

Social Learning for Trade Show Exhibitors By Christine Christman

“You can’t teach people everything they need to know. The best you can do is position them where they can find what they need to know when they need to know it.”

- Seymour Papert, MIT

You might have noticed that “on the job training” is taking on a new personality with the advent of online and mobile learning. Whether you work for a company that provides formal training and a budget for ongoing learning, or a start up where learning about your job is a daily challenge, you are probably expected to take more initiative in staying up to date with job-related skills.

In the trade show industry, you’ll find a nice variety of opportunities for formal skills training. A few of the events are listed below, with the links to their sites:

[Exhibitor Show 2012](#)

[Exhibitor FastTrak](#)

[HCEA Annual Meeting](#)

[TSEA Red Diamond Congress and Local Chapter meetings](#)

But the mode of learning, dubbed “social learning,” requires that individuals and teams take responsibility for their learning and performance improvement. Here are a few comments from a blog post that I wrote for the Exhibitor eTrak Blog: [Learn While You Work or Become Obsolete](#).

“The departure from the corporate norm, here, is that it is no longer just the responsibility of the training department to assess learning needs and provide solutions. According to the learning pundits, a shift is taking place in organizations where individuals and teams are using social media tools to create learning content. The most commonly used are Wiki’s, sites that can be quickly developed and accessed for contributions which, together, create a collaborative learning tool.”

“At what point does information sharing become “social learning”? When you tweet out that you are looking for a vendor? When you use LinkedIn to pose a question to a group you belong to? When you share information about how you compile and analyze show results for your reports? When you find a great online seminar and share it with coworkers and industry peers is that “social learning”? Like the term social media, the term social learning is an emerging concept still struggling for a clear definition. But watch for instances where you will be expected, if you are not already, to analyze your program’s performance, and find the learning to move to the next place. Are you seeing social learning expectations in your workplace?”

The good news here is that a variety of social learning opportunities are already available in the trade show industry. Here’s a few to consider:

LinkedIn Groups – Go to LinkedIn and search on trade shows. I was surprised to find 20 pages of groups that defined themselves as associated to trade shows.

Blogs – If you don't currently use a feed reader to aggregate and peruse blog postings, you might consider getting started. This is a great way to get snippets of information and education while you work. Here's a great post by Chris Brogan on how to use a feed reader: [Use Google Reader to Blaze News](#). I followed the instructions he provided and now use Google to follow 50+ bloggers just in the trade show industry.

Bookmarks – You can collect the pertinent data that you see on blog posts in a bookmarking service such as Google Bookmarks or Evernote (there are a host of these available, you don't need to stick with these two). These are the two that I use. They are both great tools for organizing snippets of data that you might want to return to for reports, staff training, or other educational opportunities.

Online Learning – [Exhibitor eTrak](#) and [TSEA](#) both offer online seminars. Exhibit Surveys offers a free ROI calculation tool on their website: [ROI Tool Kit](#).

Learning is all about accessibility, now. Getting the information you need, when you need it. And for trade show exhibitors who don't sit at their desks everyday, and might not have a week to dedicate to a learning conference, there are now a variety of opportunities to access learning tools.

Christine Christman has worked in the trade show industry since 1981. As the first staff writer for Exhibitor Magazine, she helped develop the research standards and editorial format that is still in use today. Christine has published hundreds of articles and three books on trade show marketing: *The Handbook of Trade Show Marketing*, a collection of articles published by *Exhibitor Magazine*; *The Guide to Successful Exhibiting*, a self-study course published by Skyline Displays; and *The Complete Handbook of Profitable Trade Show Exhibiting*, published by Prentice Hall.

Christine also worked as a consultant with Communique Exhibitor Education where she trained exhibit staff and wrote award-winning manuals for Fortune 500 Companies such as IBM, US West Communications, and Eli Lilly Pharmaceuticals. Christine helped to develop the Exhibitor Show CTSM program and worked as its Executive Director until 10 years ago when she took a break from the industry to work on her MA in English. She recently returned to Exhibitor Media Group to help develop the Exhibitor eTrak online learning program. Christine is working on a new, online resource "NowWhat? eGuide for Trade Show Exhibitors".