



Sainsbury's: excellence programme promotes training on the job

Learn as you go

With marketers increasingly stretched, a range of new creative techniques are swiftly up-skilling teams with minimal disruption to day-to-day activities. **Lucy Fisher** reports

The idea of going on a five-day residential course to learn the tricks of the trade may still be appealing to many but in reality it's a tall order for most marketers to take a week out of the office without very visible results. In recognition of this, many brands are delivering learning materials in short, sharp and often highly creative formats.

Networking firm Avaya has responded to an increasing appetite for on-demand training by

creating a virtual university campus, available for partners to access training material round the clock via avatars. "The feedback was that spending four or five days in a room doing face-to-face training was a huge commercial commitment," explains Claire Macland, vice president, go-to-market and marketing, EMEA.

She notes a shift away from formal paid-for training towards a wider context in which busy marketers can source free subject matter

training online, tapping into knowledge that is already within a business.

This ethos of harnessing existing know-how is also heavily subscribed to at logistics company Unipart. Director of corporate affairs Frank Nigriello says that for the past 20 years, there's been a mantra of employees teaching employees. "The idea was that we needed to teach people quickly in terms of what we do," he explains. "You learn in the morning then

Leadership versus learning

While certain skills can be learnt from a textbook, true confidence and effective leadership are more often fostered and emulated rather than taught. Fujio Nishida, chairman of Sony Europe, has been working with leadership consultant Jane Sparrow who recently wrote *The Culture Builders*, about the importance of a long-term approach to learning.

Nishida warns: "Marketing people can accelerate their knowledge through e-learning, web conferences and talking to customers. But if you're really looking to change habits, investment is needed in deeper development programmes. Fast learning is good but we must recognise that it rarely changes the way people behave over time."

Added to this, the success or otherwise of a workshop may boil down to the charisma of the group leader.

Michael Bates, former marketing director at Morrisons and now managing director at online clothing retailer Joe Browns, recalls a workshop led by Dominic Irvine, of learning and development consultancy Epiphanies LLP, after Morrison's acquisition of Safeway.

"It wasn't a theoretical course on marketing best practice," he says. "It was about holding a mirror up, aiming for effective leadership and making the team more focused. What was memorable was his energy and drive. The effects were long-lasting."

apply this knowledge in the afternoon. It's possible to get a connection to subject matter experts – other members of staff with the 'black belt' in a certain area of expertise."

Certainly, one of the downsides of a residential training course could be that it's all very well taking time out to consider the theory but to take knowledge on board effectively with results, it is key that it is applied to real-life business situations.

According to Sarah Ellis, who launched Sainsbury's marketing excellence programme, people always enjoy meeting their colleagues, putting names to faces and developing internal networks and therefore learning quickly.

"People do appreciate a different setting and time out of the day-to-day," she says. She adds that the important thing with face-to-face is "to provide interactive sessions where you can apply things you've learnt, be creative and present ideas".

Sainsbury's marketing excellence programme is based on the so-called 70/20/10 learning philosophy, where 70 per cent of training is done on the job, 20 per cent within networks and 10 per cent formally. The supermarket's marketing training now comprises a mix of one- and two-day training programmes for marketing core skills, monthly lunchtime learning sessions and a marketing library, magazine and digital subscription service. Lunchtime sessions are designed to harness internal expertise,

casestudy BT

Head of BT's marketing community Lesley Wilson has wanted to reinvent professional development at BT, to 'modernise it, make it more efficient, and reduce costs'. She implemented BT marketing community four years ago and it has been evolving ever since.

It is essentially an intranet that links users to training events and to their colleagues, and which has added functionality such as a profile builder and links to professional bodies and publications, YouTube and other communication platforms. It serves a global audience of almost 1,000 marcoms professionals at BT and acts as a hub for a 'couple of hundred' training events a year and as a destination for best practice and internal guidelines documents.

Wilson says that some marketing training is still done face-to-face – generally this is the case for particularly complex subjects – but that predominantly learning is now done online, in easy-to-access time chunks, planned to work across time zones. This is done in a group, as far as possible, and she suggests that around 15 people is the optimal number to get a debate going without some individuals 'getting lost'.

"It's harder to break the commitment of a group activity, whereas you might break rules with yourself all the time," she says. The community has become quite a social hub, too, even though this was not necessarily an intention when the idea was conceived originally.

However, it did take a while to get going: "Everybody had been used to face-to-face

events. When you think about online, people tend to think about a lone style of learning. It took a while before people realised there's a lot of interaction."

Ensuring content is up-to-date and relevant also takes time and effort but frequently it is about harnessing knowledge that is available internally. "We work out through the marketing leadership team what the key issues are, the areas with skills gaps, or if there are campaigns that are not going as well as they should. Often we have experts, so we can 'suck out' their brains," she says.

