

Moving Training Content And Delivery Into The Virtual World

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While many training organizations are jumping on the virtual training bandwagon, some are still not realizing or leveraging its true potential. Simply shifting existing face-to-face training curriculum to the virtual arena does not take advantage of the full value this new media offers. Virtual training at its best enables a facilitator to fully interact with the class, conduct group activities as if students were seated around the same table, and visit group break-out sessions as easily as if they were in a conventional classroom setting.

The flexibility and very nature of virtual training also allows organizations to break an eight-hour class session into three or four shorter sessions. This pacing or modularizing of six hours of content into three two-hour trainings has several advantages over the traditional classroom environment.

Increased productivity?

First and perhaps most important, participants can attend the shortened class sessions for an hour or so in the morning and then immediately start their work day as soon as the class is over. This dramatically reduces the drain on productivity that occurs when the individual is traveling to and from the training, then sequestered for up to eight hours in a classroom. In addition, the student is better able to balance work and home life, which can also hinder productivity.

Greater retention and adoption

The second advantage is that because exposure to the new learning, concepts or skills is given in shorter bites, students report significantly reduced mental fatigue and increased retention. In addition, the facilitator can design the class so that students can immediately use the new skill they learned that morning when they go back to work that afternoon. Usage increases retention and facilitates adoption.

Reduced cost

Last but certainly not least is cost. Virtual training eliminates the cost of travel, hotel stays, meals, off-site conference rooms, etc. In fact, most companies

estimate that evolving to virtual training has saved the company up to 30-40 percent of total cost, as well as the potential avoidance of lost revenue from non-selling time. Equally important is reducing the cost of annual non-selling time because for every hour an account rep is sitting in a classroom, that's an hour he or she is not visiting customers and selling.

Five Critical Best Practices for Virtual Training Success

Training is critical to an account rep's ability to learn new selling skills, stay on top of trends, and become a more valuable part of his or her customer's business strategy. But whether training happens in a physical classroom or in the virtual environment, the value of training is proven by how fast participants can learn the new skills and how easily they can apply what they have learned. Learning by doing is the key and that's why virtual training is so effective. Virtual training allows facilitators and participants to interact in the fullest sense of real-time collaboration that includes, team learning, large group discussion, and role plays, all carried out in the virtual environment.

Virtual training takes learning to a whole new level and can be an impactful, cost-effective method of bringing new skills to your sales teams that show measurable results. It takes planning and foresight, however, to make the most of your virtual training, along with the integration of a few critical techniques and best practices.

1. Treat each session like a production

Exceptional delivery is absolutely critical in the virtual environment and part of that process is to make sure you can easily fit the training, brainstorming discussions, and breakout sessions into the time allotted. This calls for solid planning that involves tight choreography; a facilitator who understands and is comfortable with the virtual environment; and a producer who can monitor the technology, support the facilitator, and act as student advocate to ensure students have the best sound quality, comfort with the

technology, class materials when they need them, and adhere to the schedule.

The choreography and the script

One of the greatest advantages of virtual training is that it allows participants to get on with their day immediately after the class has ended; and they depend upon that predictability. In a traditional classroom, students are sequestered and with the facilitator in the room, it is much harder to get up and walk out of the classroom when the clock says the class is over. In the virtual world however, all they have to do is hang up the phone, close the Internet browser and they've effectively left the class room. There is little opportunity to recover from schedule slippage in virtual training. Let's say that within an eight-hour classroom session, you have a lunch break and two coffee breaks. That's a total of about two hours a facilitator can 'steal' time from and cut short if they think the class might be running late. That level of time-elasticity does not exist in the virtual world. The trick is to tightly design the class to stay strictly on point, script the session to make sure it won't run over the time limit, and rehearse it to test for length.

The facilitator as emcee

While virtual training is a completely different environment for participants, it can be equally foreign territory for the facilitator and not all facilitators will be able to make that leap. Just like in a physical classroom, the facilitator is the host of this production – but without the advantage of body language. In the virtual world, the facilitator must depend on other methods to create a persona. One way is to use a more animated tone of voice to engage participants and keep them "in the room." Monotones have no place in a virtual classroom and since the facilitator only has vocal qualities to present a persona, nervous coughs and stammers are more noticeable. A good, animated "radio" or "phone" voice becomes a huge asset.

The producer as orchestrator of the production

Actors can't perform without a support team working behind the scenes holding up cue cards, aiming the camera at the right spot, and adjusting the lighting. In much the same way, the nature of virtual training and the associated technology also requires a producer. Virtual training is a highly orchestrated production. With the facilitator and producer working as a team, the facilitator can maintain his or her focus on teaching. Working in the background, the producer manages the technology, quickly addresses problems, downloads class materials, and generally keeps the class on track. The producer "orchestrates" the entire production and also acts as "participant advocate", ensuring that each

participant gains full value from the training, making sure the technology is working, downloading materials as needed, and queuing the subject matter experts and sponsoring managers as they are needed.

