

What About Those Letters?

By Jeffrey D Brown, CTE

A few years ago I came across a company in the event business whose name was *Planners Without Letters*... no joke. I've always been fascinated with the whole certification thing, not for whatever perceived value it delivers to the "appendee", but more because of the wide range of emotions and opinions associated with it. And there are many.

I've been doing some further research on why people pursue education/exam based certifications and the reasons are wide ranging and certainly include everything from status to pay raises, to getting more and better business, all the way to the social and networking advantages. I'm sure there may be a tad bit of ego tossed in on occasion. But it's all good and I have a great deal of respect for those who pursue these efforts.

I've also looked at quite a few certification programs of all types and believe me, they run the gamut from high-end, well-respected to totally bogus... and a lot in the middle.

So it was against this backdrop that I decided to create and launch a certification program for our popular industry magazine website, *Tradeshow Blues* (<http://tradeshowblues.com>). Because we've always marketed ourselves across industry segments to "tradeshow and event enthusiasts", it seemed absolutely logical to create a program consistent with our ideals and values that would support and promote the industry as a whole and provide unique, tangible benefits for the participants. Thus was born the *Certified Tradeshow Enthusiast*™ (CTE) program.

The CTE program is not an education/exam-based certification. If anything, it's an "attitude-based" certification, a notion, which dovetails very well with the style and mission of *Tradeshow Blues*. Unlike those "bogus" certifications, the CTE doesn't claim to be anything other than what it actually is. And what it is... is quite different than any certificate program in our industry... or any other that I'm aware of. I won't go into great detail here (you can get plenty at <http://tradeshowblues.com/be-cte>) but here's a quick snapshot of what the CTE is and where it's going...

Currently, anyone associated in some way with the tradeshow or event industry is eligible to apply for and receive their *Certified Tradeshow Enthusiast* (CTE) designation. During CTE Phase One, applicants pay a small processing fee of \$24.95 to enter the program and they must state their enthusiasm for the business. Initially, they receive a beautiful personalized certificate in the form of a hi-res PDF suitable for any kind of printing and framing (multiple printing is allowed). In addition, each CTE receives a prominent public wall space on the CTE Wall, part of the Tradeshow BluesWall complex (the only one of its kind) included at no cost for the first year. The wall space is an excellent promotional tool which by itself is worth the cost of the program.

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Even more exciting... we're in the midst of bringing to life the *International Society of Tradeshow Enthusiasts* (<http://istse.com>) who is sponsoring and issuing the CTE. All initial Phase One CTE's will receive a one year membership in the new organization as part of their participation once the formation is official. As we move into Phase Two this summer, there will be much more depth to the program as well as benefits of membership in ISTSE.

Now then, from the *Department of We Should've Expected This...* The introduction of the CTE has caused some controversy and a bit of a stir among a small segment of industry players. I attribute this to a combination of fear, lack of understanding about what we're really doing, economic concerns and unfortunately a few who simply want to protect their own interests... even when those interests are not threatened.

There is no question that building this program from the ground up is hard work... and even harder in challenging economic circumstances. But I am quite certain that the perseverance, passion and enthusiasm combined with the inherent good in what we're doing will payoff with an organization that ultimately has more CTE's than all the other certification programs in our industry combined.

But wait... there's more good news. The CTE is good for all those other programs as well. We are NOT competing with them. We are NOT diminishing the value of any of those programs nor any of the holders of those other certificates. We are supporting ALL of them by creating a vehicle that by its very nature is designed to raise the tide for all ships. Remember, we're about enthusiasm, positive attitude and pro-active interaction.

How much better does it get?

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