



HEAD OF THE CLASS





PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND INDUSTRY CERTIFICATION MAKE THE GRADE AT THESE INDUSTRY COMPANIES.

By Jen Alexander

YOU'VE GOT A STABLE OF LOYAL CLIENTS AND A PORTFOLIO THAT REFLECTS YOUR EXPERTISE AND TALENT, BUT ARE THESE ENOUGH TO SHOW PROSPECTS AND PEERS THAT YOU ARE THE BEST PROMOTIONAL PRODUCTS PROFESSIONAL YOU CAN POSSIBLY BE?

Industry professionals looking to add another feather to their cap will often turn to professional development and certification.

By many accounts, certification is a valuable means by which professionals in dozens of industries can set themselves apart and gain a strategic or sometimes financial advantage in the workplace. A recent survey conducted by *Certification Magazine* revealed nearly half of all respondents—48.2 percent—believe certification helps them improve or confirm their qualifications for the job they currently hold. And nearly 35 percent of respondents say they pursue certification to show they're qualified to take on more responsibility at work.

PROFILES IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Shari Garvalia, MAS

Showdown Displays

Garvalia earned her CAS at The PPAI Expo 2012 and earned her MAS in March 2016 using PPAI's online proctoring service to complete her exam.

The certification program is one important element which can help us elevate the perception of the promotional products industry, especially in the minds of those who think of us as just selling "logoed stuff."

PPB What challenges did you encounter, if any, when fulfilling the requirements for earning each designation?

Garvalia I had attended education events primarily at the Dallas and Vegas shows as well as local regional association events, throughout my many years in the industry. When I decided to test for CAS certification a few years ago, I had more than enough credits, however I learned I had to fulfill some basic requirements which included basic entry level courses that did not exist when I started in the industry, such as Promotional Products Industry Overview Part I and Part II.

A few years ago, not all of these courses were available via webinar, so I had to wait for the opportunity to attend them in person. That was interesting, and while not difficult, the realization that I had to complete those basic courses, after all of my years in the industry, delayed my testing. The increase in the number and variety of courses available through live and recorded webinars has made it much easier to complete required courses.

PPB What were some of the webinars or live education events that you enjoyed most, or that most surprised you with their relevance to your work?

Garvalia I always enjoy the live events more than the webinars, because the interaction and spontaneity keeps me engaged and energized. The best live education events have been part of the Women's Leadership Conferences and North American Leadership Conference, and I also always enjoy the general session keynote speakers at The PPAI Expo in Las Vegas.

PPB How will having these designations elevate your business among clients, and how can certification improve the industry as a whole?

Garvalia The CAS and MAS designations represent one's commitment to continued education and personal and professional development. The certifications show that a commitment to the industry has been made by a dedicated professional, and someone who is willing to invest in their personal development and career. The certification program is one important element which can help us elevate the perception of the promotional products industry, especially in the minds of those who think of us as just selling "logoed stuff."

PPB You completed your MAS exam through the online testing platform; what can you share about your experience that would help others who might be unsure about testing online?

Garvalia When I realized there were not any in-person exams scheduled at events or at times that I would be available for many months, I was intrigued by the opportunity to test online. The proctoring service was easy to deal with, and the scheduling and actual testing process was simple and seamless.

The proctor is visible to you at all times on your screen, and at one point when I had a question, he answered it immediately. While the cost was a little higher to test online, it was definitely more convenient and timely for my needs. I also liked the fact that I received an immediate score rather than waiting a few weeks, which happens with in-person exams.



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Certification also helps seasoned workers stay relevant, especially as Millennial professionals enter the workforce with up-to-date skill sets already under their belts. Achieving field-specific certifications shows current and potential employers that workers are dedicated to their craft and the industry to which they apply their skills and professional development. To the customer, holding an industry

certification shows a higher level of professionalism and is documented evidence of industry expertise.

“Achieving certification is not about checking a box—it’s about gaining the content knowledge that enables you to earn a certification,” says PPAI Certification Manager Julie Levay. “It’s a customizable program that allows you to learn more about the industry and how to do your job better.”

PPAI Certification is a valuable means of differentiating oneself in the marketplace, Levay says. “As the industry’s longest-running certification program, its Certified Advertising Specialist (CAS) and Master Advertising Specialist (MAS) designations are instantly recognizable—and well regarded among professionals in the field.”

Certification in the promotional products industry requires an investment

Ready To Go To The Head Of The Class?

