

The Multiple Uses of Multimedia Instruction

By Mary Howe

One of the exciting ways technological advances support small businesses is through focused yet flexible instruction options.

What is multimedia instruction? Broadly speaking, it's a method of instruction that uses the computer to present information with text, graphics, audio and/or video. You may also hear it referred to as *computer-based training (CBT)* or *Web-based training (WBT)*. It can take the form of training, presentations, software simulation, job simulation, testing, reference or online help. Since multimedia instruction is often delivered over the Internet, it can look just like a set of Web pages, but it also can be delivered on CD-ROM, on diskette or over a local area network (LAN) or company intranet.

What Are the Applications?

As a good example of using multimedia instruction, one specialty sporting goods firm provides its sales reps with a CD to use in clinics to educate dealers about their products. When the clinic is over, the dealer gets to keep the CD as a reference tool. Updating the materials is easier on CD (especially if CDs are burned on demand) than on paper, and it reduces paper waste. The same content can be delivered throughout the company regardless of the sales rep's instructional style. And the dealer can pass the same information along to the store sales staff.

Multimedia instruction works well for all kinds of content. Both very complex material and very simple information can be delivered this way. For companies whose products or services are dangerous or sensitive, multimedia instruction can safely allow trainees to "practice" on the computer. When the trainee makes an error, he or she gets immediate feedback and an opportunity to correct the error ("Nope, not down the kitchen sink! Try again!").

Audiences for multimedia training may have a wide range of skills, educational levels and computer experience. It has been used to deliver training to such disparate groups as pilots using sophisticated flight simulators with detailed graphics and tightly controlled user responses and teenagers using touchscreen kiosks to learn the dangers of alcohol and tobacco. (In the touchscreen application, a user doesn't need any computer skills at all, and information can be entirely graphic, with little or no text.)

What Are the Advantages?

Though many of the advantages of multimedia instruction may already be evident, here's a summary of the "plusses":

- **It's interactive.** Learners are actively engaged. Interactive tools may include multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blanks, selecting all right answers or matching by dragging and dropping graphics. Feedback engages the learner even more. For example, an incorrect answer could provide a hint along with a "Sorry, that's incorrect" response.
- **It's tailored to learner needs.** Learners can take the training when they want, as often as they want, and at a pace that's right for them.
- **It's cost-effective.** Companies don't need to pay for trainers, travel or classrooms. It's especially useful in situations where users are spread over a wide area.
- **It's efficient and effective.** Learners typically learn more in a shorter period of time with multimedia instruction.
- **It's easy to revise and update.** Especially with Internet delivery, changes made to one copy are immediately available to all learners. For example, a company that manufactures car utility racks can easily alter installation instructions for consumers as car manufacturers introduce new models every year.

Is It Right for My Small Business?

Whether multimedia instruction is suitable for your situation depends on a variety of factors:

- **Cost.** The expense can vary widely. You can find off-the-shelf or off-the-Web training at very reasonable cost, and sometimes even for free. Custom development of computer-based training can be expensive, but may be worth it if employee or customer training is crucial.
- **Number of learners.** A very large audience, such as a large customer base, may reduce costs greatly and possibly allow you to deliver instruction more effectively and economically than with paper-based instruction.
- **Location of learners.** If your learners are spread over broad geographical areas, such as with sales reps or traveling technicians, CBT or WBT may be the only way to provide accurate and effective training to everyone.
- **Availability of computers.** Equipment doesn't have to be sophisticated—all you may need is an Internet connection.

Where Do I Find Out More?

Name a topic. You can probably find training on it, either online or on CD-ROM. For generic computer-based training, such as tutorials and other instruction on software packages, look in your local computer store. On the Web, search by subject area or use keywords like *online learning*, *CBT*, *WBT*, *online training*, *courseware*, or *e-learning*. The following Web sites are just a few that provide online courses on a vast range of topics:

- ElementK—www.zdu.com
- DigitalThink—www.digitalthink.com
- Blackboard—www.blackboard.net

If you consider customized, company-specific instruction, look for consultants with experience in both instructional design and multimedia development. You may be tempted to use a Web design company, but keep in mind that the goal of multimedia instruction is different from the goal of a Web site. A Web design firm can develop effective marketing tools and information delivery, but only an instructional design firm follows instructional principles to help people learn.

Mary Howe, an independent instructional developer in Lawrence, Kansas, does most of her multimedia instructional development for Creative Courseware, Inc., a Kansas City-based performance improvement consulting company that has been designing and developing customized online learning products for over 15 years.