New Emphasis on an Old-School Solution

At the macro level, pharmaceutical companies, pressured by loss of patent protection and pricing pressures, are responding to slowing sales growth by reining in spending. At the micro level, business unit and training and development heads are watching their budgets shrink like party balloons losing air. As those numbers shrink, the challenge grows for these leaders. They still need to equip representatives to sell effectively in a marketplace frequently defined by the fierceness of its competition. Reps regularly report back to their managers about specific competitive attacks they say they can’t combat with their selling skills. These reps need application-based training, but classroom delivery isn’t in the budget and an e-learning solution, while often less expensive, will not allow reps to address all the variables of the competitive threat.

So, how can sales and training leaders support their sales forces without breaking the bank? They can put new emphasis on an old-school solution, the video/teleconference. Alliance Performance Systems (APS) has partnered with leading pharmaceutical and biotechnology firms to develop and implement strategic video/teleconferences designed to be both application exercises and skills refreshers for sales representatives facing specific competitive challenges.

Five Keys to Effective, Strategic Video/Teleconferences

The video/teleconference is what one might call the double-edged sword of learning delivery. Done right, these interactions can engage and add value for an audience. Done wrong, as they most frequently are, they can disengage and demotivate an audience. Drawing on decades of experience, APS consultants have identified the following five keys to making video/teleconferences relevant, sought-after, and cost-effective training solutions:

1. **Do Real World Work**

   The cardinal sin of video/teleconference learning design is to focus solely on generic or theory-based subject matter. Such conceptual content lacks the immediacy necessary to captivate audience members participating from different geographic locations. As a general rule, the more hypothetical and less specific the subject matter, the greater the opportunity for audience members to succumb to attention drift. And, if the audience includes action-oriented, goal-driven sales professionals, expect video/teleconferences that lack real-world application to be judged harshly.

   APS consultant and facilitator Joanne Capritti has had great success implementing application-focused video/teleconferences with the sales forces of leading biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies. Recently, she’s used the solution to support sales reps in a single therapeutic
area confronting competitive counter detailing that was creating noise in their channel. “In the teleconferences, we helped the reps and their manager figure out how to double back on their messaging and use skills they already had to overcome the challenge. The reps left with revised customer plans and renewed confidence.”

2. Link to Core Skills

In addition to being application-focused, video/teleconferences should be built on a skills foundation. Designers and facilitators must recognize these engagements represent an opportunity to reinforce core selling skills via discussion and analysis of real-world challenges. If this reinforcement is not hard-wired into the learning design of these video/teleconferences, the temptation for facilitator and participant alike will be to develop and debate the strategy without making specific linkages to core skills. They’ll be using skills, but, depending on their level of proficiency, they may not know which skills they’re using.

By making specific linkages, the facilitator can emphasize the importance of the initial skill training sales representatives receive and also give them the grounding they need to tackle similar threats that arise in the future.

3. Use an Experienced Facilitator

As soon as real-world application becomes a learning outcome for a video/teleconference, the profile of the facilitator becomes crucial. Strategic video/teleconferences require experienced facilitators who have a deep understanding of the industry and,

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if not already versed in the product, can rapidly absorb and process information about it and its marketplace. Their acumen ensures the value and relevance of the engagement. In addition, facilitators must have the dexterity to offer a robust focus on application while, at the same time, maintaining awareness of opportunities to make specific linkages to core skills. The facilitator should also have proven methods to engage an audience participating from different geographic locations. He or she must spark the type of back-and-forth communication vital to the success of the strategic video/teleconference.

4. Limit Number of Attendees

While video/teleconference technology allows for dozens of participants, APS has found the optimum number of attendees to be from six to 10. This smaller group size promotes a deeper dive into the subject matter. The engagement will include enough divergent opinions to promote rigorous discourse, but the number of those opinions will not overwhelm the facilitator’s ability to achieve the learning objective. The smaller group size also allows the facilitator to lead the engagement as he or she would lead any other conversation. Questions can be directed at specific individuals, and all participants

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are compelled to remain attentive because they will surely be called on in a group so small. If facilitators are unable to deliver the video/teleconference as they would a fascinating conversation, they’ll be haunted by frequent, awkward silences. “If it isn’t designed and delivered the right way, they’ll hear crickets in the background,” warns Capritti.

5. Expand the Reach

While making the effort to limit the number of individuals participating in the live video/teleconference, the learning designer must also take steps to expand the reach of the work that will be done during the engagement. APS’s Senior Vice President of Client Development Peter Pisarri, also an experienced consultant and facilitator, says, “If you aren’t recording these conferences and creating a library everyone in the organization can access, then you are throwing away additional ROI opportunities down the road.” Whether the recordings are made available to representatives via download or distributed on a CD, DVD, or flash drive, the value of the video/teleconferences are compounded and true cost-efficiency is achieved. Pisarri also points out two additional benefits of these video/teleconference recordings: (1) They help combat the scheduling challenge of time zone differences because team members can watch and/or listen at times more convenient to their schedules; and (2) an organization that integrates the recordings into its learning management system can track use and associate it with effectiveness in the field.

An Effective Tool to Drive Sales

In this era of shrinking budgets and expanding competitive pressures, pharmaceutical and biotechnology sales and training leaders can support their sales forces by looking past classroom and e-learning to an alternative solution—the strategic video/teleconference. If developed and delivered effectively by utilizing the five key principles described above, video/teleconferences can showcase the type of application-focused learning sales representatives desire and also reinforce the core selling skills that are part of the organization’s mission. These engagements can also cost-effectively reach the entire sales force. While the video/teleconference can be thought of as an old-school solution ideal for the current environment, it should be known as an effective, though occasionally overlooked, tool to drive sales.

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