2. Teach the technology

Learning a new technology and the behaviors expected in this non-traditional method of training can be intimidating. We have found that scheduling time at the beginning of the first class of a series to educate participants on using the tools decreases that stress and provides them with the opportunity to enjoy a richer, more substantive experience.

A culture change

Most sales teams consist of people on opposite sides of the technology spectrum. On one side, you have younger account reps who grew up with the Internet. Social networking sites, such as Twitter, FaceBook, and others, have become second nature to this group. On the other side of the spectrum, you have seasoned salespeople who might still remember life before PDAs and aren't as comfortable with this media. Putting everyone at ease right from the start forces the technology into the background where it belongs and helps participants shift their attention to the learning, rather than the tools. On average, we spend about 15 minutes at the beginning of the first session teaching the technology.

Making the transition

Showing participants how to use the icons that let them raise their hand, use the chat window, contribute to whiteboard sessions, and participate in virtual breakout rooms goes a long way toward making the virtual sessions highly interactive and less stressful. The key is to move the technology to the background where it's an enabler rather than a distraction. Start slow with a hands-on approach; teach the technology in small steps; add more tools as they are needed; and by the end, a facilitator should even be able to hand over control of his or her desktop so participants can lead a discussion or conduct a role play. For example, we often start by using a sign-in screen to welcome participants to Session 1. This sign-in and welcome screen uses fun, ice-breaking prompts to demonstrate their current skill level with the available virtual tools. For example, participants are asked to place a check mark next to their name, raise their hand if they have been in a virtual breakout room before, and use chat to share with everyone where they took their last vacation.

Acceptance

The simple approach to using the technology has demonstrated nearly 100% success rate, regardless of age or technological savvy. We see them congratulating themselves and coaching each other when they 'get it'. All of them walk away knowing that they can be comfortable with this environment and in turn, they can now do this with their own customers or channel partners. The most gratifying experience in this process is when we hear them say 'I had no idea I could ever do this' or 'I didn't realize it could be this easy or this interactive.' Now you've shown them a whole new style of communicating, not only in a training class but also how to use the technology to remotely host a meeting or product demonstration with their customers.

3. Take advantage of the break-out rooms

Virtual training lends itself perfectly to the use of breakout rooms and this is where the lectures, whiteboard activities, and the general sessions come together to cement the learning. In the breakout sessions, the teams can only hear themselves talking and cannot 'eavesdrop' on other teams. However, the facilitator – with the click of a mouse – can quickly enter into and out of each session to monitor progress, keep everyone on track, answer questions, and then bring them all back to the general session upon completion.

Assigning the teams and conducting the session

After explaining the exercise and downloading the materials for the exercise, separate participants into teams and assign them to breakout rooms, just as you would in a classroom. Using a separate conference bridge and web environment for each breakout room, team members can brainstorm, discuss the exercise, take turns controlling the desktop, etc. Typically we give them 15 or 20 minutes to complete the exercise and we drop into each breakout room to ensure that things are moving along. Participants can also raise their hand to get our attention and we will then enter the classroom to answer questions. If the team finishes early, they can re-enter the main room themselves, or if they are still working on the project when the time is up or have lost track of time, we can pull them back into the room ourselves.

Here's where the producer is invaluable

Remember, in a virtual environment timing is everything and this is where the producer can help shave valuable minutes off the logistics. While the facilitator explains the exercise, the producer transfers class materials to each participant, organizes the teams and sends

participants into virtual breakout rooms to complete the assignment. While the facilitator is visiting each breakout room, the producer makes sure the technology is cooperating and maintains the main classroom to provide assistance as needed.

Easier on the participants

Because the technology is so flexible and easy to use, facilitators can go in and out of the breakout rooms as often as needed. One of the great things we've noticed about virtual breakout rooms is that in a face-to-face environment, team members would have to crowd around one person's laptop to see the materials and complete the exercise. For example, let's say we want them to fill out a spreadsheet to prepare a sales forecast. When several people are crowded around a laptop trying to see the numbers, someone's view is always obstructed, making it difficult and frustrating. In the virtual classroom, everyone is looking at a shared spreadsheet on their own desktop and no one has an unobstructed view. It helps the facilitator in this way as well and when there is a problem and the team needs help, the team leader can turn over his or her desktop to me and we can actually show them what they need to know.