Wilson is passionate about the marketing community and says that smaller companies too could benefit from something similar, given the advantages in driving a culture of sharing and instilling knowledge. "Companies have a tendency to think expertise needs to be sourced from the outside. Learning often goes on but is not always appreciated. It can be very confidence building to stop and capture the things that you're doing."



training via video is popular because of the retailer's younger demographic in terms of its employees and its customer base.

This year the focus on video and social media for training will be increased. Fisher says that messages directly from a store manager can be more believable and achieve cut-through more effectively. "The film format is great as it's not too formal," he adds. "We might interview a store manager about his or her top five tips for Christmas, direct to the camera, with humour. It's quite relaxed."

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, mobile technologies are also becoming increasingly important in training. Dell's EMEA communications director David Thorpe is working with Skill-Pill a company that provides training via mobile. He says distilling key messages into a concise mobile format has been helpful for an organisation that sells complex products and has to communicate them quickly and effectively. "It can really help if you're selling something abstract," he explains. ▶



“Technology supercharges the learning experience. It can't replace it”

Jeremy Brook, Heineken

Dell (left) and Heinz (below) are training in bite-size segments

► “You have to focus on the key nugget and [the skill-pills] can be very effective as a communications vehicle and a learning and development tool across different scenarios.” Thorpe says that when a new skill-pill is out it gets heavily adopted. “They’re easy to absorb and very consumable. It goes viral. In comparison, online training can be dry and boring.”

However, he adds that such solutions need to be viewed as a complement to other training methods. They are not a replacement, he says. “It’s like the elevator conversation. It can be effective to distil a single thing, a key point, such as our value proposition and why it’s different from the competition. You have to focus on the one thing that will change your behaviour. I sometimes wish classroom-based trainers would do more of this.”

It’s clear that not every company will have the budget to bring in bespoke mobile learning programmes. It helps from a financial perspective and in terms of economies of scale that Dell is a very large company.

Save the Children global staff development manager Samantha Hackett says that the charity, which has also used mobile learning, was able to justify investment in a skill-pill programme because it suited the complexity of the organisation.

She is looking to promote peer-to-peer and just-in-time learning and that delivery via mobile suits those who are office-based, as well as those who are out and about. “The push came from the field,” she says. “They were saying they needed something like this. Any limitations around mobile are around the fact it’s moving so quickly. You have to ensure you take a step back and focus on organisational priorities.”

And, as with any technological development, it’s important not to chase the next fad, or to shoehorn offline materials or techniques into online channels without considerable thought and planning as to what will work effectively.

Professor Barbara Allan, dean of Westminster Business School, says that she is now less keen on online learning techniques than she was about five years ago, when part of their attraction was undoubtedly their novelty.

“For learning to be embedded, it needs



to be about more than just watching a screen,” she says. She uses games, movement and objects to anchor learning and says that surveys consistently demonstrate that people like to meet the trainer and other learners. She says follow-ups can help to make the most of a course, especially when there may be pressure to deliver more content in a shorter period of time.

The need for training providers to deliver added value in today’s climate is echoed by Dil Sidhu, a director of executive education at London Business School. “Executive education is expensive and maybe the business schools have been late to practise what they preach,”

he admits. “It’s about classic customer marketing – not ‘fire and forget’.” He says that his customers are looking for something beyond the course, something to help them use the skills and techniques they have learned.

The Institute of Direct and Digital Marketing has increased its online delivery ‘four-fold over the past four years’ but chief executive Mike Cornwell stresses that in the rush to deliver new formats, it’s important not to overlook that the overwhelming message from customers is that time spent away from the day job, face-to-face with experts and peers is ‘by far the most effective way to ensure that learning is engaging’.

For global companies such as GSK where face-to-face meetings with colleagues aren’t always possible without taking a long flight, online workshops can be designed to replicate the in-person experience as closely as possible, with high levels of interactivity.

But it’s never going to be quite the same. Technologies are not yet at a point where it is possible to read non-verbal clues or body language effectively, and there’s always the risk of technical glitches.

According to Heineken head of digital capability Jeremy Brook: “You can do everything possible to supplement it, but you can’t replace the human element. Technology supercharges the learning experience. It can’t replace it.” He admits to being surprised by how popular the social element of Heineken’s digital training hub has proven and Lesley Wilson, head of BT’s marketing community, notes the same phenomenon (see case study).

Beyond the debate around accelerated training, the key to successful outcomes is a motivation to learn. You can deliver staff education in whatever format you like, but unless you have a responsive audience it will fall on deaf ears.

“It’s about enabling and empowering people, giving them the tools and resources they need to develop. Forcing people down education paths doesn’t work,” warns Caroline Taylor, vice president of marketing, IBM UK and Ireland. “The technology is just an enabler. There’s a need for a balance, a blend.” ●