

Positioning Continuing Education Computer Programs for the Corporate Market

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In the summer of 1992, Bellevue Community College's (BCC) Continuing Education division retained me to help position its computer education programs to be more attractive to the business community. The suburban Seattle institution already had a long-standing and successful Continuing Education computer program. Kae Hutchison, the dean of Continuing Education, suspected that the program could be even more successful.

My credentials to complete the project included a decade working in corporate computer training. The efforts my colleagues and I had made to build bridges to academic resources in the community had proven more frustrating than not. Since my career had also included a decade in the university system, I felt sure we could create a successful partnership between business and academia.

By adapting BCC's existing program to better address the peculiar requirements of the corporate market, the school has had a rousing success with its Continuing Education computer training effort. The project reviewed the characteristics of the corporate market, current BCC training facilities, competition for the corporate training dollar, and BCC's course mix. This report summarizes the findings of the market assessment phase of the project, as the results of that phase have wide applicability to other community colleges attempting to gain a solid foothold with corporate customers.

Approach

To assess the effectiveness of the college's marketing efforts, we looked first to define the needs and priorities of the target market—medium and large corporations in the Puget Sound area. Only with a clear picture of what motivates corporate customers to purchase training could we be sure that BCC's efforts to get the corporate customer to purchase its training were on the right track. Thus, we interviewed a representative sample of the corporate market in the Puget Sound. The interviews revealed that BCC Continuing Education's Computer Training needed to (a) increase awareness, (b) counter the anti-academic bias prevalent in industry, and (c) focus on the software training that it alone offered.

Increase Awareness

Most corporate customers simply don't think of the community college as a training resource. One of the questions I asked was "what outside resources do you use, or might you consider using, to improve employees' computer skills?" Not a one of the people I interviewed mentioned the community college as a resource, even though they knew I was there as a consultant from a community college. The best courses in the world won't attract customers if customers aren't aware those courses are there. Telling people you're there doesn't guarantee they'll remember. The interviews demonstrated that corporate customers are inundated with flyers, brochures, and sales calls from organizations that want to sell them training. To get the corporate customer's attention, BCC had to trumpet the unique features of its Continuing Education computer training programs.

As a result of the interviews and analysis of competitor tactics, we recommended that BCC

- Advertise in the business section of the leading Seattle newspaper, not just in the general section or in special supplements devoted to education.
- Distribute easy-to-read flyers (as well as full-fledged catalogs) to the key managers at the top 100 Puget Sound companies.
- Begin a program of speaking at industry organizations, like the American Society for Training and Development, a key resource for HRD managers, and the Washington Software Association, a key trade group for technology companies in the area.

It's important to note that technology companies, focused as they are on leading-edge, sophisticated applications, are not always well positioned to offer basic skills training to their employees. At the same time, these companies require high levels of basic computer literacy. Thus they're a fertile ground for an external training resource.

Counter Anti-Academic Bias

Without exception the corporations I interviewed expressed a reluctance to turn to academic resources for computer skills training. Their resistance can be summarized as "they [college training courses] give us a lot of theory and don't understand how people use computers on the job." This attitude was pervasive, even when the people I interviewed had substantial academic experience. Sometimes they would say things such as "personally I think my employees could use your programs, but upper management would be unlikely to approve an academic institution as a training vendor. They think you'll be too slow

and not useful."

Thus, in addition to increasing awareness of BCC's computer training programs, the Continuing Education division needed to make sure the awareness campaign increased the confidence corporate customers have in the ability of the college to address their needs accurately and efficiently. The study recommended that BCC increase corporate confidence by making sure the awareness campaign:

- Focused on skills.
- Focused on the workplace uses of computer skills, not on the products being taught.
- Mentioned "fast" "efficient" "results-oriented" approaches, and followed through by actually having those approaches.
- Avoided the word "theory."
- Included copious testimonials from happy, and preferably important, corporate customers.

The study also recommended that BCC assume it would take time to re-engineer the corporate opinion of academic programs, and suggested the college re-interview customers after a year of the kinds of efforts suggested here.

