

Blended, Schmlended!

By Anver Suleiman

Blended Learning: A Marketer's Perspective

Blended, schmlended! Blended learning has been around forever. E-learning is what's new.

Let me explain.

When you went to college, did the faculty not “blend” instructor-led training with book learning? And sometimes blend with the showing of videos? And other times with other ways or vehicles of learning, such as tests; tests are one of the most powerful learning tools yet devised. And blend as well with research, and perhaps programmed instruction or audiotapes? Just add e-learning to the blend and, *Voila!*, we have the same age-old idea that learning in a variety of ways is generally more effective than learning just one way.

So, what's all the fuss about blended learning?

What *is* new is that we now have e-learning. Indeed, e-learning is absolutely wonderful—for some kinds of learning. Better for such areas as computer skills, not as good for, say, presentation skills. Great for just-in-time learning—handy as all get-out. *Blended* means, simply, blending one form of delivery (not just e-learning) with one or more other forms for greater potential effectiveness.

Now, a marketer's perspective...

Most marketers believe that it's customers who decide what they want—in the case of learning, *how* they want to learn: book, audio, video, ILT, e-learning, and so forth. Among marketers, there is the saying, “Seminar buyers are seminar buyers, tape buyers are tape buyers, and book buyers are book buyers.” When marketers select mailing lists, we see a tremendous differential in list performance based on the preferred delivery vehicle for learning—not that there isn't any crossover.

So, what about college students? They often have no choice. They're a captive (to the system) audience. That's also true for some segments of the training market, such as insurance and other salespeople and support- or admin-level employees. But once you provide a choice—book, seminar, tape, e-learning—you'll find that a standard project management program can be delivered in all of those ways. The audience, however, will quickly divide itself (in other words, they will buy) based on delivery preference. Forcing the blending will generally reduce the response, and the learning.

That's not to say that you can't blend. But it is to say that it's best to blend for your customers (clients, employees) and for their preferences, not just for seemingly sound pedagogical reasons. E-learning for many topics is a great option, even a preferred option. After all, e-learning can be more economical, faster, delivered 24/7, spaced over time, available just-in-time, accessible anywhere.

Yet, marketers who market instructor-led training know that if you ask participants at almost any level to pre-read a book before attending a program 1) you will get fewer registrations and 2) you will get more cancellations. What does that tell us? The customer is in charge.

So, blend as you will with e-learning, books, tapes, and anything else and you'll likely increase the efficiency of the learning process—for those individuals who prefer “blended learning.”

E-learning is the really big news, and powerful. Let's not confuse our typology, marketing, or the audiences. We'll serve our intellects, investment dollars, and audiences better. **TD**

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