Earn Your PPAI Certification

PPAI Certification CAS • MAS • MAS+	PROGRAM ELEMENTS					Designation Awarded
	Industry Experience	Education Points	Required Courses	Exam Required*	Recertification Required**	
TAS Trained Advertising Specialist	Less Than 3 Years	25 CAS or MAS Level	No	No	No	Certificate of Completion
CAS Certified Advertising Specialist <i>CAS Certified Professional</i>	3+ Years	75 CAS or MAS Level	Yes	Yes	Yes	Certification
MAS Master Advertising Specialist <i>MAS Certified Professional</i>	5+ Years	100 MAS Level & Valid CAS	No	Yes	Yes	Certification
MAS+ Master Advertising Specialist Plus <i>MAS+ Certified Professional</i>	7+ Years	225 Total Points & Valid MAS	No	No (Project Based)	No	Certification

*The PPAI Certification exam is offered year-round at PPAI live events and online. In order to register you must have already completed the specified CAS or MAS program requirements.

**CAS designees must continue to keep their CAS Certification current by completing 25 additional educational credits over three years.

MAS designees must continue to keep their CAS Certification current by completing 25 additional MAS-level educational credits over three years.

Fast-Track Your Certification

The PPAI Certification Fast-Track Program is an initiative aimed at providing promotional products professionals with a minimum of five years of verifiable industry experience with an avenue for “waiving” certain CAS certification requirements in consideration of their experience, education, and/or achievements.*

The PPAI Fast Track Program is comprised of two applicant-submitted waivers:

- Certification Fast Track 15 “Waives” all six CAS-required courses (15 points) for the applicant (each course will show as “Waived” on the applicant’s transcript).
- Certification Fast Track 75 “Waives” all six CAS-required courses (15 points) and remaining 60 CAS points for the applicant—qualifies the applicant to immediately sit for the CAS exam (each course will show as “Waived” on the applicant’s transcript).

**Specific criteria must be met to be eligible for CFT 15 and CFT 75; respective fees apply. Contact PPAI at certification@ppai.org for more information.*

of time and money. With all that you’ve got on your plate as a busy professional, it’s reasonable to expect that you might ask yourself, “Is certification worth it?”

At least two of the largest distributor companies in the industry have decided that professional development is not just good for the individual, but it’s good for the entire company—so they provide opportunities for every employee to earn certifications from PPAI’s certification program.

Lewiston, Maine-based distributor Geiger (UPIC: GEIGER) introduced an internal development program for managers in 2006, extending it to all associates in 2007. Laura Bosse, MAS, vice president of human resources, explains how the company’s program ties into PPAI Certification.

“We partner with PPAI to develop an annual program for supporting our associates in their pursuit of or

maintenance of CAS or MAS certification, which is the foundation of our professional development program,” she says. “The program provides a common body of knowledge and expertise. Associates who are certified have an edge over others when it comes to being considered for growth opportunities within the organization.”

Under the program, Geiger management associates must obtain MAS certification, while non-management associates who interact regularly with customers, sales partners or production partners must obtain CAS certification within a three-year period. “Our training includes an additional, internal certification in continuous improvement at the leader or practitioner level,” she adds.

Bosse says that in addition to internal training opportunities and a lending library, Geiger offers a tuition reimbursement benefit for college courses and encourages staff to participate in external learning

Connect Your Professional Development To PPAI Certification

An internal professional development program can be a valuable tool in helping employees achieve PPAI certification, and PPAI will work with an individual organization to create a scalable program that’s customized to their educational needs.

The main objective is to provide support for established internal education and offer assistance with quick and easy certification needs. PPAI reviews a company’s internal education for certification credit opportunities and provides discounts on certain certification fees.

Through this process, says PPAI Certification Manager Julie Levay, the Association bolsters the individual company’s professional development plan by allowing company employees to not only grow from provided internal education, but to have that knowledge accredited in their pursuit of a highly respected industry certification. “Overall, these partnerships are helping educate the industry, producing knowledgeable, committed promotional products professionals,” she says.

PROFILES IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Within the industry, I do think that having a CAS or MAS designation signals a level of professionalism to supplier and distributor colleagues.

Tim O'Neill, MAS

Image Masters

Tim O'Neill earned his CAS designation at The PPAI Expo 2014, and went on to earn his MAS the following year.

PPB You earned your CAS and MAS within 12 months. Was this a planned effort, and if so, what kind of preparation did you go through to accomplish this feat?

O'Neill It sounds tougher than it was. For my entire career I've valued attending professional development at every conference that I attended; I just never bothered to start the paperwork for certification.

