Self-Directed Online Learning– Tips for Subject Matter Experts

by Erin Roberts

Are you thinking about adding online learning to your repertoire? This article tells you what to expect and provides some tips to get the most from your ROI.

Online education comes in two primary flavours….webinars and self-directed online learning

A webinar is typically a live conference call with a slide show shown over an internet connection. The best use of this tool is for overview and introductory presentations where the material can be covered quickly.

Self-directed online learning is an interactive experience between the user and a special purpose website. The best use of this tool is for more in-depth learning. The players involved in producing a learning program are a subject matter expert, a curriculum design firm, and a provider who disseminates the program to its clients. Typically the provider funds the cost of the program .

What is Self-Directed Online Learning?

In the old days self-directed learning meant receiving a three-ring binder of printed material in the mail accompanied by cassettes, CDs or DVDs.

The advantage is that this method can support an in-depth curriculum and the user can choose the pace at which they learn.

The disadvantages are that it is not very portable for the user, and it is expensive for the provider to produce CDs and to print and ship the printed material. Every update requires a new production and shipping round with the associated expenses and delays.

A self-directed *online* learning program provides the content over the internet, optimized for web-delivery.

The online version has all of the benefits of the print version plus several additional valuable advantages.

Advantages For the Provider:

1. No fulfillment costs. Printing, shipping and disc production is eliminated.
2. Reduced turnaround time. Updates are made on the hosting server and are instantly available to all users.

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Advantages For the User:

1. Instant fulfillment. The user receives the program immediately. They don't need to wait for shipping.
2. A richer learning experience. Audio, visual and textual elements are integrated. The experience is interactive and unique to each user.
3. Completely portable. The user can use the program from anywhere with an internet connection and can download content on demand.

Advantages for the Subject Matter Expert ("SME")

Exposure to a wide audience. A web-delivered program reaches users anywhere in the world with an internet connection. This gives the SME exposure and brand recognition to a potentially unlimited audience.

Cost-effective delivery. An online learning program can be used continuously by any number of users at minimal marginal cost.

Leading-edge technology. All of the tools available on the web can be used for online learning. Audio, images, animation and interactive user experience tools can be used effectively to enhance the dissemination of the SME's knowledge to the user. High quality, leading-edge knowledge products have an obvious advantage over content in a less advanced format.

What's Involved?

The SME works with a curriculum designer to adapt and enhance their content for online presentation. If the SME has a self-directed learning program in print, the process is faster. If the SME's learning collateral is exclusively PowerPoint slides the process takes longer.

The curriculum designer — What is their role?

Get the curriculum designer involved early in the process. They can provide valuable expertise during the planning stage. The curriculum designer's job is to deliver an excellent learning program to the user that enhances the reputation of both the SME and the learning program provider. They are responsible for content creation through to production. Their job is to learn what the SME wants to teach, and to distil this content into a format and flow that works effectively for the online user. The curriculum designer also works with the SME to incorporate appropriate images, audio clips and other media to enhance the learning experience.

The SME — What is their role?

The SME is the face and brand of the learning program. It is their expertise that is delivered to the user. The value of their subject-matter expertise and the power of their personal brand determine the take-up rate by the users.

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The SME will budget one-to-one time with the curriculum designer. The amount of time required depends on three things;

1. The knowledge collateral that the SME has available,
2. The amount of information disseminated in the learning program, and
3. The media requirements (i.e. images, audio, etc.)

The Learning program provider – What is their role?

The learning program provider has a valuable list of prospective users, the knowledge of what their users want to learn and how they want to learn it. Their job is to choose the subject and the learning medium that generates the highest take-up rate from their clients. They provide the budget, the audience and the marketing.

Tips for SMEs

Use the marketing opportunity effectively. Think about how you can use this opportunity as a powerful marketing tool. This is an excellent opportunity to promote your brand and your business.

- It will provide exposure to a wide audience of qualified prospects
- It will feed the search engine optimization for your website and your name

Use the curriculum designer effectively. Take advantage of their expertise to produce a high-quality resource for your target audience. Budget enough time to use this valuable resource effectively.

Negotiate effectively. You must negotiate terms for the use of your intellectual property with the learning program provider. They provide the budget, the audience and the marketing. You provide the subject matter expertise and the brand power.

The provider must generate enough revenue to provide a reasonable return on their investment of time and money. You must generate enough exposure, leads and business to justify your investment of time.

Learning program providers are typically more flexible in negotiating terms on marketing and future revenue than on upfront payments. Use this information to negotiate a win-win contract with the provider.

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