

Virtual Training becomes a reality!

NAXSA Members with any sort of training program know how important this strategic, value-add service is for their customers. Unfortunately, the current pandemic environment has greatly challenged this key element of their business. The traditional model of a large group of employees gathering in a small training area, unable to socially distance from each other, is no longer a safe option.

While online training has been around for years, the need to figure out how to implement virtual training is now at the forefront of many in our own industry. Like many things in life that are new and unfamiliar, virtual training provides a unique opportunity for those brave enough to try it, but also provides many challenges and technology-based obstacles to overcome.

Recently, the NAXSA Communications Committee hosted a virtual roundtable of a select group of association trainers and communication specialists. This group has compiled a list of a few do's and don'ts and best practices for *Virtual Remote Training* (VRT), and how to develop and implement a web-based training program.

The first thing to considered is the **delivery method**. Will the class be prerecorded or “canned” for customers to view or download at their convenience? Or will it be virtual and “live” with an instructor leading a real-time class from a remote location. As the pandemic of 2020 has unfolded, many have participated in *Zoom* or *Microsoft Teams* meetings, with multiple colleagues participating from various locations; so, the concept of remote meetings should not be entirely new.

This leads into the second consideration: what **platform** to choose. In addition to Zoom and Teams, there is also *Webex* and *Google Meet*. Though the various web-based services do parallel each other in function, each offers a slightly different experience for users. The key is that once a platform is chosen, it is extremely important to become familiar with the mechanics and nuances of how the program works. The ability to walk others thru the program's capabilities and teach them how to use it, will almost certainly be a part of the learning experience.

Once a platform is chosen and the company's trainer or presenter has become proficient in its use, the service's **Plan and Pricing** must be considered. Does the stripped down or free version provide the capabilities required, but also still project the professional experience desired? Keep in mind that the limited or free version of a platform's capabilities might include a time limit on meetings; therefore, the format and agenda of the training program itself should be considered beforehand.

Often, purchasing a paid subscription to the enhanced version of the platform is the best course of action. Remember, the VRT program should be user-friendly for your customer, as well as the presenter. The key to choosing a price-based Plan is determining what provides the best experience for everyone.

Once a platform has been chosen and the trainer has expertized themselves in its use, here are few tips to consider when entering the VRT world:

- Limit class size to something manageable. Discuss with your customer what they are trying to accomplish and on what timeline. Sometimes two classes of 15 is better than one class of 30.
- It can be more than a one-person job. A proxy on the customer's end can help with the technical and logistical facilitation of the program. Things like timely breaks, social

distancing, and technical glitches are often best handled locally. The customer's owner, company safety officer, or superintendent on the remote end can help contribute to the VRT program's overall sense of importance and appeal.

- A second person on the delivery side can also be invaluable. This person can monitor the platform's chat function and interject with the customer's questions; while keeping the presentation flowing and interactive. Another key function of the second person is to monitor the cameras of individual laptops or a group camera if all participants are in one room. Having assistance gauging participants' interest level and need for breaks takes a lot of pressure off the person giving the presentation.
- The training presentation itself, while relatively easy to work thru within the platform, might not be a sufficient substitute for physical training material such as manuals, tests, or post-class survey. The decision needs to be made early on whether the presentation will be a 100 percent virtual experience, or will materials need to be shipped to the customer's proxy for distribution before the VRT begins.
- Will the trainees be participating on a laptop or personal device, or are attendees gathering in a single space to watch on a large screen? Either option will work, and both have advantages and disadvantages. Working in a controlled environment like a training room provides less opportunity for technical glitches but often will not have a microphone and camera for the large space, so interaction could be limited. Laptops and cell phones on the other hand, have built-in front-facing cameras and microphones which makes it easy to ask questions verbally, which increases the interactivity of the program. Again, a single person on the user end to operate the equipment and provide questions via the chat function of the platform is extremely helpful in the group setting.
- If possible, working with the customer prior to the VRT to make sure the platform has been properly downloaded, functions well, and all technical bugs have been eliminated will make "game day" go much smoother. Also, it is helpful to "arrive" early for the training to make sure all contingencies have been worked out, so participants are left with a feeling that the VRT program was well prepared and professionally presented.
- Environmental elements such as ambient sound, lighting, and the background of the presenter need to be considered. A green screen as a backdrop will help make the presentation look and feel professional.
- If after-class—or even in-class—feedback is important, the presenting company might consider software add-ons such as *Microsoft Forms*, *SharePoint*, or *Survey Monkey*.

The world of online training is new, diverse, and potentially complicated; but it also presents a lot of opportunities for those not afraid to tackle it. The key to successful training is going to be experimenting with what works best for both trainer and customer and keep working to perfect the interaction and experience. It is unlikely that all things will go perfect the first time, but that should not discourage jumping in and trying different approaches until the best service and experience is provided.

The following are important resources if considering starting a VRT program, or for help with refining an existing VRT program.

Howard Nute, Sunbelt Rentals – howard.nute@sunbeltrentals.com – 602-377-4003

James McRay, Efficiency Production – james.mcray@arcosa.com – 517-676-8800

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