

How to Tackle External Audiences

THERE'S NO ONE ANSWER, SINCE AUDIENCES ARE DIVERSE. BUT THERE ARE PITFALLS.

BY MATT GILLEY

Many organizations often want to explore how to engage, communicate and train “external audiences.” Generally, requests are focused on students, or potential students, who are not employees of the company and reside outside of the organization’s physical footprint and technological infrastructure. This scenario certainly presents a series of unique challenges.

Five common misconceptions and pitfalls that, when avoided, lead to much more successful external programs.

#1: DON'T RECREATE THE (CONTENT STRATEGY) WHEEL

Companies sometimes over-analyze the needs of their external audiences. They mistakenly assume external audiences require a level of engaging, entertaining content that is somehow different from what they provide their internal audience members. Before you worry about internal versus external audiences, you should develop an over-arching content strategy that results in creative, modern, engaging training material. Then you can determine how to present the appropriate content to the appropriate

audience. If you’re considering content for external users that is superior to the content you present to internal users, you’re doing something wrong.

#2: DON'T IGNORE STUDENT SEGMENTATION

Even the organizations with great content strategies sometimes neglect to plan ahead when it comes to segmentation. You would be surprised by the number of companies that allow external students into their learning environments without a clear way to identify or track them as such. If you can’t tell at a glance which students are internal and which students are external, how can you expect your learning management system to deliver the appropriate content? Develop an efficient way to designate a new user as internal or external during the registration process. You certainly do not want to try and identify them once they have become active users. If security becomes a big concern, you can consider pushing the two audiences into separate accounts. Over-complicating the structure and security requirements of a single learning environment in order to accommodate both internal and external audience members can divert attention away from the primary training mission. Instead, think: “Same great content, same variety, same over-all ap-

proach, different accounts.”

#3: DON'T OVER-COMPLICATE REGISTRATION

The registration portal is the first thing external students encounter. It should mirror the kind of simple, clean and intuitive experience the entire learning environment offers. Too often, registration pages and processes are bulky and confusing, forcing external users to jump through too many hoops before accessing the learning content. Difficult registration processes will result in significant drops in user activity. Consider the simplicity of the registration process for the majority of the consumer apps we rely on everyday. Are you thinking about single or social sign-on to simplify registration? You should be.

#4: DON'T UNDERVALUE THE USER EXPERIENCE

A large number of external training initiatives rely on the “self-paced” model, allowing students the freedom to move through topics and access modules at their own speed. Amazingly, many organizations do not consider the student’s actual experience when they build out an external, or even internal, learning environment. Students expect to find the content they are looking for immediately, and with little effort. This means search functionality must be exceptional. Key words, course descriptions and summaries need to be less clinical and

neutral, and much more strategic and engaging. The affect that images have on user engagement numbers, positive or negative depending on the quality of the images, are staggering. It’s time to ditch the outdated clip art in your catalog and course descriptions. Work with marketing to develop an image strategy for the entire learning environment that not only aligns with your content, but helps “sell it.”

#5: DON'T FORGET TO ASK, “WHY?”

External is definitely “trending up,” but first, companies should really evaluate what they are trying to achieve. Perhaps more importantly, why? Some organizations have the kind of content that external audiences are already demanding. Some companies view external training and education as a way of strengthening or securing their already strong brand ties and audience relationships. Either way, these organizations typically have external audiences in place, audiences that already perceive value in the content and justify the required resource investment. If you don’t have a good answer for why the content should be offered to students outside of your organization, there is no reason to further explore the how. 

—The author is the CRO for Intellum. More info: www.intellum.com