

FORCES SHAPING OUR FUTURE

WHAT REALLY MAKES SIMULATIONS WORK

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Marketing and Selling Simulations Internally

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "If you build a better mouse trap, the world will beat a path to your door." In other words, if you come up with a better way to do something that needs to be done, you don't need to market it; people will come looking for you.

Emerson didn't tell the whole story, though. In fact, when it comes to simulations, his business theory was completely wrong. It is true that simulations are a better mousetrap in many training situations. If you have a problem that requires an experiential learning solution, a simulation often is the fastest and most effective route to take.

But many seasoned entrepreneurs have learned the hard way that even if they have the best product around, they have nothing of real value if no one knows about it. In the best of situations, we cannot assume that a great simulation will sell itself. Like any successful product, a simulation requires a thoughtful approach to marketing.

Along the way, you'll need to develop a clear and effective plan for communicating the benefits of the simulation for your organization, brand the simulation, and make a winning case for the program to those who will help you secure it.

When presenting simulations as the answer to your company's needs, it will be tempting to assume that the many departmental stakeholders will understand and appreciate the value of experiential learning. However, virtually all

organizations struggle with different priorities competing for resources, especially budget and employee time. Company representatives responsible for allocating these resources have a variety of agendas that may not appear to immediately correspond to what a simulation will offer.

Simulations are a relatively new solution in the training field. For the uninitiated, misperceptions are more common than facts when it comes to understanding what simulations are and what they are capable of doing. Even though simulations are often superior to traditional training methods, they can seem no different than any new program and will require internal marketing to convince decision makers to give them a chance.

Marketing vs. Selling: What's the Difference?

The American Marketing Association defines marketing as an organizational function and set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders. Selling is a subset of marketing that deals with developing, managing, and growing the customer relationship. Marketing and selling are different, but they depend on each other for success.

You may discover that some leaders in your organization don't recognize the added value of a full business simulation, because they assume that they already have "simulations" in place. Perhaps your current training programs use role plays and other types of experiential learning. These individuals need to be educated about the differences between simulations and other forms of experiential learning, and then adequately prepared so that they know what to expect from a new simulation.

Marketing a simulation internally will also enable you to manage expectations regarding what a simulation can and cannot accomplish. Good marketing should get people realistically excited.

Your internal marketing plan for a simulation will serve two purposes. First, you will educate your stakeholders and create buy-in from management, which may be required to get a simulation adopted in the first place.

Lesson Learned

"When the idea of a sales simulation was introduced to me, I thought, 'Here goes the training department with a new angle to justify charging back against my budget.'"

-VP of Marketing, telecommunications company

Second, you can use the process to educate, motivate, and excite learners. This isn't just another training proposal; this is something different, challenging, exciting, and maybe even scary. If you get participants interested and emotionally involved in the process, they'll arrive on the first day of the simulation eager to see what all the fuss is about. That's what good simulation marketing does.

Love-Hate Relationship

When marketing a simulation to learners, keep in mind that a love-hate perception will begin to surface.

It's rare to find anyone who does not believe that learning-by-doing is the best way to acquire a new skill, and most learners will agree that simulations are a great and fun way to learn.

On the flip side, when learners are asked to actually go through a simulation, the hate perception can enter the picture. Employees love the idea of a simulation, but often hate the idea of going through one.

Why this paradox? Psychologists would categorize it as an approach-avoidance issue (or cognitive dissonance). People may be drawn to simulations because they are new and may help them to better their skills. However, they may worry that a simulation will make them look stupid and demonstrate to others that they don't know everything.

Be aware of this issue and address it in your marketing materials; you're likely to be far more successful in positioning your simulation with workers-especially with first-time simulation participants.

Develop and Execute an Effective Communication Plan

A communication plan should be part of the overarching branding strategy of every simulation project, internally directed to the specific business unit (or units) at the operations level.

A comprehensive communication plan provides a strong foundation for project success and establishes a structured means for tracking progress, informing participants, and motivating them to contribute to the ongoing success of the simulation—from the pilot to the rollout to measurement and follow-up activities.

Your communication plan should include the following:

- Simulation purpose
- Example: To provide employees with practical experience using the company's Product Development Life Cycle (PDLC) process.
- Communication objectives
- Example: To ensure that managers and front-line employees fully understand the PDLC process.
- Example: To create confidence among the global PDLC teams that they'll be able to achieve the company's goals to release X number of products over the next five years.
- Example: To position the company as a progressive and innovative organization that seeks to equip its employees with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to beat the competition.
- Situation analysis
- Example: Future corporate plans include expansion into Asia and further acquisition of businesses in Europe. Forecasts show that by 2007 up to fifty percent of current middle- and upper-management personnel could be

serving the company in some capacity outside of the United States. In order to prepare for this, the new learning solution will collapse the learning curve and eliminate cultural confusion. This learning solution will be a real-world, highly interactive simulation to train managers and front-line employees on the new PDLC process. The simulation will place managers in situations in which they must deal with the cultural, entrepreneurial, and business challenges they will face.

