

Training and Education for the Stone Industry

by Frederick M. Hueston

Chief Technical Director, Stone Forensics

Many industries have formal training programs where you can learn the trade. There are programs for general contractors, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, etc. Many of these classes are offered by community and technical colleges. But, what about the stone industry? Where does one go to learn how to install, fabricate or restore stone?

A Little History

The stone industry really never offered any formal training programs in the past. All the training was done on the job. There were lecture based short seminars that were offered at trade shows and expos but these were very generic and did not provide hands-on training. In 1991 I developed the first formal training program and founded The National Training Center for Stone & Masonry Trades (NTC). These first classes incorporated lecture as well as actual hands on training. The courses were outlined and developed as if for a trade school or college.

Today, many others offer training programs. A caveat however is that a significant number of these programs are sponsored and presented by distributors and suppliers who have an interest in selling their products. There is still useful information to learn from these courses but one must be aware that they will be presented with training with an agenda (a sales pitch).

What to Look For in a Training Program

Quality training is essential for launching you toward a successful business. When choosing a training course you want to make sure that the instructors are highly experienced in their respective craft. While experience is critical the instructor must also have the ability to teach. I have seen many instructors and presenters in this industry that seemed to like to hear themselves talk with little or no concern as to whether the student was actually learning the material. All too often many instructors do not have their facts straight and surprisingly will make up facts. I have seen this time after time. A good instructor will make sure to point out facts and back them up with proof. If an opinion is offered it will be clear that it is an opinion.

Types of Training

There are several ways to receive training and many methods. The following will explore these methods.

Lecture

Lecture is the most popular form of training. This is where the instructor gets up in front of a group and presents. He/she may use Powerpoint, slides, flip charts, video, etc. to emphasize points. This is the method of presentation that you will see at trade shows and expos. The advantage of lecture methods is that a lot of information can be presented. The disadvantage is that the student will rarely absorb all the information. This is why it is important to have all the information presented supported with hand outs, etc. Another disadvantage is that many adults can be bored easily in this type of learning environment.

Hands-on

Hands-on training is perhaps the best way to learn any of the stone trades. This is where the student actually gets to work with the tools, etc. One must be careful when looking at training programs that advertise “hands-on.” If the instructor is doing all the work and only demonstrating the techniques and not allowing the students to perform the tasks, this is not truly hands-on. Another thing to watch for is that there is enough equipment to use so that you don’t have to wait around for your turn at hands-on. A true hands-on class will allow you to not only work with the tools but to have time to practice the techniques, etc.

Online

With the advent of the Internet, there is now training that can be taken online. This type of training is similar to the lecture method. There are a number of advantages to on-line training. The most obvious is convenience. You don’t have to travel. Many on-line training can be taken at whatever time is convenient for you while others are live and you simply need to log onto your computer at the designated class time. Another advantage is that many on-line training courses can be recorded and viewed again and again. The disadvantage of course is that it won’t give you the benefit of hands-on training, but for many topics, on-line is an ideal option.

Just remember that training is a continual process for every trade and profession. The best business owners and craftsman know that they have to continue to be updated with new techniques and methods.

A Couple of Personal Recommendations

I personally recommend The Stone and Tile School. Each of the instructors is a highly seasoned craftsman in their own right and you won’t be subjected to sales pitches disguised as a true training program. The hands-on courses offered are intensive -- be prepared to work. Standing around waiting for your turn at the equipment is never a problem since each student has their own equipment to use throughout the courses. The facilities are truly unmatched. For example, the stone restoration training facility offers more floor, wall and countertop space than any other training facility out there. The tile and grout facility is also unrivaled in the total square footage of training floors and walls. For more information, visit The Stone and Tile School (www.thestoneandtileschool.com).