Play to Your Strengths

The college offered more courses than any public or private competition in the area, and particularly excelled in software applications and programming training. It was also, at the time, the sole purveyor of multimedia training (except for individual consultants scattered throughout the area. This study looked only at formal institutions devoted to corporate computer training). By emphasizing its software expertise, BCC might lose a few customers to hardware or support-focused programs offered elsewhere. The study nonetheless recommended that BCC focus on becoming the pre-eminent software applications training vendor in the Puget Sound. The gains it would make in simply getting the attention of the harried manager flipping quickly through a pile of marketing information from several companies would more than make up for the occasional loss of a client who wanted a specialized form of training with a small market and low revenue potential.

As a result, the study recommended that BCC Continuing Education's computer training programs:

- Focus on being the vendor of choice for corporate training on computer applications.
- Divide corporate training on computer applications into office and professional level courses, since the

market for each type of training is different. In the area of office courses are basic computer skills training, word processing, and introductory spreadsheet courses. Professional courses range from desktop publishing (graphics and page layout) to programming.

- Stick to its current course mix. Since few institutions in the area could begin to match the depth and breadth of the existing programs, it made sense to focus on those programs, rather than diverting energies to inventing even more.

The management team for BCC's Continuing Education computer programs at the time was excited about the ever-growing interest in leading-edge technologies, and eager to develop and market training in hardware and software products at the forefront of research efforts in the field. In a world of limited resources, this was an unwise approach. Rather than spreading existing human and financial resources even thinner, BCC needed to build a solid reputation for its proven products. Not incidentally, it also needed to generate substantial, predictable revenues, something that was more likely with training on products people were widely using than on products that were still in development.

What About Program Costs?

Equally important, the interviews demonstrated that corporate customers are less concerned about the cost of a computer training program than they are with its perceived quality, efficiency, and responsiveness. This suggested that a program for marketing BCC Continuing Education's training should not stress cost over other corporate concerns. In an age of reduced budgets, the tendency is always to emphasize cost over other issues. Academic institutions often seem to operate on the assumption that the low bid will always win. This is emphatically not the case. Within a range of acceptable prices, corporations will always choose the company that's willing to offer training tailored to its business environment, sometimes offered on site at the company, always offered at times that will work for the corporate customer (all the companies we interviewed, for example, prefer a concentrated 2 or 3 days of training to a semester-model course spread out over several weekends or months).

Results

A year later, BCC's Continuing Education computer training has a new director and a solid record of success. Dean Hutchison

says that putting management in place who could understand and implement the results of our work was the first key to making the computer training program a leader in the community.

The previous management was full of superb ideas, she says, but less experienced at evaluating those ideas in terms of their profit-making potential, less adept at prioritizing programs and tasks to maximize revenues to the program. Now, she says, "we love to make money," and they're good at it. And because the college computer training programs are being run like a business, businesses feel more confident that the programs can address their needs.

The college has won several major training contracts by emphasizing quality and responsiveness as well as cost. Thanks to changes in their facilities, they're able to respond quickly to requests for training. King County (the local government), and Lamonts, a major department store chain, have both responded to BCC's increased visibility and professionalism by signing substantial contracts with the college to provide training. These are both institutions that have used private training companies in the past; BCC is rightfully proud of having increased its visibility and respectability in the corporate community enough to win the new business.

Running a professional training organization that business feels comfortable retaining requires a big initial outlay, Dean Hutchison admits. But she says that they've attracted so much revenue through their aggressive foray into corporate markets that the up-front outlays more than pay for themselves. In fact, not only has the college covered its costs, including marketing and new equipment outlays, Continuing Education has been able to contribute to the credit programs from its corporate-centered computer training revenues. And the end is not yet in sight. The Continuing Education division is also partnering with the college's international programs to provide a cadre of Saudi Arabian students with custom-tailored computer training certification as well as the technical English certification they originally came to America to receive. Dean Hutchison hopes this is the first of an internationally-oriented focus that will establish BCC Continuing Education's computer training as a leader in the world market for corporate training vendors.

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