



“We built it as a monument to our customers and employees, and we want as many people as possible to come see it.”

Desmond Clancy
Director, Sales Training

Presenting the New Uponor Experience Center: Q+A with Desmond Clancy, Director of Sales Training

What is the vision behind the new Experience Center? And how does it build on what came before?

Desmond Clancy: Our vision was to create a truly flexible, adaptable space that could not only serve a number of different purposes but, more importantly, a number of different stakeholder audiences.

As I think about all the audiences the Experience Center will serve, at or near the top of that list is our customers. That means plumbers, mechanical contractors, engineers, developers, owners, builders, and distributors.

So, it's really about how we can continue to build contractor confidence, not only in their ability to serve their own customers, installing our product or anyone else's, but also to help build their confidence that they chose a premium product to build the best systems they can. That's going to be really important to us.

Another important audience is all the communities we serve. Sometimes that can be the local community here in Apple Valley or the Twin Cities in general. We do a lot with the local STEM programs and the middle schools – some fun exercises that we've done at the schools as well as hosting the students here at Uponor.

And another community is our industry. We want to host events here, whether it's for ASHRAE, a local builders' association, a contractor group, and so forth.

Finally, our own employees represent another important community. We wanted to provide a backdrop that our folks who are close to the customer can learn about our products and applications. This learning covers not just the value our products bring to the job site, but we want our people to get their hands “dirty” by doing the installations themselves, not in the field, but in this practice area we have created.

Jon Sillerud, our vice president of Integrated Supply Chain, told me Uponor has factory personnel with as much as 35 years of experience on the plant floor. They have literally extruded millions and millions of feet of PEX. But they've never been on a job site to see how the pipe they have made is installed. So now, they will get the chance to experience that first-hand.

Ultimately, we wanted to create another space that our employees can be proud of. They will be able to bring their families through the center and say this is what Dad or Mom does. This is what they make for a living and how it is used in homes and buildings.

How does that vision build on what came before?

Clancy: It was previously called the North American Training Center. Now it is the Uponor Experience Center. I think the difference between “training” and “experience” is key – a big differentiator.

That difference can be best seen in the way we have deliberately made the center more interactive with a smaller emphasis on classroom learning. We will be doing many more hands-on activities, with visitors installing the systems, making connections, and doing all of those other things you would normally do on a job site.

If you're going to learn how to play golf, you're not going to sit in the clubhouse all day and watch videos. You're going to grab a bucket of balls and hit the range to practice. That's what the Experience Center is all about. We're going to offer a lot more direct experience with the products, especially for installers.

What types of courses will the new Experience Center offer?

Clancy: There are professionals who will attend for multiple hours, perhaps even days, at a time to elevate their skill sets or learn a new skill that will create a new revenue stream for them. We offer quite a few of those workshops around several of our core offerings: radiant, plumbing, and PP-RCT. The latter is one of our new lines that involves a far more sophisticated connection method of fusion-welding pipe together. So, the installer must make an elevated commitment to training, compared with the simpler ProPEX® connection.

How long should an attendee expect to be away from his or her business? That may be the biggest hurdle of all when trying to recruit attendees.

Clancy: You're absolutely right. We know it has become much harder for contractors and their crews to take three and four days away from their business and their customers. We are very sensitive as to how big a sacrifice that is.

So, we have wholeheartedly embraced a new and unique approach, reaching people with our Uponor Academy Online portal. With it, a student can do the more traditional classroom kind of work digitally and on their own schedule — before, during, or after work hours. And when they do come to the Experience Center, it's less time in the classroom and more time in the hands-on spaces, doing installation work.

Our radiant program has historically been a three-day commitment for professional installers. Put travel on either end of the experience, and you're talking most, if not all, of an entire week.

Today, the online pre-work involves only a couple of hours, followed by being on site for only a day and a half. They will also have a little bit of post-work to do to complete whatever qualification they are trying to obtain. In the end, the online instruction and the new Experience Center will be a much better use of their time.

Manufacturer training facilities are typically for professionals who work with the tools. How will you persuade a wholesaler, a builder, or a specifying engineer that the new Experience Center is meant for them as well?

Clancy: We have tried to create a highly flexible, adaptable space to serve all those different audiences. The Experience Center contains three very distinct spaces within the larger space. Think of it like a funnel. At the top of that funnel are messaging and experiences that are really focused on a high market or industry level. Here we present the value Uponor brings to this industry and the attendees' businesses.

In the second space, the messaging becomes a little less strategic and a little more tactical. Finally, the bottom of the funnel is the hands-on space where it becomes all tactical. It's about installation. It's about practice. It's about how to do things right.

As a result, a group of plumbers who want to get more deeply involved in the radiant heating and cooling space to create new revenue streams would spend most of their time in the third, hands-on space.

But executives from a multi-billion-dollar, commercially oriented, mechanical contracting firm won't necessarily want to get on their hands and knees to start making PEX connections. They will be more comfortable in one of the other two spaces that are more focused on high-level value messaging and the impact our products and services can have, not just on their job sites, but also on their P&Ls and balance sheets — how Uponor's emphasis on efficiency and productivity delivers results for their businesses.

In addition, the interactive video displays or the product displays can literally speak to more than one audience. We've created different audio tracks for the same displays to better relate to whatever audience happens to be standing in front of them.

Fitting messages and experiences to audiences really starts with our more rigorous intake process on the front end of every visit. We want to understand where the customer is at with Uponor, the evolution of that relationship, where the opportunity is, and what challenges are facing them.

In short, the space doesn't change, but the way in which we engage the space and the way in which we message the space does, based upon the unique needs of that particular visitor. I might be walking the center with a large mechanical contractor in the morning and a small plumber in the afternoon. The space remains the same, but the places we focus on within that space and the messaging for each visitor must be different.

