Selling HRD on the Inside

If you find your department given only a cursory glance, you may need better internal marketing, not better programs.

By ROSEMARY F. GAFNER

So often on the outside looking in, human resource development can be a source of frustration as well as satisfaction for its practitioners. As HRD professionals, we're taught to analyze needs and remedy problems. Yet we frequently aren't allowed to do the very things that would make the organization more effective. The reasons are varied: It costs too much money or takes too much time. People can't take time for training programs; or they "know it all." You know them. You've heard them, either directly or indirectly. Getting past them and getting your HRD programs accepted for their benefits are the goals of every stymied HRD practitioner.

Marketing is the key to getting your programs into the company's mainstream. You have three "product lines": human resource development as a concept and a function; specific training programs within that function; and yourself, as a person. You market all of them by following tried-and-true marketing and sales strategy:

- Create a need for the product in the mind of the consumer.
- Satisfy that need with product features and benefits.
- Close the sale.

The first step concerns marketing. The other two have to do with sales, but they are the means by which you get your programs used.

Creating a need

Forget, for a while, the content of what you've got in place already. Never mind that you've got a state-of-the-art supervisory training program, or a fine team-building program. What you've got to do is match your products to the needs of your clients. You do this by focusing entirely on what your product can do for them.

Yes, I know you did a needs analysis; after all, that's what told you they needed a team-building program in the first place, right? The trick is getting *them* to recognize and really *feel* that need. Then, they'll reach out eagerly for anything that will satisfy.

The usual way of offering internal training programs runs exactly counter to what works best. Usually, a needs analysis is completed; programs are developed to answer the needs; and then are announced through a newsletter, memo, or brochure.

Such an approach is unsuccessful because people won't typically feel the need. They've got to want to meet that need. Through marketing and sales, you'll get them to want your product—training. But first, they've got to see what it will do for them, personally and professionally. Nothing less than your personal attention to the marketing process and sales call will do the trick.

Remember: People don't do things for your reasons; they do things for their reasons. So, you shed light on needs that can only be satisfied by your training programs. One of the best ways to begin is to translate behavior into dollars. If a work group is spending a lot of time discussing whose job it is to do what, that's production time lost. Calculate how much money is being wasted per hour. Figure the average hourly wage of the people in the group. Add to that another 20 percent or so, to represent fringe benefits. Multiply that figure by the number of people in the group. That's the *direct* cost of failing to work well together. You can double or triple that figure, depending on how much

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time is spent after meetings discussing what went wrong and what jerks the others are. That money could be saved if the group knew how to handle their working problems. Enter your team-building program, carefully designed to do just that.

Talk with a member of the group (it doesn't have to be the designated leader). Ask how the project is doing. Get him or her to tell you about who's working on what. If the group is dysfunctional, that fact will come out. That's your cue to get the client—what this person has become—to state a need. You can do this by practicing your own active listening skills. "Sounds like not all members have the same outlook;" or "It seems that not much has happened; but haven't you been meeting for a while?" Your client will then be able to disclose a need. For example, "No, there's a difference of opinion about what should be done;" or "Yeah, we've met three times and we're no closer to a solution than we were before this got started."

Satisfying the need

Now, use your sales skills. Offer something to meet the need. Perhaps a direct approach will do. "Why not try the TEAMMAX approach? It makes it possible to work well with lots of people in spite of differences of opinion. Down time is reduced and meetings are more productive. . . ." You can then follow your client's lead, pacing yourself to keep up with him or her. If there's distinct interest, continue describing what the program can do for the client. Don't describe the content. You want him to want the program for selfish reasons, for what it can do for him. The only way to make that happen is by telling him how the program benefits him.

If there's little interest or obvious balking, don't push; go back to the discussion that stated the need. Explore that some more and feed the fire. Eventually the client will express his need clearly: "Someone needs to take charge"; or "Something's got to give that group some focus." Then you can step in again: "What needs to be done? What should the end result be?" And finally, you can offer things that will fix the problem.

If you're not comfortable with a direct approach, go more softly. Say, "You've got a problem all right. Too bad; that's a lot of talent going to waste." Usually, your client will pick right up on that. You can help him along: "If you were in charge, what would you suggest?" He may express an opinion, or he may say, "I don't know; I'd have to get some help." You can carry along the conversation, and eventually say something like: "There's a lot of material available on how to handle group interaction when it's blocked; how about if I see what could work for you?" He can hardly say no; and from there on it's relatively smooth sailing.

The point of your action is to make your client aware of a need that you can satisfy with your training programs. The above example focused on a team-building program, but the approach works equally well with any training program as long as it will truly solve the problem. You've got to be sure it will; otherwise you've lost your credibility, and with it your future as a resource for your organization.

