

## Five Ways to Love Your SME (Feb 07)

The SME and the designer: Why can't they just get along? We examine why this relationship is more complex than Romeo and Juliet and how you can avoid a tragic end with just a little love and understanding...

It's the age-old tale: Two people who desperately need each other, and want the same thing - but just can't seem to find a way to make it work. They keep trying to meet, but other people come between them. They keep explaining to each other what they want from the relationship, but it's like they're speaking different languages. Eventually it breaks down, one moving on to date an authoring tool who promises never to lie to them again, the other to have a series of flings with generic software that seems cheap and easy at first but ultimately doesn't make them happy.

### Five steps to a happier relationship....

It doesn't have to be this way, people. We've worked with many SMEs down through the years. We've seen it go very right and very wrong. Sometimes a little understanding is required. Sometimes a little tough love. Sometimes a little more explanation of where you see the relationship going. Sometimes seeing from through their (highly billable) perspective.

But it can all be done better, and faster. We've tried to boil it down to a series of steps that any designer can do to improve how they manage and collaborate with SMEs to achieve the desired result:

#### 1. Find the right partner

Not all rapid e-learning projects have the same subject matter expert requirement. The key project factors that will steer you towards the most appropriate SME are:

**Time:** If you've only got three weeks, only some SMEs will be in a position to help. You are unlikely to secure the most senior qualified person unless they're very committed to the project (and they may not be at the right level to provide useful help).

**Subject matter:** A more linear procedural or systems content may need less face-to-face SME time than soft skills or more complex content, which may need more interpretation.

**Project profile:** A rapid e-learning project for a specific group or role will have a specific SME requirement that's different from, for example, a company-wide induction project that will require a range of SMEs to represent different groups and functions.

#### 2. Make sure they're ready for commitment

The SME's most common complaint about participation in e-learning projects is that it takes far longer than they were told it would. To avoid this, be clear about time required upfront.

And if your SME can't commit to the relationship? You can either:

- Adjust your schedule to accommodate (if they must be the SME), or
- Adjust your working model to accommodate (if the deadline can't change), or
- Find alternative SME resources.

Don't pretend it's going to work if you know your SME is not going to be available. You're setting yourself up for disappointment.

### **3. Let them know where the relationship is going**

Bear in mind that your SME may have no idea what you mean by e-learning – or have a different idea of e-learning to yours. If you're not on the same page in terms of type of learner experience and learning model, you will encounter problems and disagreements in the detailed content development and review.

To help them visualise the outcome, and the iterations along the way:

- Show them the most similar piece of e-learning at your disposal
- Show them an example of a script/unedited PowerPoint for review
- Show them a typical output from the tool you're using.

### **4. Get the process straight**

Before you move in together, you need to be clear upfront about who's going to do the dishes...there are many models to get from the contents of the SME's head to a finished rapid e-learning course. From lowest level of SME involvement to highest, the most common are:

- SME provides raw materials and ideas, then reviews build
- SME briefs, reviews scripts, graphics, build
- SME co-writes, reviews scripts, build
- SME authors (in PowerPoint or authoring tool.)

In between there are many gradations. It's important that you agree with the SME the model that will work best for you and them, and adhere to that model. Best practice is to develop a short document or flow-chart agreeing who will do what so there's absolute clarity.

### **5. Don't spare the tough love**

SMEs need project management, probably more than any other member of the e-learning production team as they're not dedicated to the project and are, by their nature, usually extremely busy. Some basic tips for project management of a SME:

- Develop a personalised project plan with just their responsibilities and deadlines
- Ask them if they're clear on their tasks and if they need support
- Set false deadlines to allow for slippage
- Focus them on the content, not the whole project (unless they're explicitly playing a more involved role)
- Focus them specifically on the content that only they can provide, for example, interpretation, examples, anecdotes, not on materials you can source without their input
- Work to a scheduled review event, e.g. meeting or conference call

### **Want to take the relationship further?**

If you follow these five steps, you'll be in a good position with your SME. But there's more you can do. This is an extract from our **Rapid Guide on how to Manage Subject Matter Experts**. It includes more detail on identifying types of SME, the five questions to ask if you've just got one hour, and how to avoid the most common mistakes made with SMEs.