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Why E-Learning Works to Build Better Decision Makers

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Building competencies in an ever-changing customer-centric organization is a continuous challenge for training personnel, especially because more demanding customers require a heightened level of decisionmaking from customer service associates. This article will review the necessary components of a solid, decision-based software and training program that has been successful in building customer service associate competencies and judgment at work.

All e-learning software is not created equal. Cognitive science and software developers have advanced to providing decision-based models so learners can practice making decisions in a safe environment rather than on live customers. This approach uses actions that requires learners to make decisions using measurable, observable behaviors that lead to well-thought-out conversations with customers.

Ulysses Learning has used the cognitive research of Dr. Roger Shank, Professor Emeritus in Computer Science, Education and Technology at Northwestern University, to create the award-winning CallMentor™ learning program. With his colleagues, Dr. Shank created decision-making software that simulates realistic experiences. Learners hear expert stories and participate in repeated practice of common experiences and mistakes they will face on the job.[i]

Anyone who has played a video game knows they can become so involved in the feeling of reality of the game that not only is it entertaining, it comes very close to the real thing. Likewise, for individuals learning how to best serve customers, real-world exercises and principles are incorporated into the design of the e-learning program. There are five key design principles in the creation of effective e-learning simulations:

1. Choices and Consequences
2. Common Mistakes
3. Ambiguity
4. Goal-Based Scenarios
5. Fun

Let's take a look at each of these design principles and how they lead to trainees becoming competent in the challenges of customer service.

Choices and Consequences
Conversations with customers can play out in various ways, both positive and negative. Simulated learning makes it possible to present learners with realistic scenarios, along with a variety of choices. They can consult an expert, read a customer satisfaction survey, or hear a story from another customer service expert, similar to experiences found on the job. The learners can navigate at their own pace and use their favored learning style to proceed through the simulations. Based on real life, they experience the consequences of their choices, making it more memorable when faced with a similar conversation on the job.

Common Mistakes

A good simulation allows learners to make common mistakes so they are easily remembered when needed in a real situation. Each scenario becomes goal based and therefore allows each choice to be a "teachable moment" for the learner. For example, if a customer is very upset and the customer service associate ignores the emotion while continuing to get account information, the customer loses confidence and often gets more upset.

In a simulated scenario, the learner hears the upset customer, and until the emotion and issue is acknowledged, the learner either ends up with an escalated call or a calmed customer, dependent on the decision they made. By introducing similar common mistakes, the learner quickly realizes the common mistakes and adjusts their responses going forward.

Ambiguity

Decision making is not always about right or wrong. Dr. Schank indicates "...decision making is an unconscious activity, and we need to train people to have a diversity of relevant cases to show when rules may not always apply in different situations." Ambiguity allows learners to use their judgment when making decisions, sorting through conflicting advice and experiences and relying on their instincts to make a choice that is neither obvious nor easy.

Consider a customer who is adamant that a payment was made last month and is upset she received a collections letter. The rule states that if a customer misses a payment, their service is discontinued. A customer service associate sees in the computer records that this customer has consistently made payments for 12 consecutive months and is just missing last month's payment.

The representative remembers a scenario similar to this, recalling that sometimes payments are posted after a collections letter goes out or a payment can get posted to the wrong account. He draws from the scenario to assure the customer that the records show she is always on time with her payments, and that he will research to see where the payment went and get back to her to resolve the issue. In doing so, the representative is using his best judgment based on the training scenario he encountered and very likely provided a customer experience that will lead to increased loyalty.

Goal Based Scenarios

Meaningful goals prompt people to learn. Consider a child who wants to learn how to ride a bicycle. This goal motivates them to practice even while falling down and getting scraped knees, until they master the skill. Likewise, simulated learning needs for a customer service associate needs to be designed to help them become successful with few "scrapes" and become effective in their job.

A learner is much more invested in a training that supports favorable performance and less stress in a new job experience. Consider a stated training goal is to "create satisfied customer experiences." This goal does not specifically define "how to" do this, why it is important, or what it may sound like in a realistic situation.

If instead the goal was, "repeat what the customer says to confirm you've been listening," and you hear stories from customers who had confidence in the individual who knew why they were calling, other associates tell experiences of how they calmed customers down by repeating what they heard; the learner now has a more meaningful reason to remember to respond to the customer by repeating what they heard.

Fun

Keeping learners mentally and emotionally engaged helps maximize learning. E-learning that is boring limits the effectiveness of any training, and even more so with simulated learning. Rather, by injecting humor, drama, competitions, and challenges, learners remain engaged and have memorable experiences that can easily be recalled on the job.

Consider a simulation that offers customer responses that are unusual or unexpected, or one asks the learner to purposefully choose the least-popular response to see what happens. Or, use a simulation where learners are challenged to get the best overall score in a program or compete with other learners for top scores.

Fun can also be built into a training program that combines goal based e-learning simulations with active, blended learning experiences as well. Learners can create a rhyme or skit to exemplify what they've learned. Or, they can write out their favorite phrases to respond to common call types.

Simulated, goal based e-learning that integrates these five key design principles provides an "alive" experience. This creates a relaxed learning environment and ensures learners are better decision makers by the end of the learning experience.

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[i] The Future of Decision Making, by Roger C. Schank, Dimitris Lyras and Elliot Soloway, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010