

Training trends from 2012 to 2013 (Dec 12)

Chris May considers trends he has observed in the training sector in 2012 and suggests what the future holds.

When you work in the training industry you gain a unique and privileged insight into the workings of some of the country's biggest and smallest businesses, be they in retail, FMCG, PR and marketing or trade and export. In other words, you have an opportunity to observe industry trends across a broad spectrum of business and quickly learn what is and isn't working in each sector – and for what reason.

There have been a number of interesting developments in 2012, but the following will focus on three particular trends that I have noted. First of all, there's how and why businesses are pursuing training; next comes the increased role of procurement departments; and finally, the way in which social media have infiltrated the training process.

Reactive training

Throughout the business world speed seems, more than ever, to be of the essence. This is evident even in the ways companies looking for training services put out their request for proposal tenders. Traditionally a training company would expect contact to be made via telephone and a proposal requested via email or post. Following this, there would be another call or meeting after which contracts would be agreed. Yet in recent months the need for speed seems to be squeezing such time-consuming niceties out of the process. Requests are now more often made via email and offer shorter periods of notice with the added stipulation that training companies should not attempt to follow up on the telephone. The whole process, from the sending of proposals to the agreeing of contracts, is now carried out with a fast turnaround in mind.

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This haste may well be a result of the recent trend in which commercial businesses request training as a reaction to short-term challenges or problems. Training is increasingly viewed as high priority by incoming staff - especially heads of department that have been brought in to turn around a business's performance. In previous years that manager might have taken the saying 'out with the old and in with the new' literally. Now however, they are more likely to keep their inherited team, growing and developing it as necessary.

The role of procurement

Procurement departments today are involved earlier in the sales cycle than ever before. In the past, procurement leaders removed themselves from sales negotiations until the stakeholder in question had made the decision to buy. At this point they would move in and attempt to close the deal at the best price. Now, however, procurement professionals are involved from the start. As a result their training needs have developed. They are now concerned with completing on deals as quickly as possible, instead of holding out for further, nominal savings. Consequently, there are greater opportunities for training agencies to work with procurement staff.

Communication

Ask a successful manager what the key to good management is and they will likely mention communication. Communicating values, feedback and business direction effectively is vital to the running of a profitable department. The methods are changing constantly, particularly with developments in social media, which has had a profound effect on managers' communication styles.

This year we particularly noted the social trend with relation to 'train the trainer' projects. In every case, the internal trainer has gone on to use Facebook in order to maintain contact with the group and individuals they have trained. These trainers, and others like them, are using the site to share new

ideas, gather feedback and offer case studies. In some cases this has now replaced the typical HR coordination function to keep files and photographs on the office server.

Predictions

Having observed the developments of the previous year, it's possible to form some theories about which trends will be next to surface.

As the buyers of training services begin the internal pitching process for resource and investment in 2013, they will find themselves facing questions more probing than ever before. Budgets remain tight as we exit the recession, and the justification for training budgets will have to be exemplary in order to secure funds. They will need to answer important questions: Why are we doing this? What are the tangible benefits to our organisation, people and customers? What would be the implications of not doing this? In order to meet these questions head on, buyers will have to better understand the needs of their stakeholders and customers before submitting their pitch.

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In fact, managers fighting for a training budget would benefit greatly from training that helps them present a clear and persuasive case - it's the training equivalent of the chicken and egg question. By undergoing training they will learn how to prepare for such questions and will be in a better place to relate first-hand the benefits that training can bring to their team. What better way to sample the wares of a new training provider than to be coached for departmental budget negotiations?

Finally, a trend requiring action from the HR managers and trainers: Trainers like me will be expected to become more than just identifiers of needs and the providers of training services. The most successful trainers will be the ones leading the debate on employee development. They must make stakeholders aware of the needs of their teams by creating a forum in which disruptive ideas are discussed freely.

Inevitably, there will be other changes in store for training agencies. The best and most profitable will be those that remain flexible and adapt to whatever is thrown their way. By keeping their ears to the ground, trainers can anticipate when and how the changes will materialise, and be ready to take advantage when the time comes.

*Chris May is managing director of **FXL***

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