Promoting Your E-Learning Investment

By Will Hipwell

Although organizations invest hundreds of thousands of dollars to develop and introduce e-learning to employees, they often neglect a key element of success—marketing and promotion.

Unless e-learning is mandatory, using basic marketing techniques to attract and retain users is critical to ensuring e-learning's success in your organization. For example, you must
❑ introduce the new e-learning program to the organization (the launch)
❑ promote it and register initial users (internal marketing)
❑ develop ways to maintain and increase usage over time (maintenance marketing).

Simple marketing and promotion techniques can contribute substantially to the success of your e-learning initiative, especially in increasing and maintaining employee participation. Consider how the following techniques could be used in your organization to increase the use of e-learning.

Integrate online courses into employee development and performance improvement plans. Incorporating e-learning into a structured process can be helpful—and easy—for managers and supervisors. They can offer suggestions for personal development activities at performance reviews or annual goal-setting meetings. Another advantage: Online learning is trackable, measurable, and time-specific.

Hold brown-bag lunches or bring in pizza while holding a short seminar for managers, supervisors, and HRD professionals on how to incorporate e-learning into their own development plans, and how they can use it in employee development and performance improvement. Show the attendees how e-learning can be integrated into developing, coaching, and mentoring activities.

Incorporate e-learning into your new-employee orientation program. At the least, give new employees an overview of your organization's e-learning philosophy, the options available, and how to sign up and get started. **Take advantage of your company's email system to promote e-learning and its benefits.** You can use email to promote specific courses, provide useful tips, outline benefits, and share suggestions for incorporating e-learning into employees' personal development. Constantly look for ways to position and communicate e-learning as a critical solution for dealing with business issues in your organization.

Set up a help line. If employees have questions or difficulties (accessing a course, forgotten password, and so forth), make it easy for them to get answers. Print business cards with help-line contact information, and distribute them to all employees.

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Develop simple brochures and flyers, and send them to employees via internal mail. Design the flyers so that employees can fill them out and return them with registration information and course selections. (Some organizations do that quarterly or when new courses are added to the curriculum.) Using a mix of communication vehicles—email, flyers, posters, telephone messages, newsletters—is more effective than using just one method repeatedly.

Create recognition programs and use them liberally. Recognition can be personal, departmental, or company-wide. Some organizations provide modest incentives for completing a course or curriculum; others print and award simple certificates of achievement or completion. Still others recognize employees through internal newsletters, memos, bulletin boards, or emails.

A personal way to recognize completion is to send a short note or email to managers, notifying them of employees completing courses. Consider putting a copy of the note in the employees' personnel files. The key: Use your imagination, and link recognition to what works best with your employees.

Hold an "online open house." Invite all of your company's employees to get more information about e-learning and its benefits. Some organizations distribute formal invitations, while others send "online tickets." Some companies reward attendees with popcorn, chocolate, ice cream, or other inexpensive treats.

Further, the online open house is a great time to register new users and hand out additional information. Promote e-learning as a way to find solutions to business issues and problems.

Consider making some online courses available to the family members of employees. Examples: online SAT or ACT prep courses for college-bound teenagers or personal finance courses—anything that can be taken from home. Your organization can offer those as value-added service to employees and family members—and they make a great benefit to attract prospective employees.

Conduct frequent course evaluations to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of your online learning initiative. Those can be formal evaluations or simple phone calls to random employees once they've completed a course. Survey employees to find out what topics interest them, and consider ways to incorporate those interests into your online offering.

If you work in a larger organization, look for more ideas and resources from other departments such as marketing or communications. Also, call on your e-learning vendors for additional help and internal marketing support.

Most of these suggestions are simple and inexpensive to implement. But they can be critical to the continued participation, acceptance, and overall success of your Web-based training initiative.

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