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How to drive revenue growth through external education

Being able to grow your business is critical—especially during times of economic downturn (like now). As L&D professionals, the pressure's on to find ways to contribute to your company's bottom line while doing more with less.

Enter external training programs

While internal L&D training budgets are getting hacked, external training budgets are growing. That's because external education is a highly effective way to drive revenue.

One Forrester study shows that companies with some form of customer education program experience a 7.4% increase in customer retention and a 6.1% decrease in support costs. Meanwhile, businesses that don't train their external partners and internal teams can experience stunted growth, lost business opportunities, higher attrition rates, and non-compliance.

In this ebook, leaders in enablement and training share their insights on the challenges and benefits of training programs and how to evaluate their success in driving enterprise business outcomes.

Better training = better results (sooner)

It pays to get your customers, vendors, partners, and employees up to speed more quickly, flattening out the learning curve, and achieving business outcomes sooner rather than later. Charles Moreton, Co-Founder of sales training company Win Spectrum, says his company has seen incredible growth, and that it's largely due to "Taking time to truly build training that works as opposed to boring slide decks where the teacher does 70%+ of the work."

PRO TIP

Charles is 100% right. Better training material leads to better business outcomes (sooner). It takes some work upfront, but it's well worth the effort. Here are a few tips to help you produce stellar content while reducing the lift:

Use built-in tools: Many learning platforms have built-in content creation capabilities. While they aren't as robust as content authoring tools, they're easier to use and give you a quick way to crank out engaging content.

Consider outsourcing: Evaluate your content needs to find opportunities for outsourcing. Industry-related content can often be outsourced to a 3rd party, leaving you to focus on more impactful content needs.

Keep it short: Not everything has to be a formal 100-slide deck or hour-long webinar recording. (Microlearning, anyone?!) Short content (like a smartphone video of tips and tricks, a screen recording of how to fix common IT issues, a Q&A forum, or an Ask the Expert Slack channel) can go a long way to educating people.

Tap your SMEs: Opening up content creation to a wider group of contributors is a great way to capture valuable knowledge. There's a veritable treasure trove of training content stored in your customers', partners', and employees' brains, so tap into it! The more user-generated content they contribute, the more your content library grows.

For Jen Bruno, CS Enablement and Transformation Leader at Gainsight, one of the factors that has helped her team scale and grow is "[partnering] with Subject Matter Experts and star CSMs to develop and deliver training and content."

There's no denying it. Everything you do to enhance customer, partner, and vendor education drives revenue growth. Despite this, external training remains a largely untapped means of growth.

Are you leveraging training to drive revenue growth?

It's in the DNA of your role to want your learners to do well. You want to empower them to achieve their goals and improve their performance. It's probably an important part of the company culture to enable people—internal and external—to be as successful as possible.

Training is a smart and effective way to do this. Well-designed training can help reduce churn, increase product adoption (and therefore sales and upsells), and enable product education across your core business and extended enterprise.

One survey showed that 46% of customers in the US are more likely to increase their investment in a solution if they had a successful onboarding experience. Further, according to **Training Industry**, users that undergo some form of training for a new product are more likely to adopt the product faster. Even more, customer training can help increase customer satisfaction, which is crucial in an age where **86% of customers** will leave a trusted brand after two poor customer experiences.

As Bruno points out, there are many benefits to customer training ranging from "increased product adoption and engagement to lower demand on support teams to creating advocates and opportunities for building community." The same goes for partner training, with benefits like "faster, more efficient, and consistent onboarding experiences—whether the customer is onboarded in-house or by a partner."

Case in point

Customer training works! (But don't just take our word for it.) There are tons of real-world results. **Wrike** was able to increase user activity by 102% and conversions by 300% (all while saving over 11,000 hours of training in the process). And **Acoustic** was able to engage more learners and improve their customer satisfaction scores by 16%.

William Buckingham, Customer Success Operations Manager at Delphix agrees, saying, "Training partners and customers removes friction and accelerates adoption—both of which help fight churn and lay a foundation for expansion." As Moreton says, "If done right, external education helps you build a much more loyal internal and external base, allows you to scale faster, and reduces the need to hire."

When you don't invest in training programs, you're leaving opportunities for business growth on the table. As most of the leaders interviewed stated, some of the consequences organizations face by not having external training include attrition, lost revenue, customer churn, loss of market share, diminished customer experience, delayed obtainment of customer outcomes, and damage to the brand.

Similarly, consequences of not investing in internal training include poor or stagnating employee performance.

Stephanie White, Director of Revenue Enablement at Loopio, says, "Not enabling your employees well means lost opportunities for revenue, growth, and developing talent within the team. The impact of that hits revenue, employee satisfaction, and employee churn." She also notes the knock on effect poor employee training can have, impacting "customer satisfaction, and the overall success of the business." She also adds, "As learning and development professionals, there's a huge responsibility and privilege for us to positively impact the business."

There's no shortage of benefits to implementing (and optimizing) a training program—not just for your customers, partners, and vendors, but also for your company as a whole. It's one of the best ways to drive revenue growth. But it's not without its challenges...

