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Getting the Most From Distance Learning: Mistakes to Avoid

To get the most from distance learning, training teams must properly integrate it into a cohesive learning pathway — one that is designed to meet clearly defined needs and that elicits the desired changes in the field.

It's no secret that the use of distance learning is on the rise. As the economy remains shaky and budgets remain tight, pharmaceutical company training departments are working diligently to squeeze every drop of value from each dollar they spend. Training teams know that distance learning can help them maximize the returns on their training investments, so there is no question that webinars, e-courses, CDs, podcasts, and printed modules will continue to play a major role in sales training curricula, even when the economy improves and budgets return to normal.

However, distance learning is not appropriate in all cases and can be counter-productive if not used properly. The benefits of distance learning do not come automatically, and training departments have learned as much through old fashioned trial and error.

This article outlines some of the key mistakes to avoid when developing distance learning programs, and it will give training departments some guidance on getting the most from their distance learning investments.

Mistake No. 1: Using Distance Learning As a Stand-Alone Tactic

Although this mistake applies to more than just distance learning, it bears mentioning here because the dynamics associated with distance learning make it much easier for training teams to fall into this trap. An example: A decision maker highlights a training need and asks the training department to develop a program to address it. The training team, in an effort to address the need quickly, runs a Webinar to address the need. The training is rolled out right away, the "box is checked," and the decision maker who initiated the process is satisfied that the need has been addressed.

The problem is that in many cases the training team has failed to run more than a surface-level assessment of the training need, leaving the training to exist as a stand-alone effort.

Too often, little is done on the front end to fully assess the need, little or nothing is done afterward to reinforce learnings, minimal efforts are made to measure results, and there is no focus on ensur-

ing that the new knowledge, skills, or behaviors are properly applied in the field.

To get the most from distance learning, training teams must properly integrate it into a cohesive learning pathway — one that is designed to meet clearly defined needs and that elicits the desired changes in the field. In most cases, this means that a training team must consider all of the following areas and then develop a program that addresses them appropriately.

Assessing the Need. Is the gap real or perceived? Does it align with the competencies defined for the role in question? Is the gap related to knowledge, skills, or behavior? The team should answer these questions so that it can pinpoint the specifics of the need. Then, the team would likely need to develop an assessment to gain insights into the current level of knowledge or skill that is exhibited by the group to be trained.

Training the Reps. With a clear understanding of the need, the training team is ready to develop a program to meet it. Team members will then determine which training modalities are most appropriate, given the nature of the need.

Reinforcing the Learnings. Most of the time, a one-and-done training program doesn't accomplish much. Some form of reinforcement is required to "make it stick." For example, an e-learning module can be followed by coaching dialogs between district managers and sales reps.

Assessing the Results. Assuming that the training department did an effective job of assessing the sales force's knowledge or skill level prior to the training, it should be well positioned to measure the improvement after the training.

Inspecting the Field. This is the true measure of training effectiveness: Did the training result in the right behaviors and desired results in the field? The training team must devise a method for inspecting behaviors and results in the field to answer that question.

It's clear that each distance learning modality has its strengths and weaknesses.

Training teams must be careful to match the tool they use to the need at hand.

In sum, a stand-alone distance-learning module or event usually cannot do the job on its own. It must be used as part of a cohesive program that involves the five key elements described above. Because of its flexibility, distance learning can be used effectively across the training continuum, not just for the introduction of new knowledge. In fact, with the evolution of distance-learning modalities, it is increasingly possible to implement robust, effective training programs without any centralized group training.

Mistake No. 2: Using the Wrong Training Modality

There are a number of distance learning modalities, and they are not equally suited to each task. For example, training teams that use e-courses when printed modules would be most effective could be severely restricting the value they provide. Here is a quick look at some key modalities and the types of needs for which they should be used.

E-courses are often used to deliver stable content that requires frequent knowledge checks and benefits from visual presentation. That is why e-courses are often used to deliver new, foundational knowledge that will be reinforced later using other modalities.

In other cases, e-courses can be used to provide information that fits into a context that is already firmly established with the learner. For example, they can be an effective means for sharing updates to corporate policies or delivering information on new clinical references.

Webinars are effective for reinforcement, application, or inspection. The Webinar's effectiveness is primarily a result of the dialog that it enables between trainers, learners, and peers.

Webinars can also be used to deliver new information that fits into an existing context, such as new corporate policies. In those cases, a training team would most likely choose to use a Webinar (rather than an e-course) if it thought that a limited dialog or Q&A session would be critical to helping the attendees more effectively understand the information.

Printed modules are still very important. They are most appropriately used when high volumes of information must be transferred, such as disease state or product information. In addition, they are often much easier to use as reference materials than other modalities.

In many cases, the printed module is used to deliver large amounts of data through home study. Then, e-courses can be used to reinforce key concepts later on.

CDs or podcasts are useful when the topics addressed are compelling enough for audio alone. They, like some other modalities, are most appropriately used to provide new information that fits nicely into an existing context or rubric. They can also be effective for a "quick blitz" on a new topic — as long as the topic is relatively narrow and easily grasped.

It's clear that each distance learning modality has its strengths and weaknesses. Training teams must be careful to match the tool they use to the need at hand.

Mistake No. 3: Failing to Get Stakeholder Buy-In

When developing a program, whether it uses distance learning or not, the training team must be sure to gain stakeholder buy-in at every step. Although shareholder buy-in is crucial when developing any training program, it is especially important to distance learning development. When a live training program lacks stakeholder buy-in, there is at least a trainer in the room to identify and cover missing links. With distance learning, though, materials are created and left for good. There is no patching a giant hole left by the absence of stakeholder input. In addition, failure to gain buy-in can result in a program that key people do not believe in, that the intended beneficiaries do not participate in, and that delivers limited value.

At the outset of a training program development process, the training team should involve key stakeholders in outlining and assessing the need. Stakeholder input should also be considered during the development of the actual training.

In addition, they must buy into the methodology for defining and measuring success. If all of this is done properly, then the training team will continue to be seen as the critical strategic resource that it is.

Distance learning is here in a big way, and its role has only grown in recent years. In all probability, it will continue to "gain share" in the grand array of sales training tools and approaches. Training departments that understand distance learning's strengths and weaknesses, and that apply it properly, will help their companies immensely. ■

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