

# Continuing turf education important & available



THE FIRST TIME ERIC FASBENDER ATTENDED AN STMA CONVENTION he noticed that “these guys with blue blazers on were the guys who people kept coming up to and talking to all the time.”

Fasbender, who back then considered himself “a rookie groundskeeper for a minor league baseball team,” kept his eyes and ears open.

“It wasn’t hard to figure out that these guys were the legends in the industry,” he said. “I started to learn so much from them, and I decided right away, ‘That’s who I want to be.’”

In the decade since, Fasbender, who recently was promoted to assistant director of athletic facilities and grounds at Louisiana State University, has earned the right to wear his own blue blazer, bearing the CSFM logo.

The Certified Sports Field Manager designation signifies a small percentage of STMA members who have made continuing education a priority and passed tests to prove their knowledge. A CSFM patch says its wearer has spent considerable hours in seminars, workshops, conference—not just learning but sharing time and talents with others. It’s an assurance that the bearer is current, knowledgeable and up-to-date in the sports turf industry.

For Fasbender and others like him, a focus on continuing education pays a dividend beyond catching up on the latest in agronomy or irrigation, pesticides or fertilizers. By attending training events, he said, the benefit of networking with others, including learning from the “legends in the industry,”

helped propel his career.

STMA convention organizers and continuing education specialists acknowledge that it’s hard to take time out of busy schedules to travel to conventions or workshops.

Sometimes it’s even hard to carve out an hour to sit in front of a computer for an hour of self study. But continuing education and networking with peers is the way to ensure that all stakeholders are getting the best possible results through the most efficient means.

“Turf management is only about one-third of the job,” observed Pam Sherratt, STMA board member, chair of the STMA conference education committee and a sports turf extension specialist at Ohio State University. “There’s dealing with people, budgets, office politics, fundraising.”

Those topics are non-technical, but important, parts of STMA’s training opportunities.

“It’s all about learning and taking it back home to help your facility,” said Mike Goatley, an STMA officer and associate professor of crop, soil and environmental sciences at Virginia Tech University, acknowledging that “the recession has made it harder to get people to attend, but we’re still hosting a conference, and we’re putting a lot more online so that members can have access to information any time, day or night.”

Sherratt pointed out that the land grant universities have excellent extension services and that their bulletins can be downloaded for free at one’s convenience. Also, she said, STMA sponsors webinars and provides study materials for certification programs. And, even if you can’t make it to a convention, sometimes the workshops can come to you.

Jeffrey Knight, central region education manager and instructor for Ewing Irrigation, a distributor of landscaping products, said his company will bring training to school district or park department meeting rooms, as well as to Ewing branches around the country.

“We’ll call a city or water purveyor and get a meeting room and do a one- or two-hour training session,” Knight said. “We’re aiming for the guys in the field. We want them to see training as an investment.”

Knight said Ewing classes are especially popular in states that require licensing, certification or continuing education credits for installers of irrigation equipment. Texas, for example, requires irrigation installation companies to have at least one licensed person on staff that has taken a 36-hour class and passed a tough state exam, with a 45 percent passing rate, Knight said. Oregon, Louisiana, California and Florida also have varying levels of licensing or certification requirements for installers of irrigation equipment, he added.

Ewing classes also are eligible for continuing education units, complementing the continuing education programs of the Irrigation Association, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, the Oregon Landscape Contractors Board, the Professional Landcare Network, and STMA’s CSFM program.

Educators emphasize that the ability to grow grass is just the starting point for succeeding in turf management. For example, “some people may not be comfortable with the math involved in calculating pressure losses in an irrigation system,” Knight said. “We can train the hands-on guys in the field to determine head coverage, to not put too many heads on a valve, to be efficient in scheduling and not waste water.”

Knight said the intent isn’t to be an infomercial for company products although sales and customer loyalty is a goal. The overarching intent is for both trainer and student

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to be perceived as industry experts.

Turf experts acknowledge that some of the basics of turf maintenance can be easily taught on the job, but it’s a mistake to take a been-there-done-that approach to continuing education.

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Also, “a large majority of the STMA membership is looking for basic help with fertilization, watering, feeding and renovation,” Sherratt said. “A small number are looking for new research and new gadgets. Others are looking for information on the personnel and budget issues. These are all presentations that we’ve made at conferences and that people can find online.”

Goatley said he’s detecting strong interest in more training from parks and recreation employees, partly because of high turnover and an

influx of inexperienced workers in some of those jurisdictions.

While dealing with staff turnover is always a challenge, Knight said that “even the pros that’ve been around for awhile” can benefit from troubleshooting classes and exposure to new products or ideas. Some of the most effective training, Knight said, reaches bosses who have unrealistic expectations about what should be happening out in the field.

“Yes, it can be tough to take a day off work and attend a class. But a day of training, whether it leads to specialist certifications or not, is an asset, not a liability,” Knight said. “It’s going to make you better at what you do.” ■

Diane Stafford is a business writer and workplace columnist at *The Kansas City Star*. This is another installment of the 2010 Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing have again partnered in this series to bring sports turf industry professional development and career issues to the forefront. For more information, go to [www.STMA.org](http://www.STMA.org) or [www.Ewing1.com](http://www.Ewing1.com).

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