Case in point

What happens when proprietary partners go rogue and create their own training content? You end up with inconsistent customer experiences. Find out how **La-Z-Boy** revamped their partner training program to ensure consistent messaging and branding across every store.

Growing pains: challenges in executing effective external training

The challenges you face will vary depending on the audience(s) you train, the content of the training, and the particular use case of the training group. These challenges can prevent you from achieving desired business results, and end up confusing your audience (instead of helping them). That's the bad news.

The good news is these challenges aren't insurmountable, especially when you're aware of them—which you are. (After all, knowing is half the battle.) Here are some common challenges you might face in external training:

Lack of personalization

One size doesn't fit all.

So, while you might need to cover the same or similar topics to your external audience(s), there will invariably be some differences in the specific way the material applies to them. For example, one customer may need your product to streamline sales planning, while another customer relies on your product to collect and organize data from closed/won deals. The use cases—and therefore training content—for each company can be entirely different despite using the same product. So personalization will be required.

Case in point

If you really want to tailor the learning experience, that's a job for AI. AI takes the guesswork (and the legwork) out of delivering hyper-personalized experiences. Using learner data, AI can curate the perfect combination of courses, content, and virtual coaching for each person based on their individual needs. Curious to see what AI-based hyper-personalized learning looks like in the real world? **Kiehl's Since 1851** is a perfect example. Discover how the cosmetics retailer is able to deliver learning that's as personalized as a skincare routine.

💡 PRO TIP

Personalization might sound like a lot of work, but chances are you already have a lot of the information you need to get started. It's often as simple as leveraging existing data points you're already tracking (like user role, experience level, products adopted, region/language, etc) and connecting them into your learning platform to automate learner enrolment in the relevant courses and pathways and letting the technology do the rest!

Buckingham advises that "When training a hybrid audience, it's all about making sure to cover the needs of each group, but not losing the attention of any group by going too deep on one aspect of the training."

Personalization can be challenging, even for internal audiences within the same organization. "The most challenging thing about training our single audience is that while their core motions are similar, there's a large degree of variation that happens depending on what product they focus on, their customer segment, and even their experience level," says Bruno. "Therefore, it is always a balance to develop engaging training and enablement that speaks to these differences in a prioritized and scalable way."

Lack of buy-in and reinforcement

Success isn't a solo endeavor.

In order for external training programs to be successful, you need the buy-in of leadership and other important stakeholders.

For Moreton's team, "The most challenging thing about our customer audiences is getting leadership in their organizations to buy in and latch onto the training and be a competent reinforcement mechanism. Most leaders can't be bothered with this, so we end up engaging for longer to ensure this happens. It's nice for us but I'd love to see leaders showing a little more care and respect for their reports in helping them grow and become better versions of themselves."

White states her top challenge is "getting consistent reinforcement from sales leaders, enablement, and alignment of the processes and tools to support what's critical. Without that enforcement, pods of different behaviors can begin to form between teams which can quickly chip away at your innovation and enablement efforts."

PRO TIP

> Getting executive buy-in often comes down to effectively selling your vision. If you don't nail the pitch, you can strike out... Here's a **quick guide** to help you make an effective presentation to senior management and get the buy-in you need to move forward.

Poor change management

Transformation takes time.

After standing up a training program, it's important to make sure you evaluate success and measure outcomes to ensure the program meets the business needs.

Bruno believes that change management can be one of the more challenging aspects of a training program: "It can be tempting to think that one training will check the box and learners should then have knowledge to execute. However [...] it's about aligning on priorities, getting stakeholder buy-in, delivering training and communications with a strong WIIFM (what's in it for me) message at the right points in time, and continuously assessing, measuring, and responding to adoption and sentiment."

For White, learner profiles are crucial. "Having well-defined learner profiles, a clear understanding of how they are measured for success, and having consistent reinforcement are important to ensure that you can be proactive in engaging learners and supporting them in change."

Whether you're building your first product enablement webinar to support customers, or rolling out a monetized customer academy, you'll inevitably come up against some challenges. Don't let these challenges stop you! Sure, it might take some trial and error to overcome them. But if you understand your learner profiles, get buy-in from important stakeholders, and implement a change management plan, you'll get an excellent external training program running smoothly in no time.
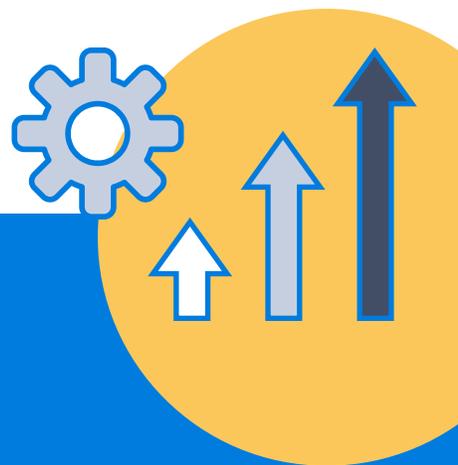
Tips for turning training into a revenue driver

So what are some ways you can address these challenges and start to design, implement, and deliver robust training programs (or improve your existing ones) for your external and internal audiences? Here are a few tips:

Bring it all together with the tech stack

Leaders in the field strongly agree that it takes the right mix of technologies to deliver training to your audience. In addition to virtual meeting software and video recording software to deliver the information, your core tech stack should include:

Learning Management System (LMS). You need a LMS to host and deliver educational courses and material, test audiences on their knowledge, and check training performance.

