

Gaming on the job

An interactive video game is helping one Ontario company improve sales calls

BY DANIELLE HARDER

In an era when many employers are asking employees to turn off fun technologies at work, Davis Controls is encouraging its sales reps to play a video game.

The game, Momentum, allows them to play through real-world, simulated sales call scenarios online. The goal is to secure a meeting with an avatar who represents a virtual client, with the scenarios becoming progressively tougher and more complex at each level.

It's not easy to win points — players are presented with a series of choices as they move along, with each one eliciting a different reaction from the avatar. The player's performance depends on how well he learned strategies earlier in the game at the Zen Learning Academy.

Stephen Kalau, national sales manager at the Oakville, Ont.-based instrument and control company, turned to the video game because traditional training programs lacked staying power.

"You go off-site, have some evangelistic training experience and you leave all pumped up," he says. "You have high expectations but then the sales force gets back to the day-to-day and slips backwards."

By contrast, Momentum provides ongoing training that consistently re-emphasizes key sales strategies by focusing on repetition, he says.

Davis Controls introduced the game to sales staff nationwide with a one-day class, but the followup training takes place online on their own time. Sales reps are expected to complete three missions every two weeks. They can take time out during their day or play online from home after hours.

"Instead of pulling them off the road for training, they can do it during lunch or during a lull in the day," says Kalau. "We don't want it to impact on the job. It's great because it's flexible and interactive."

Training can take one year

With 120 story-based missions taking anywhere from 20 minutes to 30 minutes to

play, it could take up to one year to finish all of the levels.

"It's designed to be done in bite-sized pieces," says Marguerite Zimmerman, president and CEO of Burlington, Ont.-based E = mz², the company behind Momentum. "We would rather they do one episode, then go out and practise. The whole mindset we're after is 'Every professional practises before a game.'"

The video game works because the scenarios change with every mission, but the core strategies are the same, says Kalau.

"You really have a chance to reinforce the strategy," he says. "You complete a mission and now you do the same thing again but maybe in a different industry or with a different kind of individual (as the customer)."

The game is structured around six basic principles: business skills, influencing, negotiation, change technology, assertiveness and presentation. Sales reps also learn about different customer styles, such as the "finisher" or "adapter."

"You're always growing but you're always repeating," says Kalau.

Unlike traditional role-playing, the video game takes the pressure off employees who don't like to perform in front of a group. That lack of pressure also encourages employees to take chances in the game, chances they might not take in real life.

"There's time pressure, but no group pressure," he says, adding there's also followup feedback at the end of every round. Players record their comments after each "sales call" and discuss their challenges in a feedback session.

"We talk about what we could have done differently, what was easy and what was hard and how we can apply what we learned," says Kalau.

Training often fails because people aren't open to failure, says Zimmerman, while the video game is fair and consistent.

"Most people don't like role-playing. If you have a few rough edges in your skills, you don't want to be found out," she says. "Nobody wants to be embarrassed, even if it's for the right reason — to learn."

Much of the game's appeal comes from the fact that it's just that — a game. With the next generation of workers being raised on video games, it's helpful to find a training tool that appeals to them, says Kalau.

However, he admits it was a challenge for him to get used to the avatar interface in the beginning.

"My concern was about how dynamic it would be compared to a real-life individual," he says. "I thought it would be very one-dimensional."

He's discovered it to be quite the opposite.

"Depending on the question you ask or the response you give, it could be a very different outcome," says Kalau.

The game has allowed Davis Controls to move beyond its short-term issues and affect long-term change, says Zimmerman.

"It takes 10,000 hours of perfect practice to master something," she says. "You're also doing a little bit of unlearning bad habits too."

Depending on the size of the company, the series can cost anywhere from \$1,200 to \$1,500, with a single level costing roughly \$400 to \$500 per person, says Zimmerman.

It's worth every penny, says Kalau, noting the video game is less expensive than a traditional, two-day, off-site event.

While he doesn't have direct empirical data to prove the game is working, Kalau is starting to see anecdotal evidence. Sales increased by 10 per cent over the last year since he introduced the training, he says. More notable, however, is what he's seeing in his sales staff's call notes.

"They're much more effective when they go see a customer," says Kalau. "Those who have taken the missions are focused on who they're dealing with — what kind of person — and what their strategy is for dealing with that customer."

The game has also led to more meetings, says Zimmerman, with sales reps averaging twice as many face-to-face meetings now as they were one year ago.

The training is being given to both inside and outside sales staff. The first group is al-

most finished and the second group starts the training soon. And with almost no chal-

lenges in the first round of training, Kalau says he plans to stick with it.

Danielle Harder is a Brooklin-Ont.-based freelance writer.