A Strategy for Training Materials Selection

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How should you, the decision-maker, choose training materials for your organization? This question gives rise to an old dilemma: Odds are you don’t know the subject matter, and even if you do, you probably don’t have the time to carefully evaluate the materials yourself. While it seems reasonable to have your training staff perform the evaluations, this can be expensive and time-consuming. More importantly, you and your trainers have different priorities.

Most trainers—like many people—resist change. If your trainers already are comfortable with materials that work reasonably well, they won’t want to go to the trouble of objectively looking at other options. Put yourself in your trainer’s shoes:

- You’re not being paid extra to review hundreds (perhaps thousands) of pages of additional material.
- If you recommend materials that don’t work out, you’re likely to be punished.
- If you recommend materials that do work out, you’ll get no reward.

Not surprisingly, after a company has chosen its training materials, it generally sticks with its initial selection unless something goes horribly wrong.

What’s a Decision-Maker to Do?

Every publisher in the world claims its materials are the best. Your trainers, on the other hand, might well tell you that everything out there stinks. And you probably don’t have the money to hire an independent consultant to evaluate your options.

There is a better way. Most of the larger courseware providers submit their materials for certification to software vendors or associations. Examples of such certifications include Microsoft MOS, Adobe ACE, CompTIA CAQC, LPI LATM and IC3. All of these courseware certification programs are administered by ProCert Labs.

It’s not widely known, but during the certification process, ProCert gives a numerical rating and a detailed report for each course it evaluates. These ratings and reports are done by independent trainers and teachers—professionals with no agenda. This is information you can use, and it’s readily available.

Get the Scores and Read the Reports

ProCert ratings are given on a one-to-five scale, based on a weighted average of seven detailed scores: target audience, course objectives, readability, navigation, content, practical experience and testing. A short essay explains what the reviewer saw as strengths and weaknesses of the course. Another section indicates how the course compares with others that have been submitted for review.

Most of what you need to know is right there. It’s independent, objective information about the course that can help you make an educated buying decision with confidence.

Of course, there are still important considerations beyond the scope of the report.

What Do the Materials Look Like?

The training materials you choose represent you, and your customers will view them as part of your product. Using attractive, well-designed materials gives you the same feeling of confidence you get from dressing professionally. Would you wear sweatpants to train a group of CEOs?
Obviously, you’ll want to balance sharp looks with reasonable cost. But all things being equal, you should go with training materials that complement your professional image.

**Will the Included Ancillaries Meet Current and Future Needs?**
For a standard instructor-led class, you won’t need much beyond the course itself. These days, however, very little in the training industry comes standard. Make sure you know your current needs and anticipate future needs.

Do you need a blended solution with e-learning? Will you need a PowerPoint presentation? Do your students need solution files? Can the course be delivered over the Web? Most quality providers will sell you just what you want and will provide for future expansion should your needs change.

**Does the Publisher Offer Sufficient Depth and Breadth?**
Having multiple courseware vendors encourages competition, and this allows you to select the very best for each curriculum. However, relying on too many different vendors can be expensive and confusing. Make sure your vendor has what you need. One-stop shopping is a great way to save time, money and aggravation.

**How’s the Service?**
If your vendor can’t deliver the books, it doesn’t matter how good they are. Most courseware vendors have state-of-the-art warehouses, but it pays to ask. Also, what kind of response do you get when you ask questions? Is it personal and thorough? You should expect no less than professional, prompt, friendly service with complete follow-through.

**Price**
It pays to shop around. Tell your vendor who else you’re talking to, and what prices you’ve been offered. Don’t be afraid to negotiate. If you like what you see, shoot straight and tell your vendor the price you want. Odds are you’ll get it.

**Try It**
“Try before you buy” to see if the solution fits you and your organization. Any reputable vendor will be eager to send evaluation copies for this purpose. The proof of the pudding is in the tasting, and the proof of courseware is in the training.

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