



REP OF THE YEAR MICHEL SALES AGENCY



Kelly Michel introduces a training session to a room full of eager students.

Bradford White photos by Joe Szurszewski.

They invested **big bucks** to **practice** what they **preach** with regard to training.

>> By Jim Olsztynski

All good reps embrace training as an integral part of their job. Real good reps recognize that it's a way to provide value-added service to their principals and customers. In the rarefied atmosphere above even this level of professionalism stands the Michel Sales Agency of St. Paul, MN, which dispenses plenty of moolah to their training function in addition to time and energy.

When Michel moved to a new building in 2005, the company invested about \$250,000 extra to build and equip a 1,300-sq.-ft. training facility that they believe is world class. It's equipped with state-of-the-art audio-visual capabilities and cutaways of various HVAC and plumbing products. The training center is outfitted with all the hand tools needed for work on sophisticated PHC equipment, including multiple quantities of volt meters, manometers, magna helixes and combustion analyzers. Updating equipment is a budgeted capital expense. Last year they invested around \$47,000 in the training effort.

To "practice what they preach" with regard to various lines revolving around energy efficiency, they built a mezzanine and installed a separate, high-efficiency air conditioning system for the space, and radiantly heated all of the floors.

"Guys have come here in the worst of August heat and through bitter winter cold. We don't want to have to make excuses for lack of comfort. What sort of example would that be setting?" said Kelly Michel, president of the firm.

"We moved to our new facility in 2005 because we wanted to improve our outreach among installing contractors, and also to offer a new facet to our relationship with valued distributors, and engineers too," added Michel. "Now we have a world-class training facility with a broad range of operating equipment that provides the perfect venue for learning and hands-on experience.

"We recognize that our future — really, the major focus of everything we do — is with the installing contractor," he continued. "We are committed, as are our factory principals, to educating and training professional licensed installers, so that they can provide their customers with the best product for their need, properly installed. That's what it all comes down to."

There aren't too many notable PHC contractors or distributors within a 200-mile radius of Minnesota's Twin Cities that haven't attended a new technology or application training class at Michel's facility in St. Paul. The photos accompanying this story show scenes from a couple of recent Bradford White training sessions there. Thirty-one attendees — chiefly installing contractors, along with some engineers, distributors and inspectors — received information and instruction about commercial and residential water heater application from members of the Michel Sales training team.



Michel Sales president Kelly Michel

A TRAINING DREAM TEAM

The Michel Sales training staff consists of eight trainers, including a mechanical engineer, Harold Bruner, and two hydronic specialists. Larry Sundberg is a former contractor with 10 years of hydronic installation experience. They recently added a 35-year boiler veteran — George Michel — to join Michel's hydronics effort.



Rick Michel, with an operating cutaway of a water heater.

“Add to that our very own ‘MacGyver,’ Rick Genrich, and you have a training Dream Team,” Kelly Michel asserted.

Currently, the Michel Sales training team offers 12 different hands-on technical training classes. They include:

- Residential water heater tech training;
- Commercial water heater tech training;
- Radiant heating installation and sizing;
- CSST gas pipe certification;
- Residential high efficiency boiler training;
- Commercial boiler training;
- Solar design and installation;
- Boiler water analysis/testing, treatment and aluminum safeguards;
- Plastic pipe joining certification;
- Residential hydronic pump sizing and installation;
- Commercial hydronic pump sizing and installation;
- High velocity HVAC installation and sizing;
- HRV/ERV installation and sizing;
- Commercial PRV installation and sizing.

“We have a hundred or more training sessions each year — all free of charge for participants,” said Michel. “One of the key needs is for our customers to learn to efficiently diagnose and fix a wide variety of equipment, using the right tools and, of course, proper installation, as well. As the technology gets more sophisticated, along with it grows the need for our customers to stay apprised of advances and new control and diagnostic approaches.

“The kernel of this idea came from many requests over the years for technical training on par with manufacturer offerings,” said Michel. The problem is that manufacturers are located all over the country. For customers to gain full training on all of Michel's product lines would require them to travel and spend weeks out of town each year. Even the largest contractors



Rick Michel demonstrates how to use a volt meter.

MICHEL SALES



Explaining the operation of a Bradford White water heater.



Rick "MacGyver" Genrich (left) and Sales Manager Dean Parker.

would have trouble affording that kind of investment in both money and time away from their families and businesses.

"We're not taking anything away from the manufacturers," said Michel. "We're not looking to reduce contact or training at manufacturer facilities. In fact, we encourage it. If anything, we've added a dimension to their training. And we also invited all of our manufacturer partners to use this facility. In between those opportunities we're here, ready to provide a wealth of training at a place most of our customers can get to conveniently."

According to Michel, many customers have told him they appreciate his firm's ability to tailor training complexity based on the audience. "We put professionals together that have similar interests and levels of experience. That way, we're not flying over the heads of beginners with complicated information, and we're also not asking experienced installers or engineers to endure stuff they already know."

CUSTOMERS COMMENT

"Their staff really knows the technology and shares it professionally," said Bob Lawrence, CEO of Nasseff Mechanical, an 80-employee mechanical contracting firm based in St. Paul, who spoke while attending one of the Bradford White sessions. "The training sessions there are always among the very best available to me and my guys. There's a lot of product in the training facility, giving every option for hands-on use and practical understanding."


Lawrence said they've been using Bradford White products sold by Michel Sales for about a dozen years. "I'm very impressed with the equipment. A key advantage is that Michel Sales stocks so many water heaters. Usually, we can get them when we need them, right away."

Richard Brandes, president of Water Heater Plumbing Co., based in Bloomington, MN, said that he was very impressed with the quality of training that day and would return for more.

A key contribution by Genrich has been the working equipment cutaways. "These allow us to show the installer exactly how the water

heaters operate, and the sequence of operation," said Michel. A mantra attributed to Genrich is: "Presentation without demonstration is just conversation."

According to Michel, they prefer to schedule training sessions in the morning. "We found that morning meetings work best and the earlier the better, usually 7 a.m.," he said.

In addition to Bradford White products, Michel Sales Agency regularly conducts sessions pertaining to various other product lines they carry, including Warm Rain, Fantech, Mueller, IPS, Buderer, IMCOA, Florestone, Kroy, General Plastics, REHAU, TracPipe and Wilo. 

A 118-YEAR INDUSTRY BACKGROUND!

The Michel Sales Agency can trace its beginning in the plumbing business to Theodore Michel and the founding of the Union Brass Faucet Co. way back in 1891. The Michel Sales Agency was founded by Theodore's son, Clarence Michel, in 1932 in the basement of his home. In 1948 his son, Chuck Michel, purchased the company. In 1959 Chuck moved the company into a 40,000-sq.-ft. facility in St. Paul. In 1982, Chuck's sons — Tom, Chip and Kelly Michel — purchased the company.

Tom Michel, generously described by brother Kelly as "the most popular and well-seasoned of the brothers," was diagnosed with MS in his early 30s. After working hard for another decade, Tom retired and Chip and Kelly split up the business in 2001 to focus on their specific markets. Currently, Chip Michel owns The Michel Sales Co./Decko Products/Bubba Pump Co., while Kelly runs the Michel Sales Agency that is the subject of this article.

Chuck Michel was one of the founders of AIM/R, the highly regarded national rep association for the PHC industry. Chuck served as president in 1977 and Kelly did the same in 1992. Recently, Kelly's son Rick Michel has been added to the national AIM/R board.