

Separate Yourself WITH Education

By Rob Cackowski

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

—Albert Einstein

Much of the hearth industry is focused on what has been successful in the past. We tend to look for our solutions in the rearview mirror and use ways that have always worked before. However, while it is important to know how we got to our current state and what has worked before, our past successes and failures must be evaluated to be understood. As we consider the past, it's imperative we continue to learn and embrace change so that we can move our industry forward together.

Anyone who has been in this industry for multiple years has seen moments that have changed the way we conduct business. Invention and ingenuity brought us the proliferation of the manufactured fireplace, the birth and growth of direct-vent fireplaces, and the popularization of electric and vapor fireplaces. We have been forced to adapt to new codes and standards, such as screen barrier fronts, building and energy codes, NSPS, and the threat of gas bans. Design trends have taken us through linear fireplaces, and flat-screen TVs made us consider

the consequences of putting them above fireplaces. Even changes in how people shop have forced us to invest in the internet and social media, extending our reach and changing how we market to consumers.

Those who have found the most success over the years have learned and embraced how to adapt to each of the above challenges and more. Instead of being frustrated by new developments and trying to solve them with old methods—or resisting the adoption of new practices altogether—the people who educated themselves and learned how they could make themselves or their companies better by looking at these new challenges as opportunities are the ones who flourished. They learned about current and upcoming trends and embraced the changes instead of avoiding them. They took classes on installing new unit types and stayed updated on developing trends and technologies. They listened to industry experts about dealing with codes and standards and adapting



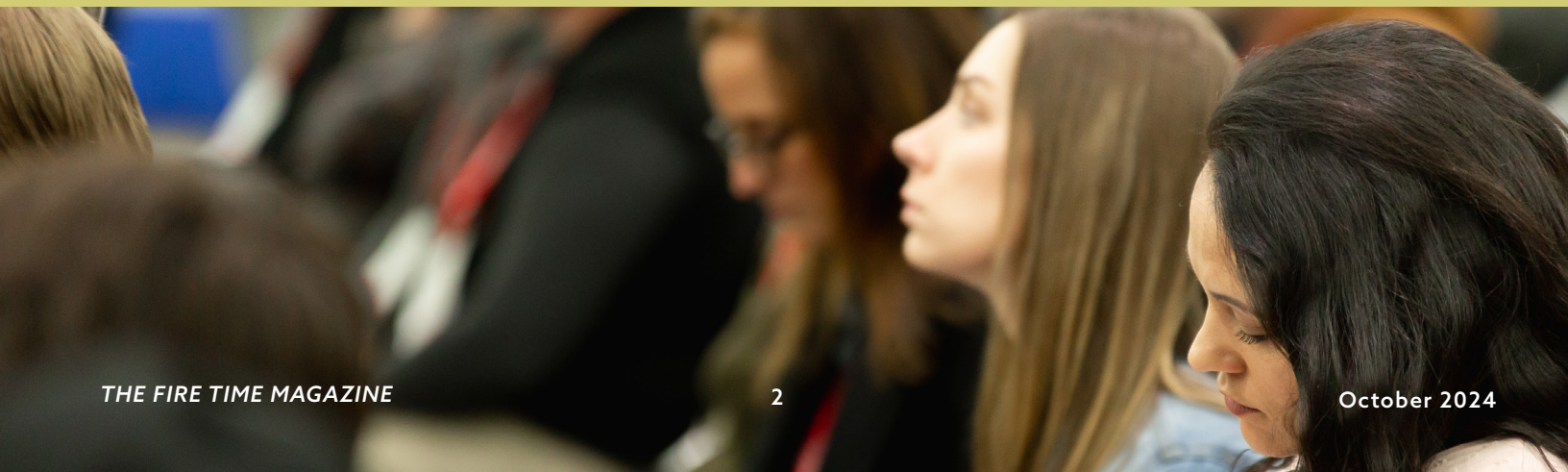
“Embracing change as opportunity is the name of the game to be successful in the hearth industry.”

“ **Never be too proud to learn** and take you and your business to the forefront. ”

to the internet and social media. Why wouldn't you want to avoid liability and reduce risk as a business owner? Or strengthen your skill set and make yourself more marketable as an individual in our industry? Embracing change as opportunity is the name of the game to be successful in the hearth industry.

Hearing so many people in the hearth business complain about problems that can so easily be helped with resources that are readily available is frustrating. When dealers complain that door swings are down, what are they doing to change that? Are they aware of the buying habits of consumers today? There are many free or low-cost classes offered through NFI, events at HPBA and affiliates, and other organizations that can educate dealers on how to market in today's world. What are SEM/SEO marketing and social media? Geo-fencing and ad-words? Never be too proud to learn and take you and your business to the forefront. Insights and answers are readily available through our industry. Go get them!

Here's another common phrase in our industry: "I just can't find employees." Okay, so how do you expand your talent pool? Instead of looking for 20 years of experience, can you take people who are mechanically inclined and get them certified? NFI now offers certification courses both in person and online. These are easily accessible to everyone. There are countless manufacturer and distributor hands-on training classes that are only half full. These take place at convenient places like regional hotels and HPBA events. They are generally low-cost and funded by manufacturers and distributors. Many offer to cover hotels and some expenses based on available co-op programs. NFI, CSIA, NCSG, and other organizations offer marketing classes and dealer sales training. Look for go-getters or talented salespeople and teach them about our industry! And by all means, please educate them on the technical side of things as well. Communication between salespeople, installers, builders, and homeowners is critical. Having technically trained salespeople will save you countless headaches and possible financial issues if the right information is communicated.



What's truly remarkable about the hearth industry is the tremendous support we have at our disposal. Our HPBA offers members access to marketing data and studies. They have people dedicated to focusing on government affairs, solid fuel issues, gas issues, and codes and standards. These people fight for our industry and develop means for us to contribute with minimal effort. These include items such as letters to government officials that are easy to fill in and tracking of litigation in your area. To educate salespeople, the HPBEF and NFI have developed certification courses for core, gas, wood, pellet, and even hearth design specialists. Several states have even begun to adopt NFI as the required certification for their installers. The HPBA also offers online continuing education courses on hundreds of topics, including internet marketing, social media, technical troubleshooting, and everything in between. HPBA affiliates have offered everything from speakers to hands-on training at each of their events. All of these

resources are at minimal cost and are provided through concerted efforts between manufacturers, distributors, dealers, and volunteers.

The hearth industry is on the edge of a great transition. Many of the "old guard" are beginning to turn the reins over to the next generation. (And there are even courses on transition and succession plans!) More than anything, we need to take advantage of the educational opportunities our industry provides and look forward to the future. The only thing that will remain constant is change, and it seems to be picking up pace. The next group who embraces change and moves to understand it will separate themselves and quickly become the leaders of the next generation in hearth.



**"The next group who
embraces change
and moves to understand it
will separate themselves
and quickly
become the leaders
of the next generation
in hearth."**

