Training 2008 - Brand Your E-Learning (Dec 07)

December 21, 2007
How to prepare your organization and market to your learners to ensure the ROI on your e-learning investment
By Lance Dublin

E-learning represents a change to your learners, their managers, and your organization. You can ensure the return on your e-learning investment by systematically applying principles of consumer marketing and change management.

Whether it's the replacement of an instructor-led class with an online course, or an Access database with a fully functional learning management system (LMS), it still is a change. Learners used to instructor-led courses often resent having to learn "from a computer" and "on their own time." Trainers who feel valued for their platform skills often feel threatened by the move to online, self-paced courses. Managers who have always controlled access to training opportunities and information frequently feel undermined when learners can access learning resources at any time, from anywhere. And the organization as a whole often goes through an adjustment period as new norms are developed and accepted.

Consumer Marketing: The Power of the Brand

One of the main axioms of consumer marketing is that people want to buy but not be sold. Consumer marketing techniques are used to not only attract and then retain customers, but also to build a long-term relationship with them. With e-learning, it's no different. You need to attract and retain individual learners. And you need to build mutually satisfying long-term relationships with them, with their managers, and with your organization as a whole.

Branding is one of the key consumer marketing techniques you should apply to your e-learning. Technically, a brand is the "combination of symbols, words, or designs that differentiate one company's product from another company's product." It includes a logo and tagline, fonts, and colors. But branding is not about aesthetics. It's about guiding the formation of perceptions and answering the question, "Why should I buy your product?"

Think Google, GE, Microsoft, Coca-Cola. Visualize their logos and taglines. Think about your perception of each of these brands and how it was formed through the extensive consumer marketing activities of these companies. According to a recent study by research company Millward Brown Optimor, the Google brand alone is worth $66.4 billion; GE's brand is worth $61.9 billion; Microsoft's brand is worth $55 billion; and Coca-Cola's brand is worth $44.1 billion.

Though perhaps not worth these amounts, your brand for your e-learning is nonetheless an important investment and critical to your success. It is this branding that will engage new learners initially and then keep them coming back. It's what will reassure managers and energize the organization. Bottom line, this branding will enable you to powerfully communicate the value of your e-learning, thereby creating learner preference and generating management and organizational commitment.

I-3 Change Management Model

People tend to confuse change management and marketing communications. The purpose of marketing communications is to create and execute "messages and related media to communicate with a market." It is information-based, one-way, and all too often overwhelms the intended audience. In contrast, change management aims to develop new individual and organizational attitudes and behaviors. It is process-based, inclusive, and two-way in nature.

The I-3 Change Management Model consists of three stages. But rather than having a "start" and an "end" point, think of it as a reinforcing cycle of events and activities supported by defined processes.

Stage 1. Inform: Information and messaging activities, (i.e., marketing communications or "marcom") is a great way to generate awareness. Learners, managers, and the organization need to be informed about the problem the e-learning is there to address and the specifics of your e-learning solution. Through the activities in this stage you want to be sure the messages you want to be heard are broadcast widely and in ways they will be recognized, recalled, and remembered. Specific activities in this stage might include: newsletters and e-mails, presentations and videos, and speeches and Webcasts.

Stage 2. Involve: Behavior change seldom happens based solely on passively receiving information or trinkets. It is critical to find ways to engage the learners, managers, and organization in experiencing the e-learning solution, and to give them a chance try it out for themselves, ask questions, and form their own opinions. The purpose of this stage is to let them internalize and personalize your e-learning solution, and have it become theirs. Specific activities might include: videos, department meetings, expos and fairs, and "road shows."

Stage 3. Integrate: The long-term success of your e-learning depends on your ability to make it a part of the organizational culture, fully integrated into the work life of your learners and managers. In this stage, it is critical to find ways to make e-learning an ongoing and integral component of organizational processes, systems, and business initiatives—not something perceived as foreign or being forced. The goal of this stage is to ensure your e-learning becomes so well accepted and integrated that, like e-mail, it is seen as critical but "invisible" to individuals and the organization. Specific activities might include: integration with the performance management process, forming the foundation for management training, and recognition as the platform of choice for ongoing learning and development.

Companies as diverse as Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, John Muir Health, and Sheetz Corporation have applied these techniques and approaches to ensure their success with e-learning. Although representing very different industries—hospitality, health care, convenience/food—they have in common an understanding that engaging and motivating people, and energizing an organization as a whole is key to ensuring their success with their e-learning.

Quick Tips to Build Your E-Learning Brand

• Develop a unique look and feel: colors, fonts, images, logo.
• Create a tagline.
• Market the features/benefits of your e-learning brand.
• Map all of the communication channels available to you, both formal and informal.
• Map your key audiences.
• Develop key messages for each audience.
• Keep in mind that one-way communication alone is not enough, no matter how many times you repeat yourself.
• Plan for hands-on activities where learners/managers can take a "test-drive."
• Use video as a virtual "test-drive."
• Look for ways to embed your e-learning into the work processes and key initiatives.
• Actively promote your e-learning as "just the way we do things around here."

Lance Dublin is the chief solution architect and founder of Dublin Consulting. He has worked in learning and change management strategy, design, and implementation for more than 30 years. He can be reached at: lance@dublinconsulting.net. He will present the following sessions at Training 2008: "Developing a Comprehensive Learning Architecture and Strategy" and "Preparing Your Organization and Marketing to Your Learners: How to Ensure ROI on Your E-Learning Investment," which expands on the content in this article.

Training Magazine, © 2007 Nielsen Business Media, Inc