



BY MIKE MIAZGA

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Photos by Nicole Krawcke/Supply House Times

Bradford White Product Training Manager Wade Poland demonstrates the benefits of a product during a recent training session at the manufacturer's International Technical Excellence Center in Middleville, Michigan. The iTEC facility sees more than 1,000 customers each year.

BRADFORD WHITE TRAINING: 'IT'S WHO WE ARE'

Water-heater manufacturer and subsidiary Laars make sure their customers are armed with the knowledge to win and retain business.

Stew Chaffee, CEO of Aston, Pennsylvania-based manufacturers representative firm Rich-Tomkins Co., puts into clear focus the major benefits of having properly trained customers.

"It costs five times more to do a job twice," he says. "Our customers want to better understand today's equipment and how to install it properly so they can be more profitable."

One of the manufacturers Rich-Tomkins represents is Bradford White Water Heaters, which through a number of means has taken customer training to the next level.

Whether through hands-on training classes at its state-of-the-art, live-fire corporate iTEC facility in Middleville, Michigan, or through the training initiatives of its legion of A-list manufacturers rep firms, Bradford White and its subsidiary company Laars Heating Systems ensure their customers are armed with the knowledge needed to best sell, install and service Bradford White and Laars products.

"Every member of the Bradford White team understands the importance of the end user," notes **Bill Horsman** of Albertson, New York-based rep firm Dellon Sales. "Bradford White has worked hard to brand themselves as a company that works with wholesalers to make sure there is a relationship and a place for end users to go for assistance. Training and customer relationships are pinnacles of their success."

GO RIGHT TO THE SOURCE

On a recent summer morning, *Supply House Times* had an opportunity to see Bradford White training up close at the company's iTEC facility (which stands for International Technical Excellence Center) in Middleville, Michigan, located in the Grand Rapids area of the state. The 18,500-square-foot building is LEED Gold certified.

The Middleville training center, loaded with live-fire Bradford White products, hosts one to three groups a week and sees some 1,000 customers a year, notes **Wade Poland**, LEED AP, Bradford White's product training manager.

The center also has a large theatre-style classroom/lecture area. On this particular day, customers, after a breakfast networking session, started in the theatre area and were asked what they wanted to accomplish during their time in Middleville. Answers ranged from "I want to know how it works so I can sell to my customers," to "I want to brush up on my diagnostic skills so I can guide our customers instead of directing them to tech support," to "It's easier to diagnose when you know how it is put together."

After the classroom chat, customers were briefed on a variety of Bradford White products before starting the main event of the morning. Bradford White trainers put glitches on a variety of products in the live-fire lab and challenged training customers to fix the problem areas. Bradford White trainers were on-hand to offer advice and encouragement during the

hands-on session that also fostered camaraderie between attendees.

“For me, I hope to gain more knowledge of the products so I can help my customers diagnose problems,” says **Chris Dudas**, of Charlotte, North Carolina-based rep firm Snider Inc. “When I get a phone call, instead of them calling tech services, I want to be able to guide them in the right direction of the things they are looking for to solve the

problems they have with the heater.”

On this particular day, Snider brought in North and South Carolina-based plumbing contractors for Bradford White training. That list included Yaro Plumbing’s **Yury Voytsyk**, Pipetechs’ **Jason Lewis** and **Angelo Roberts**, Carolina Cool’s **Chris Justus** and **Sean Zambito**, Kay Plumbing Services’ **Christopher Anderson** and **Barrette Grand**, and Meetze Plumbing’s **Lee Hagins**.



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Rich-Tomkins CEO Stew Chaffee holds court during a Bradford White training session at the manufacturers rep's dedicated training facility in Aston, Pennsylvania. Photo courtesy of Rich-Tomkins Co.

“This trip is about trying to get more knowledge of commercial and residential units so we can take it back home and give the information to our coworkers,” Kay’s Grand says. “The really important part of iTEC is them breaking all this information down for us that lets us gain more knowledge about these units.”

Snider’s **Phillip Ayers** notes trips to Michigan allow customers to be exposed to the Bradford White brand. “Any time we have a chance to bring in wholesale and contractor customers who want to advance in their market by learning directly from the manufacturer, this is the perfect facility to do that,” he says.

Meetze’s Hagins had several objectives in mind during his Middletown experience. “What I really want to gain from this experience is learning more about how these heaters work, the efficiency and applications, and then compare them to others models and manufacturers and applications in certain situations to what benefits the customer the most,” he says. “I’m very hopeful to learn more about that and what makes Bradford stand out from other companies, and what would make it work better in our market, for our company and for our customers.”