When I did decide that having my certification was a goal I checked my transcripts, and I also applied for extra credits for my time in the industry and for my service on our regional association board many years back. When it was all said and done I had more than enough units for my CAS and was close to the target for my MAS. I took the CAS exam that year, finished up my remaining few units for my MAS at the same PPAI conference and sat for the MAS exam the following year.

PPB What were some of the webinars or live education events that you most enjoyed, or that most surprised you with their relevance to your work?

O'Neill I believe that understanding product safety is a significant component of being a professional in this industry, and once PPAI developed the curriculum for Product Safety Aware, I made sure that all of my sales team and I did the webinars together.

PPB How will having these designations elevate your business among clients, and how can certification improve the industry as a whole?

O'Neill I use my MAS designation in my email signature and on my business cards and I've had a few customers ask about it. But for the most part, we don't earn our customers' trust with a designation; we do that with our actions. Within the industry, however, I do think that having a CAS or MAS designation signals a level of professionalism to supplier and distributor colleagues.

opportunities as well as PPAI events and online webinars.

To recognize and reward the effort it takes to achieve certification, Geiger provides an incentive bonus of up to

\$750 for CAS and/or MAS certification, depending upon the length of time it takes to complete the requirements and pass the exam. Associates who are not required to achieve certification may

do so on a voluntary basis and are still eligible to earn the incentive bonus.

Professional development through ongoing education is a key part of Geiger's workplace philosophy, says Bosse.

PPAI Professional Development Over The Years

Today's PPAI Certification program is the culmination of decades of dedication on the part of Association members who believed that formal industry education was important to increasing the legitimacy of promotional products as a business and the professionalism of the men and women who earn their livelihoods from it.

PPAI's formal professional education began as an Executive Development Seminar in 1961. The curriculum for the eight-day session was created by industry pioneers including Jim Albert and Ralph Thomas, with a hyperfocus on specialty advertising business. The supplier and manufacturer participants—then called jobbers and manufacturers—were awarded with diplomas at the conclusion of the seminar that conferred upon them the newly minted designation of Certified Advertising Specialist.

Sales training clinics were added to the roster in the late 1960s, and in 1983 the Master Advertising Specialist designation was established, along with the adoption of certified education units, or CEUs, as the formal measure of skills attained to achieve CAS and MAS status.



Photo provided by Gene Geiger, MAS.

The 1973 CAS class was an all-male group. Even in the mid-'70s few women were active in the industry.

Since the program's inception, more than 5,000 members of the industry have achieved a CAS, MAS or MAS+ designation. The industry's dedication to continuing professional development is a testament to the efforts of those early Association leaders who believed that education makes the industry stronger.

"The Geiger Way, our company's value statement, includes the following: 'Our associates are by far our most valuable asset. We will hire talented people, train and empower them, and recognize their accomplishments.'

"We believe that investing in our associates' achievement of industry certification makes them more credible to our customers and sales partners, and better able to provide a higher level of customer satisfaction," she says.

Distributor firm AIA Corporation (UPIC: advinadv) in Neenah, Wisconsin, took its training programs up a notch roughly four years ago, certifying its on-site training classes through PPAI.

"We recognized that to better meet the needs of our customers we had to expand our staff orientation and ongoing training program and focus on excellent customer service as well as a deeper knowledge

of the complexities of the promotional products industry," says Marie Miller, MAS+, director of continuous improvement for AIA. "The certification program is important because it gives everyone a goal to strive for as well as additional knowledge and credibility with our customers."

Miller says by providing new staff members with a broader understanding of the overall industry and the supply chain, and by increasing product awareness, "we're able to bring them up to speed quickly so they can build lasting relationships with our customers."

Even though certification isn't mandatory, 82 percent of AIA associates are certified, something Miller says is indicative of the quality of the training program as well as the significance of certification. Employees who earn PPAI certifications are recognized through

announcements, on the company plaque, and with bonus points toward AIA's company incentive program.

In addition to providing internal professional development, AIA partners with a nearby college to invite instructors who teach skill building in core business areas such as communication, technology, performance management and customer service, she says. "Often these classes are certified through PPAI, so our associates get the benefits of a fresh, outside perspective, a business-experienced instructor and credits toward their certification."

The payoff for professional development doesn't stop with the individual learner, says Miller. "The impact is seen in numerous ways including higher customer satisfaction results, increased employee engagement and an overall sense of cultural unity." **PPB**