

How to Market Training to Your Workforce

By Gordon L. Johnson

You probably wish you didn't have to spend any of your training budget on marketing. Wouldn't you rather focus your resources on developing top-quality learning? The reality is that if you don't have marketing, you don't get heard at all.



Kevin Costner thought that if you built it, they would come, but this is only true in the corn fields of Iowa. Building great training is usually only half the battle; the other half is getting your workforce to take advantage of it. Unfortunately, like most people, your workforce is so bombarded by marketing messages that unless those messages are carefully planned and executed, they won't even hear them. Marketing must be an essential part of any successful training program.

Marketing Tools that Always Work

In the ten years that I've marketed training for a wide variety of suppliers and training departments, I've routinely been asked some variation of the following:

1. If I *must* integrate marketing into my training program, what's the least amount of effort I can put into it and still get a payoff?
2. What marketing activities really work for training?
3. What's going to give me the biggest bang for the buck—and even more importantly—for the work I'll have to put in?

The truth is: there's no free ride. Some of the most effective marketing activities are also some of the most expensive. Others cost almost nothing, but tend to require plenty of labor. The trick is to determine the combination of marketing activities that will make the best use of your time and your budget, so that you can eliminate what doesn't work and focus on what does.

What's the right marketing mix for training?

Marketers use the phrase "marketing mix" to mean a combination of activities that create synergy. "Mix" is the important part, because almost all successful marketing programs are

combinations of two, three, or more activities. For example, you could spend your entire budget printing posters or sending out direct mail, but combining them with other activities like seminars and email marketing will increase your success rate exponentially.

Scott Hornstein, the author of “*Integrated Direct Marketing: The Cutting Edge Strategy for Synchronizing Advertising, Direct Mail, Telemarketing and Field Sales*” believes that when you integrate several marketing activities, a sort of magic happens. It’s similar to the effect that blended learning can have on a student’s retention rate. When you hear the same message in different ways, you tend to remember it, and sometimes even act upon it. That’s what marketers want, and that’s what you want in your marketing programs. You want the learner to take action—to register for a class, take the class, and benefit from the wonderful services you have to offer.

The Ready-Made Marketing Plan

The bottom line is: you need cost- and time-effective marketing that’s proven to work for training. You also need to create a marketing mix that gives you that extra bang. The activities below are those I have found to be the most effective for marketing training. Fit them into your marketing plan, and watch your classes fill up.



1. **Get executive backing.**

This may not sound like marketing, but it’s the best possible way to “sell” your classes. Getting executive buy-in means that you convince your company’s leaders to endorse your program, actively promote it ... and possibly even require it.

Let’s say you have a new compliance course that you want all of your employees to take. Rather than send an email asking them to register, why don’t you have your CEO or another top-level executive email a meeting planner inviting everyone to attend the class. Most sane employees will jump to respond to this ... and attend the training as well. We all know how important executive buy-in is, but it’s critical to place this at the very top of your list. This step might take lots of work and follow-up, but it’s worth it.

2. **Make it easy.**

A widely known truth in marketing (and sales) is that when you make it easier for your customers to buy, your sales will increase. It’s that simple. It can be very frustrating for consumers to deal with organizations that make it more difficult than it should be to take advantage of their products or services.

Have you ever tried to buy something over the web and just gave up because you were confused by the process or had to go through countless screens to complete the order? If the vendor took a moment to step into your shoes, they would see why they’re losing sales. The problem is that the vendor is thinking from *their* perspective, not the perspective of their customers. Step out of *your* shoes for a moment and into your customers’ ways of thinking. This can sometimes be pretty challenging, but you’ll quickly see where you can make improvements that your customers will notice.

3. Use email.

Nobody likes spam. There's no question, however that email can generate the biggest bang for the buck. But, there are a few important things to consider:

- a. **Every email needs to add value:** You have to make it clear "What's in it for them" and provide information that will be perceived as valuable. Otherwise, they'll call it spam. eNewsletters work well for this.
- b. **Send the right message to the right person:** Although it's tempting to send mass emails to everyone in your company, it's more important that you target the right message to the right person. If you're offering IT training, send it only to the IT department. However, don't get too bogged down in breaking up your database into too many groups. This can make emailing so time consuming that you might never send out enough emails to make it worth the time you spent.
- c. **Make it easy to opt-out:** In each email, give them an easy way to opt-out. If you do this, it nearly always satisfies those people who might have otherwise complained about your email.
- d. **Plan at least six months in advance:** Put together a simple schedule that contains the content of each email, when they will be emailed, and to whom. This will increase the chance that your emails will actually be done and that they will be sent on a consistent basis.

4. Publish an eNewsletter.

It's an email, but it's not as easy to produce as an email. eNewsletters are usually very effective and are generally perceived as valuable communications by most people. The problem is that they take a lot of time to produce and are hard to sustain over time. Here are some tricks to help guarantee your first eNewsletter won't be your last.

- a. **Don't be overly ambitious:** The eNewsletter highway is paved with eNewsletters that were produced once and never heard from again. Start with a quarterly newsletter, which is fairly realistic. If it works well, you can always increase your frequency to every other month.
- b. **Get help from your training suppliers:** Training suppliers have a vested interest in making you successful. The good suppliers have the tools, articles, and expertise to help produce and distribute your eNewsletter.
- c. **Write it yourself:** Newsletters are not difficult if you're doing it yourself. Getting others to write articles and deliver them on time can be like pulling teeth. If you can't manage the eNewsletter yourself, make sure that the person in charge has a vested interest in its success and is willing to commit the time it takes.



5. Conduct seminars ... and webinars:

As a training person, using seminars as a marketing tool is a natural extension of your expertise. The added benefit of an event like a seminar is that it's an opportunity to showcase what you do, which gives your customer tangible proof that you offer a good service.

But remember, you must add value. The success of a seminar is determined mostly by how interesting the topic looks to your customer. Self-serving topics make for very small attendance.

6. Take advantage of all “free” opportunities.

There are lots of unique communications channels in your company that will help get your message out. Each company is different, but most have bulletin boards, intranets, newsletters, company events, vendor fairs, etc. Sometimes, you just have to ask to be included to get some valuable free exposure.

The good news is that effective marketing can pay off big-time for your training programs. The bad news is that it can be challenging and time consuming. However, if you stick to proven techniques and plan things out well in advance, you can get a return that will elevate your training program to the next level.



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