Closing

Once you've established the need for training, and convinced the client that your programs will satisfy that need, you close the "sale." You do this simply by confirming what specifically you'll do: "Okay, I'll get things arranged. Would a morning or afternoon session be better for you?" Give the client control over timing, sequencing, and other details: "Want to start next month, or would you prefer to have the program sooner?" That way, he feels a sense of control; with that comes involvement and commitment.

What happens if all doesn't go so smoothly? You stop, reconsider the situation, and handle the objections or barriers that arise. Let's suppose a client balks when you offer the choice of morning or afternoon sessions: "Wait a minute! I didn't say I wanted your program; I just want to look at some materials." You can take that as an objection; find out what's really at its core. In this case, the true barrier could be a number of things. Perhaps the client needs to get the approval of someone else before he can commit to having a program run. Maybe he's concerned about the reaction of prospective trainees (after all, they may be hard to convince). Or, he could be skeptical about the outcomes of your program. Find out what's bothering him, so you can remove the barrier. The dialogue could go this way.

YOU: "Would you prefer a morning or afternoon session?"
CLIENT: "Wait! I didn't say I wanted that program; I just want to look at some alternatives."
YOU: "Sure; I can get the stuff to you. What in particular are you interested in?" (You're getting the client to restate what he wants—he's acknowledging a need.)
CLIENT: "Something that will tell me how to get people to quit arguing and start acting."
YOU: "There are entire books on that! Maybe something more concise—a how-to list, perhaps?"
CLIENT: "Yes; one that includes things to do, things to avoid, and similar information."
YOU: "Okay, sounds like what you're really interested in is something that you can absorb quickly and put to work immediately."
CLIENT: "There you go!"
YOU: "Okay, I'll put something together for you right away. After we've gone over it, I'll go over the list with the group members, so they'll be ready to use the same techniques. You'll be up and running in no time."
CLIENT: "Sounds good."

People only do things for their reasons, not yours

You got the client to restate his need (thus making a renewed commitment), and to buy into what you're selling—in this case, a practical course that will help the group to work more smoothly.

To market

Where could your HRD efforts be of benefit in the organization? In other words, where could the above process work for you?

In general, there are two ways of looking at potential markets. There are cross sections: people spread throughout the organization who could benefit from your programs. You can also take a concentrated approach: looking at specific functions or related groups.

Cross sections include all first-line supervisors, customer-contact people, management, employees with less than one year of service, and so on. Your training for these people will have to focus on whatever they have in common: people they supervise, problems they deal with, tenure, etc.

A more concentrated approach might try to reach all employees of the purchasing department, the communications department, those involved with long-range planning; or top management. Individuals in these groups typically share comon activities, goals, and a niche in the organizational structure. The distinction between the two groups may not always be clear. Planning for example, may be both a functión (conducted by a cross section of people) and a department.

The reason you look at both groups is simple: You multiply your marketing effectiveness by providing programs for both segments. The team-building program you conduct for a cross-section work group automatically makes you visible in each of the departments represented on that committee. Next time they've got a problem, they may turn to you for help. Similarly, the program you conduct for a specific department will promote your image as a valuable resource to other specific groups. They'll see you doing custom work as well as providing off-the-shelf programs. Versatility is an asset.

To discover the needs of each group, examine what their jobs involve. Look at the contacts made. Think how you can help make it happen more smoothly and where improvement is possible.

Cross-sectional project groups usually need help in working together. They're likely candidates for team building, conflict resolution, communications skill building, and negotiation programs.

Cross-sectional groups not brought together for a specific project still provide opportunities for training. An excellent place to look for those opportunities is the long-range or strategic plan. Where does the company want to be in five years? What one-year goals are planned to get it there? What tasks or projects must be completed for those goals to be met? The answers will fuel your marketing efforts. To perform those tasks, people will need training. Make sure you're able to help the decision makers define the need for that training. Present your work as cost-effective. Figure the relative cost-effectiveness of sending a group outside to the Wharton School versus providing them with a custom program in-house.

Finally, market yourself. Your marketing efforts will make you highly visible. Use that to your advantage. Develop your personal credibility by polishing your style, taking full advantage of your expert, legitimate, and referent power bases. Develop your nonverbal communication skills and learn to use them persuasively. Gain respect—not because you represent the HRD department; nor because you occupy a certain position in the organization. Those criteria are sandy ground for true respect, easily gone with a minor reorganization. On the other hand, if you are respected as a person, viewed as credible, and perceived as competent, your standing is assured.

You're the only one in charge of your credibility. Cherish it; cultivate it; extend it; and use it as the basis for all your marketing efforts. You'll win on all fronts: with peers and employees, with higher-ups, and with current and future clients.