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Serving the Client

CEDIA University's Customer Relations, Business Management Colleges Round Out Professional Career Paths

The call for education and skill-based knowledge is a never-ending theme in our industry. It's a common thread that helps our businesses grow and maintain profitability. That's why in today's cutthroat marketplace, the formalized education path offered through the Custom Electronic Design and Installation Association (CEDIA) helps prepare electronic systems contractors for the opportunities and adversities that wait for them.

The CEDIA University education platform helps entry-level employees or inexperienced newcomers grow into knowledgeable professionals who fill critical roles on their teams. Such well-rounded employees allow owners and managers to spend their time on strategic business operations that help grow their companies' bottom lines. It's the dynamic separating businesses that struggle from the firms that lead the pack.

With that in mind, what can someone expect from a career as a customer relations or business management professional in our industry? And why should any business owner consider continuing education and CEDIA Certification for his or her employees? These questions and others have been explored in prior articles throughout this series leading up to the CEDIA EXPO 2006, scheduled for September 13-17 at the Colorado Convention Center in Denver. In this final installment of the series, you'll learn what CEDIA leadership has planned for career paths in customer relations and business management.

These are increasingly important matters to consider in 2006 and beyond. More than 15 years ago, the electronic systems contracting industry was young and anything but a formal body of professionals. Many businesses who identified with this industry were tiny two- or three-person shops that embodied the old "trunk slammer" moniker. Most business functions—including customer service, business management, project

Electronic Systems Customer Relations

Now that CEDIA University has established a foundation for the curriculum for the technician and designer colleges, it's time to work on the more subjective career paths such as Electronic Systems Customer Relations (ESCR). CEDIA is currently in the process of finalizing the structure for this college. The new curriculum will pave the way for a career path that embraces sales, marketing, customer service, publicity, and outreach. As such, it will be a diversified college appealing to many shapes and sizes of businesses.

The CEDIA University leadership team believes it's important to establish standards for sales processes, marketing strategies and customer service practices—and also some proven methods for publicity and outreach. The team wants to offer sales professionals in our field a structured framework of best practices that will help them close more sales more effectively and increase customer loyalty.

ESCR College students will learn that the craft they have

chosen—selling, marketing, and servicing residential electronic systems—will be a rewarding and sustainable career. But they'll also learn that an education will be an essential part. Formalized education will take them and their peers to new levels and more consistent practices.

Students will discover the instructors at the ESCR College are highly qualified professionals in their field. This team will bring real-world experiences and, in many cases, will have some background in teaching.

The ESCR College focuses on two major areas: One is to build skills in the five specific areas. In addition, we'd like to create a better understanding of each area by those involved in another. For example, sales and marketing professionals are generally outgoing people by nature. That said, the sales profession is a different than the marketing profession. If we can help sales people to understand more about marketing and vice versa, we begin to break down some barriers and upgrade each discipline.

These are not baby steps. We're entering a time in which so many more new-and-young-homeowners expect audio, video and integration in their homes. That's why an increasing number of homes are built with this sophisticated infrastructure. To ensure CEDIA members are ready to meet these demands and truly evolve into the Fourth Trade, the ESCR College will play a central role in CEDIA's strategy.

Our readiness will help us justify any concerns about the returns on investment in CEDIA University. After budgeting for employees to attend ESCR College courses, business owners can expect to grow their sales and sell more profitable systems after they and their employees complete a variety of ESCR college courses. That's because the coursework will be a solid roadmap for their employees' future. We're not just developing good courses; we'll also establish a clear and effective order of courses to build, enhance, and reinforce good customer relations skills.

management, marketing and other disciplines—tended to be the responsibility of a single person. In a better-case scenario, the work might have been divided among a few partners.

Things really have changed, to say the least.

Today's electronic systems contractors employ thousands of professionals in a variety of disciplines. Many businesses are still small in terms of employee count and multitasking continues to be a necessity. But for the most part these busi-

nesses tend to be more complex organizations. More than ever, they also hire professionals in greater numbers and for far better defined roles.

Electronic Systems Business

Because the industry is in a constant state of change, CEDIA University is designing an Electronic Systems Business (ESB) College that helps students prepare for the times. It's a challenging environment, given the constant flow of new technologies, increasingly tough competitors, and never-ending demand for new electronic systems solutions.

Those are just a few reasons why the dream of running a healthy and profitable business can be so daunting. It's no secret that a constant test for owners and high-level managers is whether they're really working on their businesses or spending too much time working in them. But given the nature of small business, it can be tough to avoid that trap.

Answers can be found in the ESB College curriculum, which will offer a distinctive atmosphere in which students can learn how to supervise successful, growing businesses. CEDIA's high-level coursework will help show them how

they can not just survive but thrive in the marketplace. The college will prove to be a critical educational opportunity for everyone from rookie owners and new management professionals to financial officers and even veterans who may need a refresher.

The ESB College will launch with six core areas of focus: strategic planning, business and operations management, legal, accounting and finance, human relations, and new business opportunities.

ESB College students will experience a fresh take on current subject matter tailored to business executives and the decisions they face every day. After all, most industry professionals originally landed at their companies as technicians—not necessarily because they wanted to manage any sort of business they encountered. That's why the ESB College can assist them with a focus on managing business operations and understanding business rudiments such as cash flow management and finance. These basics, after all, are the most important things to learn—or seek as a refresher—for professionals with these responsibilities.

The instructors scheduled to lead the ESB College classes include industry veterans as well as

outside authorities such as certified public accountants and other experts from a variety of professions. That blend of industry insiders as well as new voices from outside our industry will deliver a well-rounded mix of information and perspectives on critical areas of business management.

Every CEDIA member company will find that his or her business will grow with educated customer relations and business management professionals who build their skills and knowledge through CEDIA University. Owners and managers will find their salespeople selling more, their marketers building more awareness of products and services, and their technical professionals and project managers busier with more jobs and more billable hours. Likewise, owners and high-level managers will hone their operations and supervisory skills as they upgrade their business management acumen. In the end, the big picture of profitability and growth will result from the savvy decision to invest in CEDIA University.

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