

Wholesalers Find HVAC Test Proctoring & Training Integral to Traffic & Sales

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Contact:

Ross Soyka - Dir. of Mktg.
Mainstream Engineering
(321) 631-3550
rsoyka@mainstream-engr.com

John Parris Frantz
J.P.F. Assoc. Communications
(773) 871-2600
john@jpfcomm.com

HVAC wholesalers that provide training and certification tests are experiencing direct sales increases from their efforts, not to mention the good will and loyalty it creates with customers.

Getting potential customers in the door is the first step toward developing a new customer base, but that first step can be costly in marketing and advertising. Therefore, some distributors are relying on certification exams and product training seminars to inexpensively draw traffic and subsequently new sales.

With the prevalence of certifications required of HVAC technicians today, proctoring exams is a trend many wholesalers are tapping. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Section-608 certification for example, which enables refrigeration service techs to buy refrigerants under the EPA's compliances associated with the Clean Air Act is mandatory. Proctoring these certification exams introduces newly-certified techs to a distributorship and also brings back the veterans for technical updates.

"Many entry level refrigeration service techs tend to make their first refrigerant purchases here, because this is where they passed their EPA-608 certification test that enables them to purchase refrigerants," said Vickie Smith, test proctor/counter sales, for the Chattanooga branch of the 112-location HVAC distributor, C.C. Dickson. "Test proctoring also gives you another chance to win-over customers from other areas when they come here to update their certification."

Getting a customer in the door for a certification test, presents an immediate opportunity for impulse or convenience sales, according to Smith, who has proctored hundreds of tests over the last 10 years. C.C. Dickson proctors tests for Mainstream Engineering, Rockledge, Fla., North American Technician Excellence (NATE), Arlington, Va., and Refrigeration Service Engineers Society (RSES), Des Plaines, Ill. C.C. Dickson has built such a reputation test proctoring in Chattanooga that many competing distributors refer their clients to them for certification, according to Smith.

Test proctoring and training is also integral to the corporate philosophy of HVAC distributor, Johnstone Supply, Kenilworth, N.J., which is owned along with four other Johnstone branches by Z & Z Supply Inc., Kenilworth. The branch offers proctored tests for NATE, Mainstream Engineering, plus R-410a safety training. "We want training to be synonymous with our branch name among our customers," said Kate Zimmermann, director of training development, Johnstone Supply-Kenilworth. "When a service tech needs training, support and certification, hopefully they think of us first."

Because refrigeration certification generally requires studying, even for the seasoned veteran that needs updates, preferences generally point to test products that offer self-study materials. Mainstream Engineering's Qwik-608® is a fast-track certification test with a self-study CD-ROM and booklet included to allow self-pace home studying. Smith points out instances where service techs sometimes fail the EPA test, but then pass it easily after using high technology training guides. The Qwik-608 is also available in Spanish, which helps Hispanic techs pass that struggle with English versions.

Johnstone Supply—Kenilworth's Valerie Conforti, systems information manager, agrees that support materials are important in proctoring tests. Previously, the branch was proctoring university-produced tests that were better-suited for trade school graduates of refrigeration classes. Veteran techs and entry level techs without any or recent trade school training struggled with the tests because of the lack of study and support materials. When Mainstream Engineering's Qwik-608 test/self-study materials were added to the Johnstone Supply catalog, Conforti immediately replaced the university test. "We did teach a three-hour course, but when combined with the two-hour test it became an all-day event that neither the applicants, teachers, nor branch proctors had time for," said Conforti. "Any certification test that offers at-home studying through CD-ROM's, DVD's, books or on-line studying is definitely the trend with our customers."

Electronic Vs. Paper Tests

While some distributors have gone almost totally to electronic testing, C.C. Dickson still finds paper tests preferred with its customers. "There's also a fairly large segment of techs that aren't comfortable enough using a computer," said Smith.

Conversely, the majority of Johnstone Supply--Kenilworth's proctored tests are electronically administered on a one-by-one basis by appointment in a conference/classroom environment. "Online testing is definitely more popular here because the results are almost instantaneous, rather than waiting a week for the graded test or paying extra for express results," said Conforti.

Conforti admits that online tests can be intimidating for those service techs that aren't computer savvy, but once a proctor sets up the test, most applicants can navigate easily. Language barriers were once more of a concern than computer literacy, however Mainstream plans to offer online testing in Spanish sometime this year, according to Conforti. For certain certification testing, Johnstone Supply does provide paper tests if the student requests one.

Marketing

Johnstone Supply—Kenilworth assertively markets its training and test certification offers through periodic direct mailings, plus counter flyers and showroom signage. Additionally, counter people verbally promote and recommend events and tests. Mainstream Engineering also distributes the 1,000 hits/day it receives at www.epatest.com to distributor dealers located in a website visitor's respective zip code.

Additionally, Johnstone Supply-Kenilworth sends a group email to customers that signed up for email alerts on upcoming training and certification events.

Testing Environment is Important

Unlike training seminars, which many distributors hold in their warehouses or remote site such as a hotel conference room, testing rooms should be on-site, quiet, and have indoor air comfort such as air

conditioning on hot days. Smith's tests take place in a vacant office at her branch. She prefers to administer the test to three or four techs in separate rooms she can oversee during the testing process.

Training is important to sales and integral in preparing the HVAC professional for every-changing technology, according to Zimmermann, who has always made education a priority at the branch. For example, the Kenilworth Branch is taking Johnstone University—a training program for Johnstone distributors—a step further and adding courses for customers that will be taught by branch educators. This will complement certification exam proctoring, on-site manufacturer-sponsored training programs, and other training vehicles. Johnstone Supply focuses their training program by addressing the needs, learning styles and requests of technicians through their online offerings and classroom style courses.