Example: New competitors have entered our market space, seeking to earn a portion of our market share. In the past, our sales strategy was to take orders when customers called. The new market reality demands that we engage our customers and prospects using a consultative selling approach. Our account managers must become business consultants to their customers, making the purchase of our products and services productive and profitable. Therefore, we will implement a consultative sales simulation to re-train our sales managers and account managers, changing their mindset about their relationships to the customers and the realities they face in the new marketplace.

In addition to the items listed above, the communication plan should also include milestones, a timeline, and a list of various smaller marketing campaigns.

Internal Branding of Simulations

What is branding? Generally, a brand is an identifiable symbol or symbols representing an entity that makes specific promises of value.

The purpose of branding is to more efficiently sell more products or services. This is accomplished through names, logos, positioning, brand associations, and brand personality that draw customers to a product. A brand is the image of a product, line, or service, which in the mind of the consumer should be associated with quality, timeliness, reliability, and other desirable characteristics.

But branding is not just used with consumer products. The same methods and practices can be used by a training and development person who

wants to market learning and development products internally.

Branding is especially important when a new or different learning solution, such as a simulation, is introduced to key decision makers. When the rollout of a simulation and any related initiatives takes place over relatively long periods of time, branding can help foster recognition among stakeholders and participants of a simulation's ongoing connection to overall corporate goals and objectives.

Consider these benefits when considering the creation of your brand. A brand:

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- Shapes the expectations of stakeholders
 - Creates trust and emotional attachment to the success of the simulation initiative
 - Makes it easier for the organization and individual learners to commit to the simulation
 - Communicates a strong, consistent message about the value of intense learning experiences
 - Demonstrates that the training department understands the overall business strategy and is serious about developing employees with a long-term perspective
 - Helps build internal credibility
 - Articulates the values that the company and department have regarding employee development
 - When branding a simulation for your internal marketplace, consider the following:
 - Are you going to develop a signature look and feel for all marketing materials related to the simulation?
 - What message do you want the simulation branding to send? What kind of image do you want to create?
 - Do you want to create a simulation logo and colors that set it apart from other initiatives, or make it part of a larger corporate strategy initiative?
 - Would it be advantageous to tap into an existing or complementary brand that your company is already using? Should you incorporate parts of other brand or company logos into your simulation symbols?
 - Do you want to position the simulation as an exclusive experience—one for which participants are selected and in which it is a privilege to participate?
 - Do you want the simulation to be perceived as challenging or fun?

Working the Power Base

However you decide to brand the simulation program, your learning program will benefit and gain acceptance faster and better if you understand the people in your organization and the supply chain as a whole. This power base of support includes the key decision makers in your organization.

Your first step in working this power base will be to understand who your supporters and detractors are.

Power is the potential to influence, either through one's title or through the respect and esteem people have for a person's knowledge, expertise, and perceived commitment. In their pivotal book *The Management of Organizational Behavior*, Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson examine power in business. They conclude that understanding power and knowing how to use it to your advantage are just as important as actually attaining power on paper.ⁱ

Power shifts according to situation. Understanding and working the informal and formal power system when introducing a simulation in your organization can go a long way toward helping you to gain acceptance for simulations as an important component of the performance development process.

As you determine how to approach and talk to others about a simulation and potentially enlist their help, here are some important considerations.

In your marketing materials and during face-to-face communications, are you:

- Emphasizing the simulation's fit with your company's corporate vision and strategy, technology, and/or financial plan?
- Broadcasting testimonials and sponsorship endorsements from highly influential individuals? These endorsements are most influential when they come from high-ranking managers who enjoy the esteem of other managers and employees.
- Building your presentation based on the existing business?
- Making recommendations that are workable given existing resources? If not, what is the plan for adding additional resources?
- Taking into consideration the need for additional technology to support the simulation? Is your IT department on board?

- In your presentation of the simulation, are you:
 - Making the recommendation tangible by painting a picture?
 - Articulating the benefits without over-selling?
 - Connecting the relevant features, advantages, and benefits of simulations to your audience?

i. Hersey, P. Blanchard, K. and Johnson, D. T. Management of Organizational Behavior. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. 2000.

