

## Winning Games (Apr 07)

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Games and simulations are efficient learning tools that are fun to boot—so much so, your employees may forget they're training.



By Margery Weinstein

### Online

In December 2005, prior to the launch of its Rapid Release Gelcaps, Ontario, Canada-based Tylenol, makers of the over-the-counter pain relief pills of the same name, decided to provide its employees with an educational game from interactive promotions provider Launchfire Inc. The company needed a way to get salespeople to commit facts about the new product to memory, and there seemed no better way to do that than through a game that felt more like playing than learning.

Entitled, "The Need for Speed Trivia," key information about the product, along with just-for-fun, speed-related facts, were put on a graphic-rich CD-ROM for reps to play either offline, or live, against peers. "We put that into a trivia game similar to what you might see at a bar," says Denyse Lafrance Horning, product director-Adult Tylenol. For a sense of competition, a timer and scoring system were incorporated. Reps that chose to play live raced against each other to see who could correctly answer the greatest number of questions in the shortest amount of time. "The extra layer that brought it over the top was a high score system, so anyone who participated in the game had visibility to who had the leading score," continues Lafrance Horning. "There was a great response to that competitive element."

Rolled out live at a national sales meeting, reps were taken through a few practice rounds, and then given the CD-ROM containing the link to the online site that allowed them to enter the competition. Questions, presented in multiple-choice format, were designed to reinforce the information they had just received at the conference about the new gelcaps. "Our sales force is exposed to so much information," she points out. "They've sat through brand launch presentations time and again, so we're always challenged to find a new way to get them excited, so they can then take that excitement and bring it to the buyers, and, ultimately, the consumer."

According to Launchfire data, the game did the trick. The Ontario-based vendor reports that each sales rep played an average of 47.3 games, and interacted with the program for an average of 71 minutes. More important is the feedback the company got from participants like territory manager Darcy Williams: "We learned about the product, which was fantastic," she says. "It was just a different medium for the message, and we had fun doing it, too." No one had to encourage her to log-on. "It didn't seem like we were doing work," she says. "I remember sitting there until one in the morning, playing this game for three hours because I wanted to win."

### On the Board

If you want face-to-face interaction between employees during your simulation, you may opt to follow in the footsteps of Bellevue, Wash.-based online travel services company Expedia, Inc. When the company wanted to teach its managers project management skills a little over a year ago, it gave the board game simulation "Countdown" from Tampa, Fla.-based Paradigm Learning, Inc. a whirl.

Expedia's fast-paced workers find challenges fun, says Director of Learning and Development Antigoni Mallen, so teaching them project management skills in a lecture format wouldn't work. "I selected "Countdown" because I knew what Paradigm did, and I knew that their simulations were engaging and fun." A company division that had specifically requested project management

training piloted the game at the end of 2005 before it was rolled out to the rest of Expedia in March 2006.

To play "Countdown," groups of three or four employees, led by a facilitator, gather around game boards with the task of completing a simulated project within five hours. "The cool thing about this simulation is that, depending on the decisions you make [in the game], it impacts the date the project is delivered, or it impacts the extent to which your customer requirements are met," says Mallen. "That's one of the things they love here at Expedia, the fact that they can control some of the destiny of the outcome of the results, and then they compare it to the other tables."

Mallen's learning goal for the game was that it would prepare managers for the corporate projects they would be a part of for the first time. That was accomplished: "After going to "Countdown," these managers can sit in on that first meeting," she says, "and they can start contributing immediately."

The comments about the game Mallen received through the post-course survey she conducted back up its success: "People say, 'This was a great way to learn,' and, 'I learned what I needed to know,'" she says, "and that tells us that we hit the mark."

Don't roll out the game before you have tested it across the range of projected participants. "Without testing," says Treher, "you've lost opportunities for getting feedback and generating buy-in and advance publicity and excitement for your game."

## **Simulation Satisfaction**

With simulation gaining momentum in the training industry, breadth of selection isn't a problem. On the contrary, you may not be able to narrow it down. Luckily, Robb Gomez, president of Tampa, Fla.-based Paradigm Learning, Inc., says great simulations have some common attributes:

**Attracting and Intriguing:** The ability to grab learners' attention with sounds, visuals, power openings, game boards, and more.

**Jump-Starting:** Participants are given just enough information to get the experience started.

**Brain-Churning = Learning:** The inclusion of guided small-team activities that prompt learners to think, act, analyze, and question.

**Discovering and Concluding:** Participants are able to discuss ideas, draw conclusions, and develop insights as the game or simulation progresses.

**Bridging and Connecting:** Learners can transfer the experiences and insights learned in the game to real workplace issues, and then apply them to their jobs.

**Experiential:** The learner encounters a new situation or problem and deals with it in terms of observations, feelings, and reactions.

**Reflective:** Learners consider their own perceptions, reconciling program challenges with their memories of past experiences.

**Testing:** Once learners have developed a framework through which they can understand and solve the program's challenges, they test their skills by engaging in further experiences in order to produce new and better results. The cycle is repeated as desired, bringing participants to a new level of adaptability and creativity.

## Good Match

Funnily enough, choosing the right game is no game. Well-produced and executed learning games are serious business, so John Findlay, founding partner of Ontario, Canada-based interactive promotions company Launchfire, Inc., tells you how not to become a loser:

**"The game needs to achieve an equitable balance between educating and entertaining the end user," he says.** That means the game should offer value to both the trainer and the "player." A trivia game in which every question is related to the key value propositions of your product or service seems like a fabulous idea, but think again. "The problem is the game offers little value to the user, so they will not play it," Findlay notes.

**Set up systems to track the game, and evaluate its effectiveness.** The primary objective is to train your audience, but don't miss out on the opportunity to do a little learning yourself. "By setting up tracking systems you can see how effective the game was at engaging your target audience and maintaining their interest," he explains.

**Ask your game developer to build a game engine that can be re-skinned (i.e., is capable of having its visuals changed), so it can be used for other training purposes in the future.** "For instance," offers Findlay, "a trivia game can be affordably re-skinned with new graphics and trivia to convey new messaging."

**Make the game accessible across multiple platforms.** Publish it in more than one place—on the intranet, Internet, during a town hall meeting, and on CD—to ensure easy access while maximizing your results.

**Don't forget about demographics.** "While men prefer action and sports games, women are more partial to word and puzzle games," says Findlay. "Choosing the right genre can make the difference between a magnetic, engaging, and effective program, and an utter failure."

## Do Not...

Like any delicate science, there also are the things you need to consider before entering the games and simulations arena. Elizabeth Treher, Ph.D., and co-founder of Washington Crossing, Pa.-based human resources services and simulation provider The Learning Key, Inc., points out several "no-no's" to consider:

**Don't start work on the simulation without first defining your expectations, including learning goals and agreed-upon timelines.** "Not doing this," says Treher, "is a recipe for frustration and confusion."

**Don't "begin the effort as an individual's pet project, without organizational commitment," she advises.** The simulation needs to be completed even if you leave the company, or join another part of the organization.

**Don't start without a clear "change-control process," meaning be able to make changes to the simulation in development when great ideas come your way, Treher recommends.** Establish a process with your vendor to allow for program revisions.

**Don't wait until the "end" for testing and feedback.** "Get employees involved at all stages to provide input and feedback," she stresses, "so that suggestions and improvements can be implemented before too much has been designed to make those changes either practical or cost-effective."