

CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER

Solutions for Enterprise Productivity

Learning from Consumer Packaged Goods Firms

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Benchmarking corporate learning departments has taken a new turn — instead of routinely studying the practices and tools best-of-breed learning organizations are using, more learning organizations should examine what packaged goods firms are doing to turn customers into strategic advisers. The latest trend is to create private, branded online communities and use them as a tool to provide insight on new product and service offerings.

Because my background includes working in both market research and brand management at consumer packaged goods firms (before I entered the learning field), the use of the Web and in particular the creation of private online communities has intrigued me and led me to think of areas where this can be used in corporate learning.

First, let's define a private online community. According to Communispace, a leading company in this space, a private community is a branded, password-protected site where up to 400 community members are invited to spend an average of 30 minutes a week to brainstorm with the sponsoring firm, offer suggestions for a new product or service enhancement, take a periodic online survey or share stories.

These private communities are, in fact, replacing much of traditional market research because they provide data that are both rich and longitudinal — meaning you have the opportunity to live with your customers over a period of months rather than interacting with them for a one-hour focus group or 20-minute survey. These private communities are always facilitated by a moderator who asks questions or just listens to community conversations.

These private online communities are being used by a range of consumer product firms. In fact, a recent article in *BusinessWeek* highlighted the use of private online communities by GlaxoSmithKline to provide “strategic customer insight” for a new weight-loss pill to be launched in 2007.

While many best-of-breed learning organizations have created various communities of practice, these often are discretely defined communities and really are not used to develop market research. I can see how these private, branded online communities can be the next step in engaging with your customers and creating the type of lasting emotional bond that leads to increased employee loyalty.

So, here are three possible scenarios chief learning officers can think about as they employ the latest consumer product-marketing techniques to the corporate learning department:

Onboarding Communities: A private online community easily can be created for all employees who were hired within the last six to 12 months. New hires can promise to spend just 30 minutes a week “advising” the parent company on their experience and propose suggestions to help prospective new hires navigate the company culture. New hires can offer valuable insight into how they see the company with their “fresh” eyes, and if they represent a younger age group, they also can suggest the technologies they expect to use on the job.

High-Potential Manager Communities: Global Insight, an economic think tank, estimates that by 2010, 25 percent of the working population is expected to be eligible for retirement. Hence, corporations are spending time, resources and training dollars to develop the next generation of management. Most, if not all, of these dollars are spent either on creating corporate training programs or partnering with universities to create customized degree programs. What about furthering these communities in a private online community? This would be a valuable tool to tap into how these next-generation managers are faring on the job post-training.

Online Learners: Chief learning officers usually are so focused on proving value to their management, they often forget to tap the most important source for proving value: the individual online learner. Do chief learning officers really know enough about how learners “learn” online and when, where and how they participate in online learning? Online learners’ conversations can provide the sort of data that might lead to developing truly engaged learners.

Or maybe the best way to find out about these private online communities is to join one as a consumer and experience the emotional bond firsthand. That’s what I plan on doing.

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