

Tips to Help CLOs Market Learning (Feb 07)

February 14, 2007 - Kellye Whitney, Senior Editor

Imagine designing one of the best regional sales leadership training programs ever. The content is solid, assessments were done beforehand to determine competency needs, people signed up and many came to class on time. Then, the first question a learner poses is, "Why are we here?"

A similar experience led Jamie Grettum, The Ken Blanchard Companies director of learning services, to conclude a few things about effective methods to market learning: Learning communications must be visually appealing, sponsored by senior leadership and clearly articulate the training message, "Why are we being asked to spend this time on learning?"

According to a recent Blanchard Companies survey of internal marketing practices, e-mail is the most common way to inform employees a training program is available or coming up. Follow-up telephone calls to survey participants from various industries revealed these training buyers, curriculum managers and others responsible for the internal marketing of learning use e-mail, even though many think their organizational cultures are overwhelmed by it.

Further, they don't have access to any of what Grettum described as the "interesting" technologies that might be used to enhance visual appeal. In some cases, that includes HTML e-mail.

"That was interesting, as was the fact that respondents acknowledge they're not marketing writers," Grettum said. "When they can, they incorporate messages from senior leaders, but messages from senior leaders about how important a skill set is to an organization — I think that right there is key for CLOs. Getting them involved helps to set the expectation for what the training is all about."

It's always (or, at least, always should be) clear to the learning organization why certain initiatives are suggested or required, but that message also has to be delivered to the target audience.

Grettum said the proposed skill set, its importance to the organization, how it helps the company move toward its goals in performance and productivity are often left out when marketing learning. Without them, learning impact and effectiveness might begin and end at a deficit.

This is where marketing comes into play.

Fliers and posters are popular ways to market a new development program, but Grettum said, whenever possible, it also pays to incorporate into marketing messages testimonials from people who've experienced the learning or are exhibiting the desired competencies, as well as words from department champions.

Once the message has been clearly spelled out, the visual appeal element of marketing new or upcoming initiatives is critical. One relatively inexpensive way to create eye-catching communications is to use a template.

"We use an HTML newsletter template that is visually appealing, has a message from the CEO, tells them why this is important to us and what they'll learn," Grettum explained. "We lead with the message, and then the logistics are at the bottom. We sent three or four versions of this, where we changed the version a little bit each time, and that class stayed full. And when people got to the class, they knew why they were there."

“Don’t spend months designing a training program and don’t do anything to tell people why they’re invited — ouch! Spend just as much time communicating with the learners about the importance of the skill set. We invite senior leaders or people who’ve already been through the training to join that first session. This is an important part of all of our launches. Otherwise, they’re not engaged right from the beginning.”

Last, the manager of your target audience has to be onboard — Grettum said learning is more likely to stick and learners will be more engaged when the invitation comes directly from the manager.

The manager knows when employees sign up and are headed to training, and those employees will know they will be held accountable for demonstrating that learning back on the job.

“Have a marketing strategy for the managers of your target audience,” Grettum said. “You could have the most beautifully executed marketing campaign for training, but if managers don’t buy that this is an important skill set, people aren’t going to be able to sign up because managers won’t approve it. There’s a certain level of positioning that you have to do. The marketing piece of this has been overlooked for too long.”

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