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Virtual training



Brett Gundlock/National Post

Merle Ballaigues is trying a video game-based training system with her sales team, and says it's already come in handy.

Mary Teresa Bitti, Financial Post · Monday, Dec. 13, 2010

Training is one of the biggest challenges small businesses face, says Mandeep Malik, assistant professor of marketing at McMaster University's DeGroote School of Business. And that's for several reasons: "It is not easily affordable by everybody. It is very hard to get customized sales training. And it is difficult for small business owners and their

employees to get away from doing business for three, four or five days for training and workshops."

At the same time, younger generations entering the workforce are looking for an engaging, experiential way to learn, he says. "The communication tools and methodology of the generations born into the Internet era are different from the world I grew up in. They need immersive, interactive experiences."

Mr. Malik says the future of corporate training is game-based online training, where assimilations are being created in many fields. "If you can simulate real-life business situations online and present them in the form of a game, you can impart best practices, enhance retention and reduce costs. These systems are becoming intelligent, students learn as they advance in the game and are exposed to planning, rehearsal, execution and review. The cost of learning face to face with customers is the cost of lost opportunity. Game-based training tools offer an effective, inexpensive alternative," he says.

Burlington, Ont.-based E=mz2 got in the game early, introducing Momentum in 2009. In the training business since 1985, Marguerite Zimmerman, president and chief executive of E=mz2, recognized a real frustration on the part of small businesses contending with limited budgets and looking for results.

"The time and cost to bring people together, often from different parts of the country, was prohibitive," she says. "I also knew from my own experience and research that they would not get a sustainable result from one event in a classroom over a couple of days."

Research shows the combination of repetition and competition in game-based training significantly improves retention rates over traditional, short-term in-class training sessions that typically consist of lectures and role-playing exercises. "I found myself feeling very frustrated because I knew that what the businesses could afford would not give them the result they wanted," Ms. Zimmerman says. "Technology afforded us the capability to put together a cost-effective way of training sales reps online, providing both the theory and practical applications of the theory in situations they would likely face in real life."

Mr. Malik uses Momentum in his classroom, to help in a particularly tough area for entrepreneurs -- sales training. "Like it or not, sales is a bad word," he says. "There is no certification required, so when people fail, they blame the profession because it doesn't allow room for good practices but they don't know what good practices are.

"If you have a system like this you can train people at low cost and simulate enough scenarios that they will recall and know what the right questions are. I do face-to-face

role playing in class to develop social interaction skills but I find Momentum does it equally well and incorporates intelligent tutoring."

Momentum features 120 story-based episodes or missions and learning is spread over three semesters of four months each. It is offered in the form of a cloud-based subscription model that can cost as little as \$25 to \$30 a week depending on group size. Participants sign in for 10-to 30-minute bursts of evidenced-based learning three times a week, which are then applied in different cases, repeating the key learning to facilitate mastery of a particular concept.

"We use stories so there are memory hooks and the frequency moves the learning from short-term memory to long-term memory," Ms. Zimmerman says. "If I don't retain something I can't use it."

Merle Ballaigues, North American distributor for Thomas International Inc., a global provider of objective management systems and work-based assessment tools, and her sales team are two missions into Momentum. "I'm evaluating it with a view to reselling it to my client base because I think it adds great value," says Ms. Ballaigues, who began exploring alternative options in training a year ago.

"I wanted something new and different. Online game-based training allows you to offer training anywhere at any time," she says.

She likes that the game allows salespeople to choose when they play, and that it reaches across ages, allowing participants to compete against themselves and against others.

"People learn optimally when they are pleasantly challenged and that's what I like about this. I am finding that everyone is being challenged in different ways. We are having very interesting discussions around what we are learning. And we are applying it immediately," says Ms. Ballaigues, who witnessed a senior sales rep apply one of the aspects of the Momentum program at a sales call last week and get a positive response.

"It is a blue ocean strategy. You are not hearing about it every day. I am excited to offer it to my clients," she says.

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