

RIDING THE LEARNING CURVE

By Deidra Darsa

In a market filled with value-shoppers, green thinkers and seekers of cutting-edge technology, education becomes a critical component to a successful dealership.

Recognizing that many dealers and their staffs remain tied to a busy day-to-day work week, the HPB Education Foundation (HPBEF) created a program that saves its members time and money while providing top-notch training geared for success.

"Our education program should be as flexible as we can make it," said Kristi Long, HPBEF executive director. "So whether you want to take a live class, a class online or listen to a recorded class, we need to be as responsive as possible and provide that service to our members."

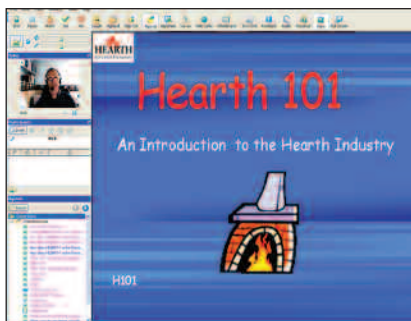
And, flexibility there is: Students enrolled in the HPBEF program can now point-and-click their way to becoming a better informed and certified professional. It's been nearly two years since the first live online classes were offered and now those and the HPB-Expo on-site classes are available 24/7 in an easily accessible OnDemand recorded format. This new option enables folks whose schedules won't allow them to sign-up for live instruction or attend Expo to continue their education in hearth, barbecue and outdoor living.

"That was a major shift," said Rick Vlahos, senior manager of training, HPBEF, noting, "with the recorded version you lose the availability of asking an instructor questions, but you gain

flexibility because it's accessible 24 hours. However, questions can be e-mailed later for explanation."

When the online classes began in 2007, the idea was to give people the ability to communicate with an instructor who not only taught the course, but was there to answer questions. In essence, the learning experience would be like that of being in a classroom, but available online so students wouldn't have to travel to learn. "It's been working great, and we're going to continue," said Vlahos.

Today, there are 75 different classes that are available online – both live and OnDemand – and include those that were offered at past Expos. "We don't teach every live class every month,"



Interactive online instruction with Rick Vlahos.

noted Vlahos, who suggests students check the schedules regularly on www.hpbef.org.

From Colorado to Connecticut, HPBA members have enjoyed the opportunity made available to them with online instruction.

"It's been very convenient," said Rick Church of Colorado Fireside. "We've really enjoyed using the system. We've been very happy with the



HPB Education Member Services Center at Expo.

quality as well, and our customers like to hear that we're always striving to continue our education."

At Colorado Fireside, five employees have taken classes this year, and each maintains their NFI certification. "We've done both live and OnDemand courses," said Church. "There's a little more interaction with the live classes, and that is helpful if you have a question, but overall, I think it's a great asset."

But, notes Church, he and his staff have reaped the rewards of the OnDemand courses, especially if a job gets postponed. "That way we can go ahead and get some training in when we're down," he said.

On July 1, 2008, the state of Connecticut required gas fireplace installers and service providers to hold a special license. Paul Bolton, a vice president of the family-owned business Ener-G-Tech, Inc., saw that as an opportunity. "That's what prompted me to get my license and get certified," he said. "To keep my NFI specialist's certification I need to earn a certain amount of continuing education units (CEUs) without getting retested."

However, he is quick to note that before classes were available online finding the time to take them was a

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problem. "The online courses have made it 100 percent more convenient for me to get the CEUs I need," said Bolton. "If I want to listen at 2 a.m. because I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep, I can do that. It's been a big help."

Bolton also counters his often demanding work schedule with OnDemand classes as well. "I can take those courses online anytime I want. My business changes from hour to hour and sometimes taking classes comes down to convenience and a great price. If I had to go somewhere to take the classes, I would have to pay for the classes plus the travel to get there."

While recorded online classes make for easy access and great flexibility, students must also be prepared to commit to the recorded content that ends with a short quiz to verify completion of the course. This quiz will ask for code words that have been given during instruction and in order to get CEUs for the class, a student must know every code word. That way, says Vlahos, "we can verify to the CEU committee that you have actually sat through that class."

As for the cost, that's new this year, too. This year, individuals can purchase a one-year subscription for \$249 that

comes with unlimited access to all online sessions through March 31, 2010. Additionally, companies can purchase five subscriptions for \$449. "That way a store owner could buy a company package and put five people into the system for \$449," explains Vlahos.

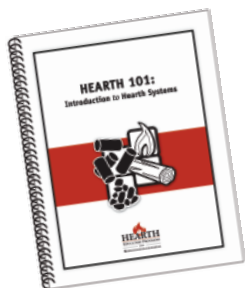
For those iPod owners on the go, downloadable EMP-3 class files are also available, but do not come with CEUs.

These are some of the latest ways that HPBEF is bringing the industry flexible education programs. And, the list of courses keeps growing, says Vlahos. "We'll keep adding to the library in the coming years." 🔥

Hearth 101 – And Then There Was Fire

Using *Hearth 101: Introduction to Hearth Systems* is the most popular class offered by HPBEF. It is the perfect industry introduction for new employees who have never experienced a fireplace or stove, no matter whether it's gas, wood or pellet and need to understand the basic foundations of the industry.

"I've had retailers, manufacturers and distributors put their people through *Hearth 101*," says Rick Vlahos. "If you hire new people and they don't know the difference between a pellet stove and a gas stove, I want them in *Hearth 101*."



And, he means ALL employees. "What would happen if your customer called the company and the receptionist knew the difference between a b-vent and a direct vent, she would know where to better route that call," he explained.

Just ask Ellie Simmons, office manager for WoodWest & Associates, Boulder, CO. "For me, being brand new to the industry, taking *Hearth 101* was really, really helpful." The updated manual and *Using Hearth 101 for Sales and Customer Service* are now available. 🔥

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INSTRUCTORS NEEDED!

Some might say the HPBEF has lofty goals to educate the masses. Others say: Let me help you succeed. If you're that person, we're looking for you. By year's end HPBEF will have 25-live online classes and is actively pursuing industry people with teaching experience. Those currently in the program find the rewards are plentiful.

For Tom Naughton of Grand Mantel, Inc. stepping up to the lectern was an easy decision. After finding there were no courses on fireplace mantels and having a degree and background in education and industrial training, he signed up to teach a course on sizing fireplace surrounds and mantels.

His class during HPBExpo 2009 attracted 40 people and was a success. The challenge was bringing that same success online. "Online is more challenging," said Naughton. "Some people don't have microphones and you have to type explanations that are very technical. You have to have a lot of pictures and graphics, which I do. Plus, when you're teaching online, you're instructing people in Colorado and Florida at the same time, and that's amazing."

Education empowers people, and empowered people will keep this industry strong. And, that is what motivates Michael O'Rourke of Wilkening Fireplace Company

to teach. "We really can only be strong by continuing to educate ourselves and have an exchange of ideas between members of the industry," he said. "I enjoy teaching. I enjoy taking someone who doesn't understand a subject and then watching them as they learn and understand how things work."

O'Rourke is currently teaching an NFI review course for wood and has developed the *HearthCheck* program that teaches dealers what negative pressure in the home is, how to measure it and what to do about it.

Please contact Rick Vlahos at vlahos@hpba.org if you would like to teach a course for HPBEF.