The key to making continuing education successful is making its goal clear and always making it fun.

Education: We keep at it

ff season, in season, middle of the sea-
son. How do you keep up with the
changing face of the industry? How
do you keep your employees moti-
vated, trained and feeling a part of the
industry as a whole? One way is
through continuing education.
Continuing education helps bind people together. It
is a chance for employees, managers and owners to be
productive while breaking the course of a normal busi-
ness day. In-house sessions or road trips help reinforce
what employees already know and teach what is new.

We use continuing education through trade maga-
zines like this one, company training programs and ex-
ternal seminars and programs taught by experts in a
variety of fields. What do you do? Do you make it
available to everyone in your organization? What
about industry association alerts and updates? Are you
sharing the latest information from your local vendor
or what you learned about a promising new wall stone
material to replace something you've always used?

Start small, think big
It doesn't have to be a major project. In fact, continu-
ing education starts at the small scale-level. It starts
with making resources available — magazines left on
conference tables for employees to browse while in the
office, or copies of articles displayed for your employ-
ees to see. I read a lot of material, and much of it I
wouldn't necessarily introduce to my staff. However,
when I see pertinent and timely information, I simply
make copies for them. People respond well to that be-
cause it keeps them abreast of what is happening.
They also know I think it is important for them to be
included and up-to-date on information.

The key to successful continuing education is find-
ing the type of resources that apply to your operation
— from planting and designing to team management
to customer service to accounting practices. If you
listed all of your organization's skills, you would be
surprised at how many different tasks your organiza-
tion engages in and how many people work in those
areas. Make those areas focal points for increased train-
ing to maximize and improve your operations.

Work your organization
One of the important benefits of belonging to a profes-
sional organization is exposure to continuing educa-
tion. Many Green Industry organizations have contin-
uing education programs. Get on a mailing list to find
out more about them.

Your customers and their businesses probably be-
long to different organizations, and some of their semi-
nars may cover a particular subject that you want to
learn. For instance, we searched for a training session
on paperwork management. We wanted a resource
that would help streamline an effective change to sat-
isfy our objectives and manage the administration
more effectively. I asked a customer in the telecom-
munications field, thinking that they might get differ-
ent types of advertisements than those sent to us.
Many of the seminars promoted to his company
crossed subjects we found most useful. Not many
Green Industry professionals were at those meetings,
but maximizing profit, eliminating red tape and in-
creasing employee efficiency certainly isn't exclusive to
our field.

Go to the shows
Trade shows are an excellent way to familiarize yourself
with new techniques, equipment and information. Often, trade shows have seminar speakers that lecture throughout the day. Local colleges and the Internet are excellent resources for finding out about relevant information and business seminars as well.

Finally, if you've been a long-time member of a particular organization, perhaps you have seen some of the same classes or programs offered through the years and have continued to frequent these programs. Or, because you've seen or attended them before, your interest has waned. Are you attending less often than before? If you have seen similar programs over the years, it indicates that they are some of the most popular, fun and instructive programs offered.

**Don't get stale**

But why go if you've already gone?

Material varies from year to year, even for the same programs. What you may have heard three years ago may be different now. I have taken different employees in different years to the same seminar. I get to see some of the same faces that I haven't seen in several years and keep track of how people are doing.

Your attendance at these functions allows everyone in the Green Industry to make friendships, renew contacts and share ideas. A program offered by the Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association last year was called “Distinguished Plants in the Landscape.” My staff appreciated learning about the new plants and it also let us speak to some growers about plants we’d like to see.

People who share ideas make each experience new. There is always something to be gained by going to a program you’ve been to before or think you know everything about because you’ll always find a new approach, make a new contact and rethink something you’ve done one way for years.

The key to making continuing education work is making its goal clear and making it fun.

— The author is president of Natural Landscape Design and Maintenance, Inc., Keego Harbor, MI

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People who share ideas make the experiences you have at seminars fun and new.