The final day of this particular training event saw customers tour Bradford White’s nearby massive 1-million-plus-square-foot water heater manufacturing facility. “We get a chance to fix units and then see how the products are manufactured,” Ayers adds.

Poland says the plant tour always is a major



Contractors and reps team up to repair a water heater during a recent hands-on training session at Bradford White's iTEC facility in Michigan. Photo by Nicole Krawcke/Supply House Times.

educational hit. "Our customers see how the water heaters are built from start to finish," he says. "It's a very big eye-opener when they see the process."

Onsite training opportunities also are abundant out of the Laars Customer Center in Rochester, New Hampshire. The Laars facility features a 70-seat classroom that allows for live-fired equipment up to 1,000 MBH in size to operate in the front of the room. Laars hosts more than 1,000 customers and engineers a year at the Rochester facility or at regional training facilities. Here, the primary focus is on the boilers produced for Laars and Bradford White customers alike, with products ranging from 50,000 Btu/h to 5 million Btu/h.

BRINGING TRAINING TO THE CUSTOMER

The iTEC and Laars Customer Center facilities are far from the only means of training the two companies provide. Bradford White and Laars manufacturers representatives are equally proactive when it comes to training in their respective markets.

Rich-Tomkins has 3,000 square feet at its Aston, Pennsylvania location dedicated to training with live-fired equipment and cutaway heaters. Each Rich-Tomkins session on Bradford White products is four hours and covers troubleshooting products, "which ties directly into proper installation practices," Chaffee notes. "We occasionally take the training on the road for customers who are at a great distance."

Chaffee says more times than not, these training sessions are not one-offs. "Most plumbers who attend return for additional training, which tells us the ROI of their time paid off, which positions our agency as a good partner

for them to align with on many products," he says. "By helping ensure our products are installed properly, hours aren't wasted on callbacks and additional time from our team trying to figure out what went wrong."

Dellon Sales also champions Bradford White/Laars product training, whether at their facility, the manufacturers' training centers or onsite. "We love being onsite and getting into

the weeds and working with the end user in their own environment," Horsman says. "One of our favorite activities is taking customers to both Bradford White and Laars training facilities or having the working trailer visit our customers. They are able to meet experts and they get to touch live products."

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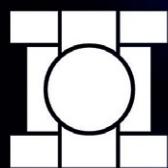
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"Training benefits everyone. Our customers understand the products better and are able to work with them easier. It also allows them to give positive and constructive feedback to the manufacturer to work on as they update and advance product lines. For Dellon, it allows our associates to continue to deepen their product knowledge and become the expert for our customers. In the world we live in, something always is changing and we need to continue to grow to make sure we don't get left behind or, even worse, give misinformation."

Kelly Michel, president of St. Paul, Minnesota-based Michel Sales Agency, notes Bradford White and Laars has equipped the rep firm with 16 working models to use in local training classes that range from 500,000 Btu/h water heaters to 1.5 million Btu/h boilers.

"We try to encompass the entire installation from proper gas pressure, water quality, product startup, operation and troubleshooting," he says. "Bradford White and Laars' commitment has been extraordinary. The tools/products to keep our facility up to date is an ongoing process and investment. They are a clear-cut full partner. The more training, the more confidence our installers have in our products. We try to differentiate ourselves from the competition by offering this top-quality training. Our distributor salespeople know we have their backs and can offer quality training to their customers."

Poland says providing this high level of training is done so with the entire supply chain in mind. "It trickles all the way down," he says. "We are creating happy customers who have great experiences from start to finish. Knowledge is power. The more knowledge we can give, the better the customer experience."

Bradford White Director of Technical Services **Dustin Bowerman** says demand for training continues to skyrocket in an ever-changing marketplace.

"With technology changing in our industry quicker than ever, keeping customers on the cutting edge of the how's and why makes them more comfortable with change, and us, the manufacturer," he says. "This creates confidence, contributing to contractors successfully making repairs, and to their customers' overall satisfaction."

"Demand for training continues to grow at all levels. Distributors and reps are in constant motion with coordination of training functions, in house or on the road. Their strong support and demand they create is validation of our programs."



Laars hosts some 1,000 customers per year for training at its Rochester, New Hampshire-based Laars Customer Center. Photo courtesy of Laars.