4. Create time to socialize

Socialization is human nature and perhaps one of the biggest mistakes some organizations make when shifting classes over to the virtual world is not addressing that need. Socialization facilitates the start of team-building. In the face-to-face classroom, especially when the training is held at off-site locations, participants fly or drive to the site and often take advantage of the opportunity to socialize the night before. Or they congregate in the classroom over coffee before the session starts the next morning. Obviously in the virtual world, that can't happen so the facilitator must look for other ways to not only allow but encourage the behavior.

Let them gather

Don't forget, virtual training is highly interactive and that's one of the reasons it is so successful. When you put people into teams and send them into a virtual break-out room, allow for a few minutes of chatter. Whether they are introducing themselves to new people, catching up with team members they haven't seen before, or talking about last night's football game, these few minutes spent at the beginning of the session go a long way toward cementing the group into a team. That's why it's especially important in the virtual

breakout rooms to build enough time in the schedule for this to take place.

Bring them back

Equally important is to know when it's time for the socializing to stop and get them back to business. While it's easier to do that when the facilitator is physically in the room, when you're a 'disembodied voice' on a computer screen, it is an art.

5. Keep them engaged

Keeping students engaged in a face-to-face classroom setting can be challenging. Keeping them engaged in a virtual environment where you can't see that their attention is elsewhere can be even trickier. The good news however, is that there are nearly limitless opportunities for injecting creativity and visual interest in virtual training, such as nearly constant animation (words or graphics fading in/out); motion (drawing on the screen to emphasize certain points); or activities (where they must participate). Facilitators can use the technology to virtually "see" when students are not paying attention. For example, on the meeting software we use, we see a red "!" on the sidebar of the screen when a student has clicked away from their training screen. Tricks like that help the producer and facilitator spot trends that identify when students are only listening vs. watching and listening. Technology gives us this new set of "eyes" and enables many of the same tactics we used in the class room to bring students back.

Make it a game

One of the virtual classes we conducted was designed to introduce account teams to a new, internal, sales-focused website. We led participants on a tour through the website, pointed out critical features, and then organized a treasure hunt to test their understanding. The producer downloaded a document to each participant with the list of items we wanted them to find and questions to answer that proved they found the items. For instance, one of the questions was, "Name the executive who appeared on a recent video." Another question was, "In what formats can you download the Customer SWOT Analysis Template?" The first person who arrived back to the general session with all of the correct answers won the contest. The beauty of this approach is that we are not only keeping them engaged, we are testing them on their understanding of the new tool, and encourage individual muscle motor memory which improves retention and use of the website.

Keep it visually interesting

The "flicker factor" is critical in virtual training. The flicker factor is the rate at which screen shots change on a television, movie, or video game. The higher the flicker factor, the more likely the program will engage the brain. Advertisers increase the flicker factor (along with the volume) to keep your attention focused on the screen during commercials. Replacing words with graphics and using color whenever possible also makes the presentation materials more visually interesting and helps keep eyes on the screen. Keep something moving on the screen at all times, such as a pointer, highlighter, or other methods facilitators use to emphasize a point and engage the mind. We've found that, drawing arrows, circles, lines, and other images on the desktop as we're talking helps to articulate a point and helps to keep attention pointed on the screen.

Keep them participating

Virtual training must be highly action-oriented and keep participants' fingers on the keyboards, which is a huge difference between virtual and face-to-face training. This is why the training needs to be redesigned rather than just transferred to a virtual format. Instead of gathering people in a physical classroom for an eight-hour session, now it's broken up into multiple one or two-hour sessions and during that time, you must have them interacting with each other via the computer, vocalizing, or doing some type of activity at least every five to seven minutes.

Occasionally test attentiveness by using polls or calling on specific students and making sure each participant responds at least once during a given time period. This is another good opportunity to use your producer. The producer can keep track of who has not responded in that length of time and send a discrete note to the facilitator.

Virtual Training is a permanent shift

Virtual training is relatively new and radically different from podcasts, webcasts and other media that offer low or no interaction. However, with the economic climate forcing businesses to severely reduce costs, and put an even greater emphasis on productivity than ever before, virtual training is an efficient, economical method of learning with very low impact on productivity or time away from the customer.

It's quite likely that the trend toward virtual training is a permanent shift away from traditional in-class, face-to-face training sessions. Sales teams get it. They appreciate the value of not being away from their

customers. They like the improved quality of life that lets them spend more time with family and less time traveling. They are quite happy not to be subjected to long hours or consecutive days dealing with a barrage of non-stop information while their in-box piles up in their absence.

That said, there is clear evidence that virtual training enables greater productivity, higher retention, and sustained adoption rates. In the end, whether it happens in a physical classroom or in the virtual environment, the value of training is proven by how fast participants can learn the new skills and how easily they can apply what they have learned.



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