozen instructors and administrators of the New Hampshire Fire Academy. Hosted at LaValley Building Supply in Newport, NH, the tour proved to be the perfect venue to help attendees take another look at components.

"A lot of them had never been to a plant where trusses were manufactured," said Chris Smith of LaValley. The tour followed a truss's progression from a stick of lumber all the way through the shop to a finished product and then followed up



Photo courtesy of Coua Early

with a live barrel burn demonstration based on protocol developed by WTCA. The chapter sponsored lunch for the group and handed out TTW folders that included a sample JOBSITE PACKAGE, along with BCSI B-Series Summary Sheets B5 through B11.

Smith said the tour changed some attendees' perceptions of trusses, noting, "A lot were amazed at how much goes into manufacturing them." He recounted how one attendee changed his mind about trusses as a result of the tour. Early in the day, Smith approached the attendee to see how he thought the tour was going. At that point, the attendee wasn't impressed. "He said, 'This isn't anything I haven't heard or knew already,'" explained Smith. During the course of the tour, that same attendee did hear and see things that were new to him. "By the end of the day, he was one of the gentlemen who asked if we could come to his department [for additional training] because he realized that there was a lot more to manufacturing components," said Smith.

A member of his local fire department, Smith knows first hand that the information firefighters receive about trusses is often cast in a negative light due to a lack of knowledge about our industry. He credits the plant tour format for giving firefighters exposure to new and accurate information. "A lot of times you give a presentation to the group and they say, 'That's just something you staged or set up,' but when you show it in front of them, they really see it," he said.

TIP: Having an employee in your operation who is also a volunteer firefighter host a plant tour for the fire service provides even greater industry credibility.

Educating the Next Generation

While tours often focus on educating today's construction industry professionals, they can also help educate the next generation. In December 2007, Florida Forest Products in Largo, FL hosted a tour for a class of CAD students from the Pinellas Technical Education Center (PTEC), a local trade school. The class instructor, a former contractor, had worked with Florida Forest Products previously, and approached the company to

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Photo courtesy of Coua Early

at a glance

- ❑ Going to see and learn something first hand from an expert is an effective way to learn about a topic.
- ❑ Plant tour attendees at an Illinois manufacturer's TTW event were awed by the custom engineering and code compliance involved in component design and manufacturing.
- ❑ A plant tour in New Hampshire led to an invitation for one manufacturer to present further component education for a local fire department.
- ❑ WTCA staff can assist manufacturers setting up a plant tour in many ways: compiling targeted handouts, providing signage or qualifying the event for CEUs.



Photo courtesy of Coastal Early

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help supplement the class's course work on roofs.

"We showed what trusses are and how they relate to what they're learning in school," said Rick Cashman of Florida Forest Products. Since the attendees were CAD students, Florida Forest Products focused its tour on design. Cashman pointed out that this tour was structured a bit differently than tours they've traditionally done for audiences like fire-fighters because the technical school students already had a good understanding of CAD. "Normally we don't spend a lot of time in the design area. We skip to the fun stuff," joked Cashman. "I think many had some experience coming in but maybe didn't know all the details," he said, noting that one student had worked in a truss plant but hadn't been involved in design.

Highlighting how the company uses truss design software and AutoCAD, Steve Chesley, a senior truss technician and former PTEC student, showed a truss's development from design to manufactured component on the shop floor. Students were able to see how AutoCAD and the trade they are learning can be used in the business world. "We worked with our software and showed how we actually use AutoCAD," said Cashman. "We printed some shop drawings and cut sheets for jobs being built in the shop, so they could compare the sheets to the trusses being assembled." Florida Forest Products also worked with WTCA to customize a handout package for the students which included BCSI-B1, the Encyclopedia of Trusses, the How to Read a Truss Design Drawing TTB, Engineering Components for Efficient Framing and a Florida Forest Products brochure.

TIP: Introducing students to component manufacturing operations promotes careers in our industry and encourages industry knowledge so that wherever they work they will view our industry positively.

Addressing Industry Issues

While many tours aim to educate professionals about the industry and dispel any misconceptions they may have, plant tours are also a great way to address a specific issue. The Northeast Chapter and Reliable Truss & Components, Inc. in New Bedford, MA used a tour in March to open the lines of communication with a building labeling advocate. As anyone who has been involved with discriminatory truss building labeling initiatives can testify to, this is a topic that merits the attention of component manufacturers.

The idea for the tour came about last year when Chief Gallagher of the Acushnet, MA Fire/Rescue Department wrote an article in a local newspaper expressing his belief that trusses with long spans posed a greater safety risk to firefight-

ers than other types of building construction. In the article, Chief Gallagher also called on citizens to support a proposed building labeling bylaw that would require commercial and industrial buildings in the city with trusses to be designated with a specific label. The WTCA-Northeast Chapter rallied on this issue and had chapter member Doug Jeffers attend the hearing. The building labeling ordinance later passed, but the chapter pressed on, setting up the tour with Chief Gallagher to open the lines of communication and work toward building a relationship. Reaching out to the fire service is also a good way to expand the building labeling concept into one similar to the International Fire Code proposal that could enhance fire ground safety.

David Thomas of Reliable Truss says that a plant tour is just the venue for tackling a critical issue such as building labeling and giving an honest portrayal of the industry. "I'm hoping it's going to educate them about what actually goes into the whole process of making a truss that they encounter in the field," he said.

Bringing together attendees' experience with components along with manufacturers' background and expertise, plant tours give participants a much broader view of the industry. "I think the best thing, with any party, is to bring them in and physically show them what you do and what the industry does. It's not just me as a manufacturer; it's a whole industry behind what actually goes into manufacturing and the whole process of building trusses and shipping them," said Thomas.

TIP: Hosting a plant tour is the perfect opportunity to enhance dialogue and find common ground for current and future collaboration.

Resources for Hosting a Plant Tour

To help component manufacturers make the most of their plant tours, WTCA has developed a new section of the WTCA website—www.sbcindustry.com/planttour—offering information on how to host a successful tour. Presented as a how-to guide, this online tool walks members through the steps necessary to plan, coordinate and present a successful plant tour based on a tour's target audience.

"WTCA had some good ideas on the work stations and information and things other people had done," said Cashman. In preparation for his tour, Cashman reviewed a draft of the tour guide before it was added to the WTCA site.

Smith credits WTCA materials with helping his tour go so well. "There are resources out there so you don't have to do it all by yourself," he said. **SBC**

To view WTCA's truss plant tour guide, visit www.sbcindustry.com/planttour. If you have questions about plant tours, contact Melanie Birkeland at 608/310-6720 (mbirkeland@quallim.com) or Trish Kutz at 608/310-6768 (tkutz@quallim.com).

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