System for documentation. You should also have a centralized content management hub or knowledge management platform to store and distribute content both internally and externally—and get real insight on what is being used most often, and how it's impacting your revenue.

Your tech stack needs to be well-integrated so your learning systems and business systems can talk to each other. As Buckingham astutely put it, "In a perfect world, your LMS integrates with your documentation system. Such integrations can help the full, real-world learning journey be much more effective and consistent. It also helps make your enablement function more efficient."

In White's opinion, one of the perks of going with a well-established learning platform is that it "seamlessly integrates with the rest of your tech stack."

PRO TIP

Integrations can't be an afterthought! When your learning platform isn't connected to other business systems, learning becomes siloed and loses its strategic place within the business. At a minimum, your learning platform should be connected to your CRM and BI tool(s) as well as your marketing automation and customer support platforms. The more business systems you can connect it with, the more you can tie learning to business outcomes. Get more insights about how connecting your systems can simplify reporting and processes, unlock useful data, and reduce tech spend in this guide, *Integrations: Connecting learning technology to the Business*.

Measure and evaluate training program success

What gets measured gets managed, yet the limitations of software and personnel make it difficult to collect, analyze, and act on data. As a result, many companies **don't even try to measure the impact** of their education programs. Getting your training programs to be revenue drivers means that you need to pay attention not just to how the learners enjoy the training and understand the material, but also how they apply the information and if they achieved the targeted outcomes.

Using the **Kirkpatrick model** for evaluating training programs, most companies strive for levels one and two—reaction and learning, respectively. But to understand and demonstrate clearly whether or not these efforts are impacting your bottom line, you need to also evaluate levels three and four—behavior and results—both of which require more in depth and robust measurement.

For White's team, that means "focusing on the outcome we're working towards (e.g. increasing customer retention) and then building our roadmap of how to get support to align with the KPIs and targets for the team." Being able to demonstrate value and prove ROI makes the business more likely to invest in enablement and training.

PRO TIP

Not sure where to begin when it comes to measuring the impact of your learning programs? Here's a pro tip: Start at the end!

What's the ultimate goal of your program? What business objective(s) are you trying to support or impact?

Once you've identified your end goal, find a few key things you can measure early on that will give you an indication of the success of the program (survey results, performance improvement, completion rates, assessment scores, satisfaction rates, etc..).

Then, as you pilot or launch your program, keep an eye on these leading indicators (versus lagging indicators, which often come much later, at the end of a program). They'll give you a general sense for how your program is performing and will allow you to proactively correct, tweak, and fix things before it's too late.

Bonus! If your LMS is connected to your business systems and has built-in data analytics, it'll **simplify measurement and definitively prove the value** of your learning program. Get more tips on how to win a learning measurement in **this guide, written by Brandon Hall Group**.

Use SMEs in your approach to content

You may be tempted to try to create and publish every piece of content yourself. While noble, this approach to content is neither sustainable nor scalable.

Buckingham advises that you leverage subject matter experts (SMEs) to scale your enablement function. "You still want to be the publisher: deciding what to enable, planning that enablement, project managing, and ensuring quality. Authoring takes massive amounts of time, and you likely aren't the best resource for every topic you must create enablement content for."

Bruno agrees that developing and delivering training shouldn't be only on the shoulders of the enablement team. "Leverage SMEs and star CSMs to partner with the enablement team when developing and delivering training and content. It increases their buy-in, brings in current real-world experience and helps the enablement team to scale themselves and their impact."
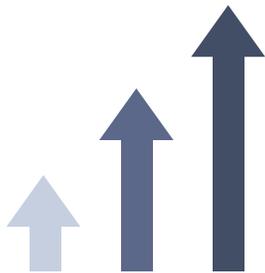
With the right tech stack, evaluation metrics, and approach to content, you can turn your training programs into effective drivers of growth throughout your organization.

Grow your people— and your business— with **external education**

External education programs are an incredibly effective way to empower your customers and the people you work with. Customers, vendors, and partners can become more familiar with your product offering and even transform into evangelists for your business. The best training programs can help a business reduce churn, retain more customers and employees, and lay the foundation for market expansion, all of which are good news for your bottom line.

When beginning your program, heed advice from those who have gone before you. Buckingham advises that you "always start with what the learning objective is. This might seem too obvious in the moment, but it's critical to driving effective learning."

In retrospect, Bruno realizes the importance of developing a governance model. "I would have liked to stand this up sooner with our CS leadership team. A monthly forum to collectively discuss priorities and roadmap helps us be more intentional in our actions and align on the highest value initiatives (and not necessarily the most immediate fire to put out)."

White's advice involves technology. "Buy specialized tools," he says. "Yes, you can use a makeshift collaboration tool, you can get around training tracking with a spreadsheet, BUT you will lose so much time and opportunity 'making' something work, when you could be far more efficient and effective by investing in something that is purpose-built."

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