

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

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The Need for Education — Where Do the Next Technical Representatives Come from If We Don't Grow Our Own? by Stan Sias

It's an interesting world we live in, don't you think? I've been pondering a question for some time now. Our colleges and universities are turning out very bright lawyers, doctors, engineers and other scholars on a regular basis and somehow they all seem to get absorbed into the system. Where is the next generation of structural building component distributors' salesmen, technical representatives and technicians going to come from? I know that all the major players provide their own proprietary training for their employees and customers, but what about the fundamental industry training? We must plan for the day that the silver lining tarnishes and the rest of the engineered wood products (EWP) and structural building components world wakes up to find itself in the condition it's in today. Yes...today. Who is it going to be that provides the fundamental knowledge that is so critically important to establish the basis from which proprietary interest can be built?

A friend commented more than a year ago on this very issue. "The EWP guys are at the very point that WTCA was at only ten short years ago. Their benefit is that they don't have to invent the solution; they just need to build on what has been done by WTCA. Better yet, why not ask WTCA to help, seeing as so many of the truss guys are also in the distribution chain for EWPs?" asked Tim LaChapelle, WTCA Northeast Chapter President and EWP supplier. A quick look at how far WTCA has come in the last ten years should put a smile on the face of every EWP and structural component distributor in the market. A simple case of gaining all the benefits without having to go through the same mistakes and learning curve, perhaps?

Where is the next generation, or even growth statistics for this generation going to come from? The truth, at least as I see it, is that this industry will not grow until the players decide they are going to invest in the people it will take to do the job...correctly! The road is paved and the hazards are marked, but everyone from there must pay their own way.

The bus is ready to leave...are you going to be on it?

[The Structural Components Distributors Association \(SCDA\)](#) is ready to help you get there. SCDA has developed a Component Industry Technical Skills Evaluation (TSE), an entrance examination if you will, to help you assess the employees you have today and the applicants you have for tomorrow. As Don Groom of Stark Truss put it, "The fundamental programs that SCDA envisions are the first positive step toward gaining the confidence and trust of the engineering and design community as well as the trust and respect of the code enforcement agencies. This basic industry knowledge is a must have if you're going to be involved in the structural component business today."

SCDA was formed to represent the interest of companies that distribute structural components. SCDA's agenda will focus on bringing quality and consistency to our industry through this

emphasis on education. The results of the TSE will let you tailor your training to your specific needs. You may have a great salesperson on your staff, but consider the following questions:

- Can they sell what you are distributing or manufacturing?
- Can the salesperson or technical representative truly convince an architect or engineer, building official or administrator, developer or framer, that what you distribute is any different from the next company?
- Do they really understand the industry, or are they simply out there day-in and day-out regurgitating the same old company line that they learned from Big Jake "back in the day?"

Today's structural component distributors are facing a different set of rules than we did in the past. Today it's all about education. Those that are willing to invest in the industry will succeed, those that do not may not go extinct, they will work themselves to death while managing only minimal profits while exposing themselves to great risk. Education is not only about selling, it is about learning. One must not only learn the benefits, attributes, growth opportunities and success stories, one must learn to protect what he now has from the ever increasing risk of business. One must learn what the real competition is, and steer the course to either avoid or conquer that force.

A decade ago most wood truss fabricators, if asked about their competition, would have named the guy down the street that put out cheap trusses. Today, the knowledgeable component manufacturer will tell you that his competition is the code, fire service, alternative framing methods (i.e. sticks), mold and a variety of other local issues. Phil Barkey, current SCDA President, sums it up like this, "Besides sticks, the biggest competition we have is the misinformed, uneducated and poorly trained people and technicians inside the industry, beginning with the distribution side and including the contractors and code agencies. Industry analysis has shown that the dramatic growth has plateaued because we've maxed out the educated technicians."

Value adding has become more important than price slashing. The direction the industry has taken to become the "total solution provider" has definitely left some people and companies by the wayside. Why? They were not interested in investing in their future. They were not interested in investing in their people. People make companies, people forge relationships, and people make decisions, but people need adequate training.

Roger Gibbs, WTCA Past President, had this to say about investing in people in the field: "Successful companies that have taken on EWP have done well because they have taken on the same business model and mentality as that of a successful truss manufacturing company. In other words, they are successful because of the support and education they provide in the field. They have made an investment in the technical staff needed for creating detailed placement plans. They have a well-educated technical and sales staff, so that when they talk to customers they will be considered an expert and make the customer more comfortable—this will lead to long-term relationships."

Gibbs went on to comment that the challenge is getting company owners and managers to invest in EWP and components as the future of framing and get out of the "commodity products syndrome." His experience is that maybe 20 percent of customers buy based on price, the other

80 percent or more buy based on value (i.e. relationships are still important to people). Why then focus your marketing on the 20 percent?

Bev Gilmore, President of U.S. Glu-Lam Inc., continues down the value-added path, using the complexity of the EWPs and the need for education to their advantage. "We want to be THE source for accurate technical information. By establishing ourselves as the pros in our market, we use other people's confusion to our advantage." Gilmore recognizes that as more and more commodity products get dumped into the market, getting appropriately compensated for your services is more difficult. Personal relationships help in that regard. Attention to detail and understanding customer needs will still prevail most of the time. Having the resources close at hand to provide those services is an investment in their future.

The Structural Component Distributors Association invites you to invest in your future by becoming a member. You will be involved in selecting the educational programs, and content, that SCDA offers as the fundamental backbone of our industry. We want to assist the industry and create the platforms necessary to build bridges between this fundamental education and the member's proprietary training. In this regard, you will help set the standards that will affect your industry and your business. It is up to you, it's an investment in your future.

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