Imagine a plumbing or mechanical contractor who has visited Uponor two or three times in the past. He knows he knows the place, the products, and the company reasonably well. How will his current experience differ from what he encountered five or 10 years ago?

Clancy: The previous environment was kind of a product showcase. You could stand and look at it, and maybe run some pipe. But it was not flexible because the displays were meant to stay the same. It was semi-permanent and, therefore, not adaptable.

Today, the hands-on areas we've created are permanent in terms of the kind of infrastructure, but they're intended to be built up and torn down — daily, weekly, whatever. That will be a really big, front-and-center difference for a returning visitor.

As I have mentioned, visitors will find themselves spending a lot less time in the classroom or the auditorium and a lot more time in the Experience Center itself. Many classroom sessions will happen in short bursts: 20 minutes talking about how to make a PP-RCT fusion connection, for example. And then we will walk a few short steps into the area where they will make such a connection themselves.

Also, the space will serve as a 360-degree presentation of our full catalog, putting all our major product categories and value-added services forward. Instead of showing visitors a few slides on our Kitting Services or our fire-resistant plenum solution, there are entire displays devoted to each.

Perhaps the most important difference of all — the entire Experience Center strives to work backward from the problems that our customers are trying to solve. It's no longer just a product showcase, but a product and application showcase. Yes, we have this product. But here's how its impact will ultimately manifest itself on the job site and on your P&L.

So, the space is very intentional in that way. Even though it's full of product, the messaging is less product-focused and more problem-focused. What problems are we trying to solve with this product? How will it make your life better, easier, more profitable, more productive, more efficient, etc.?

I think those are the sometimes subtle, but big changes for a returning contractor. Someone who's been here in the past will likely encounter a night and day difference. There will be no mistaking that they're in a very different space now.

It sounds like the hands-on opportunities at the new Experience Center will be geared as much toward younger tradespeople learning to master their profession as it will toward seasoned professionals.

Clancy: Historically, if Uponor hosted someone at the academy for two days, they'd spend 80 percent of their time in the auditorium looking at slide presentations and videos, and the remaining 20% doing actual work. This space is going to completely flip-flop those percentages, as they learn first-hand how these products can help them be more productive on the job site.

But we also expect to welcome owners and executives, who will hear how switching to Uponor can help make their operations more efficient or profitable, while reducing risk. Many of these folks are former installers who have been elevated to leadership positions. They know they must make good decisions to improve their companies' bottom lines. But that can be difficult if their former colleagues in the field actually doing the work are resisting any change. "I've been making crimp fittings for the past 20 years, so why would I want to switch to cold expansion?"

At Uponor, we understand that we are not simply selling product. We're selling change management. To do that effectively, we must build relationships with all of those stakeholders, including the owners of these contracting companies, giving them the confidence to make the tough decisions that will boost efficiency, productivity, and profitability at their companies.

This new space is really intended to help support our efforts to demonstrate value and drive change management.

Do you have any message for someone unable to visit the Experience Center in person? Is there something that they can participate in remotely?

Clancy: Yes, absolutely. With some of the new technology, we expect to start offering dedicated virtual sessions for participants "dialing in" from afar. We also think the Experience Center will lend itself to live streaming. This incredibly well-branded space will provide an excellent backdrop for programs on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and other social platforms.

We also have our online learning portal to engage those customers who cannot make it to Apple Valley. We have begun to digitize much of the content that has been delivered in person, converting it to interactive e-learning to complement what we do at the Experience Center.

Will there be any type of professional certifications offered for any of the courses?

Clancy: We have both trainer and installer qualification programs for our PP-RCT offering, which has a more complex connection process compared to the cold expansion methods for PEX.

We also have our AquaSAFE™ qualification for our fire sprinkler installation, and we have prepared two new Uponor certifications around radiant heating and plumbing. Contractors who complete the training will be certified as qualified Uponor Installers. We will also offer personal development hours and continuing education credits for participants' licensure.

Finally, I anticipate this new space will help us renew our efforts to engage with the local unions and local trade schools. Then, we hope to scale those activities in other parts of the country that lack ready access to the Experience Center. We want to actively engage those audiences as well.

Is there any kind of a fee to visit the Experience Center and attend courses? And if not, how does someone in the field — a contractor, engineer, whomever — arrange to visit the Experience Center?

Clancy: We charge a nominal fee for a few courses with highly specialized types of content, but most of the experiences offered here are complimentary. We have a high sense of obligation as a manufacturer in this space to help solve what is probably the industry's biggest challenge, the lack of skilled labor.

We cannot infuse the industry with new talent. That's unrealistic. But we can elevate the finite resource that exists today, making the current workforce more efficient and productive, helping them create new revenue streams and become more profitable.

We want to fill this Experience Center with as many people as possible who can drive in, fly in, train in, or walk in. We built it as a monument to our customers and employees, and we want as many people as possible to come see it.

Uponor Media Contact

Patti Winger, Director, Corporate Communications
patti.winger@uponor.com or 651.341.8991

Uponor Inc.
5925 148th Street West
Apple Valley, MN 55124
USA

T 800.321.4739
F 952.891.2008

Uponor Ltd.
6510 Kennedy Road
Mississauga, ON L5T 2X4
CANADA

T 888.994.7726
F 800.638.9517

Where do people go to learn more about the Experience Center and to register to visit?

Clancy: The Training tab on our website is being upgraded to showcase the Experience Center. There, an interested party can register for one of the continuing education courses or open and register for our online learning portal.

The alternative is to work through the local Uponor sales team, either one of our rep agencies or a member of our factory sales team working in the field. They will facilitate the registration process to identify workable times on the schedule. They will also conduct the all-important intake process to make sure we will be making the very best use of their time.

uponor

**EXperience
Center**