

General Motors Dealers Enjoy the ‘Suite Success’ of Distance Learning (Jun 10)

By Paul Harris

A new four-point blended learning program brings just-in-time training directly to the desktops of GM dealer employees throughout the world. Benefits include high quality learning, complete interactivity and cost effectiveness for the company and its dealers.

Auto technicians and sales representatives at General Motors dealerships throughout the world are learning new skills via virtual classroom training (VCT), the internet-based technology that enables full interaction by students with their instructors and peers. It's part of a bold new learning initiative that is boosting workforce training effectiveness at GM dealerships.

Launched last November as part of a blended learning solution at more than 5,000 GM dealerships in North America, the VCT capability replaces a satellite-based distance learning system that has helped train dealer employees for over a decade. John Palmer, Manager of GM Learning, reports that the solution is winning over employees and management alike with its broad functionality, ease of operation and cost-saving features.

"I actually believe it's a better delivery method than having an instructor in the room," says Palmer. He calls VCT an invaluable tool for reaching the widely dispersed population of GM dealer employees.

GM is currently rolling out its enhanced distance learning capabilities worldwide with the help of its training technology partner, Dallas-based Raytheon Professional Services LLC, (RPS). A division of defense and aerospace giant Raytheon Company, RPS has helped provide training at GM dealerships throughout North America, Europe and elsewhere for over a decade.

RPS Program Manager Gregory S. Inman joined Palmer in demonstrating the new training system's many features during the 2010 Partnering for Performance conference of training executives in Raleigh, N.C. sponsored by Training Industry Inc.

"Our legacy satellite learning system was state-of-the-art in its time, but VCT is a far superior technology," Palmer told the group. He said GM has selected Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro as its VCT tool. It enables users to create, deploy and manage live virtual classrooms, while operating seamlessly within a powerful learning management system developed internally by Raytheon.

Four-point Program Covers Bases

The virtual classroom training tool is one of four training pillars employed by GM and Raytheon within a single integrated system that delivers training and other important communication directly to the desktops of intended individuals. The others are:

- **Executive Messaging.** Important communication from GM executives is delivered directly to GM and dealer employees.
- **Video on Demand.** Compelling training and other videos are streamed to recipients anytime and anywhere, including just-in-time training videos selected from the course catalogue. Video content is easily retrieved by using keyword searches.
- **Global Repository.** This secure site for authorized users, such as training suppliers and GM country managers, enables GM trainers throughout the world to access all online training contained within the system. They can also localize the content for specific training audiences.

"We call it the suite success of distance learning," said Palmer of the four-point program. Inman agreed that the system provides all necessary ingredients to ensure that first class training is presented seamlessly to end-users.

Yet as valuable as VCT and other training tools have become in today's learning landscape, their benefits are only realized when they are properly supported by sound management. "The partnership between GM and Raytheon makes it all work," says Palmer. For example, he said, Raytheon helps GM implement policies and procedures guidelines needed to deliver engaging and successful content – "the key to any Internet-based training," said Inman.

The entire training program is supported by the people, processes and governance necessary to ensure quality and success, the two pointed out. Other key elements include a single sign-on as well as the ability to locate, enroll in and take available training courses. The learning management system (LMS) also tracks the training history of every employee, a "must" for this workforce.

"The system that GM Training has installed, and which Raytheon is implementing for us, is the best I have ever seen," said Palmer. He said some 200,000 employees in North America alone will rely on it, as well as thousands more in other countries.

Understandably, a cost effective solution was a top priority for the automaker in 2009, and thus a principal objective for Raytheon. Other priorities included interactivity and training quality that met or exceeded the previous satellite-based system.

The new system resulted in the elimination of dedicated satellite equipment on the roofs of every dealership and other hardware, which was replaced with broadband Internet service that was already employed by dealers for parts and auto ordering, among other business purposes.

In addition, the system's Global Training Repository has become a huge cost-saver and a valuable forum for the sharing of content. Palmer said the VCT technology has so captured his imagination that he teaches a course on its many features and benefits for dealership trainers and executives. He says most VCT sessions for GM dealership employees are live and instructor-led because the company values the vigorous interaction with and among its students. (The technology can also be used for independent self-paced courses.) Instructors control the content, which typically include visually impactful material including illustrations, video and other courseware – all integrated with the Raytheon LMS.

Instructors can rapidly create content by deploying custom training programs that mix and reuse content; share their screens at window, application or entire desktop levels; track learner performance and employ built-in LMS features including surveys and polling. At the instructor's discretion, students may participate by voice or live chats, and can even assist each other privately via their shared desktops. Instructors can also divide a class into separate breakout rooms. "This is why I consider VCT better than a live classroom," he told the gathering.

"Every time a dealership sends an employee to a hands-on class, it represents lost revenue since the technician is not fixing cars and the sales representative is not selling," said Inman. "So we try to deliver as much as we can to them in this format." The use of VCT varies by market and job description, but VCT currently accounts for 30 percent of technician training and 50 percent of sales training, he said. "We're still growing into it."