

More Than Learning

LMS enhances product education and training.

By Rex Davenport

FEW WOULD ARGUE the value of a learning management system for a large enterprise. To meet the workplace training needs of a far-flung organization, the LMS is more than just nice to have—it is almost mandatory.

But as often as not, the LMS can become a critical application in the business processes of the organization itself. When Toyota USA undertook a wide-ranging effort to bring together unconnected learning systems five years ago, the company understood it would achieve consistencies in its offerings, and as a result create some savings.

The LMS enhanced the training that took place after the launch of the company's youth-focused Scion line of cars.

"If you look at the e-learning industry as a whole, you really can break it into two groups," explains Ara Ohanian, president of Vuepoint, the company that supplied the LMS for the carmaker. Some companies zero in on human capital management. Ohanian calls these the traditional LMS companies. "They are focused on how you more effectively manage the human capital, how you help employees grow, and how you give them career pathing. That has everything to do with the human being and how they are developing themselves and becoming a better performer."

The second kind of LMS provider, he claims, offers similar tools that highlight ease-of-use, speed, and granularity in measurement and capabilities, but focus on business knowledge impact, as opposed to human capital management. He describes business knowledge impact as being the driver of specific knowledge. "It's where the rubber meets the road, where sales or customer service happens.

"And that is where Toyota has been making an impact on their business, as it relates to bringing all this e-learning technology (into use)."

Dealing with the dealers

"The main focus of the installation, at the onset, was for the dealer audience," explains Michael Lewis, learning management systems project manager for Torrance, California-based Toyota Motor Sales USA. "We have two main customers, the dealers—Toyota, Lexus, and Scion—and our Toyota associates. The decision at that time was to focus on the dealers. We wanted to change the culture and be more e-receptive. We did not want to send every person to every class for every little thing.

"We have very specific customization to the audience, our user," explains Lewis. "We have a portal for our Lexus dealers, we have a portal for our Toyota dealers, and we have a portal for our associates. We wanted enhancements

to the (LMS) product that we thought would be beneficial to a larger audience base. We have identified those through upgrades and new versions...that originated as Toyota's ideas. We were able to convince them that this is really good functionality."

Prior to the installation of the LMS, different groups or units scheduled, enrolled, tracked, and delivered e-content in a myriad of ways. "There was no consistency," says Lewis. "From a consolidation standpoint, any LMS" would have been a benefit.

Vuepoint helped Toyota take a number of different systems throughout the company and integrate them into a system that manages the product-knowledge cycle. Since then, almost all products released in the United States with a training component, both for the sales side or the technical-support side, have been part of the LMS. The LMS supports that activity, whether it is an e-learning piece or traditional classroom learning.

Currently, there are as many as 80,000 dealer users and 8,000 employee (associate) users at more than 1,400 Toyota Motor Sales USA dealers (1,200 Toyota/Scion, 200 Lexus).

The breadth and depth of the installation enables it to support the complexity of a product launch in many markets around the world, not just the United States. It can deal with issues

MANAGING THE LEARNING FUNCTION

that need to be localized in up to 20 languages.

Ohanian explains that over the past five years, Toyota, Lexus, and Scion have produced and launched more models faster than ever. “That became a driving force for the company and it put a tremendous amount of pressure on their training function,” Ohanian adds. “Toyota, in the auto area—and maybe one of the few companies in the world—would not release a product or a service unless everyone is ready to support it and the customer. That put a tremendous amount of pressure on them in terms of how rapidly they could deliver knowledge around a new product introduction.”

Scion: introduction in high speed

“We live in a demand economy—where an empowered, highly informed consumer is the boss and the sales team must be more educated than ever before on the brands and products they represent,” explains Ohanian. “The speed and continuity of knowledge transfer throughout the enterprise directly affects the company’s external-facing operations and ensures that no advertising dollar is wasted.”

And any product education effort is a very expensive proposal. “Traditional auto product education has a lot of road shows, classroom events, and ride-and-drives,” says Lewis. “That’s big money.

“When the Scion line came around, the powers that be decided to conduct a large portion of Scion product training via e-learning. While local ride and drives were conducted, the learning could be expanded to those not able to attend these intensive hands-on events.

“What made this viable was that the Scion uses the best of proven Toyota technology. Our customer-contact associates have a basic familiarity with the systems, but needed to know how they are incorporated into this youth-oriented product line, and how to present the vehicle to this new kind of customer,” Lewis adds. **TD**

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