

NlightN Multimedia -

A Real World View



eCommunication: making it work

Part 1 – What is it good for?

What is e-communication?

eCommunication is a term I use to describe all forms of communication broadcast by electronic means. I suppose, by this definition, then emails like this and static webpages could be considered to be eCommunication but, in my book, true eCommunication must feature AT LEAST one of these:

- interactivity
- multimedia

So, this report is not what I would call eCommunication. Indeed, many elearning programmes aren't really eCommunication (some of the worst examples of elearning are neither interactive or multimedia) but, in general, eCommunication means multimedia presentations delivered online or via CDROM.



Kevin Partner writes a regular bi-monthly column for PCPro (www.pcpro.co.uk), the UK's leading IT magazine and is an expert in eCommunication in all its forms. He's worked in the field since 1989, has seen fads and technologies come and go but the fundamentals of good practice remain the same.

eCommunication is typically used for:

Training: in the form of online elearning programmes, CBT and CDROM/DVDROMs

Education: primarily for children in and out of school but also for teachers and adults

Communication: for getting a message across both online and CDROM.

Marketing: specifically about a selling message. Again either on CDROM or, more commonly, online. Often used both by commercial organisations and charities

TRAINING

Commercial training providers were amongst the first to see the potential for training. Indeed, I began my career developing Interactive Video products which were a combination of a very primitive PC (this was 1989!) connected to a LaserDisc player. It seems to me that, for many purposes, this form of training was ideal and it's only with the development of DVD and DVDROM that developers have the same capabilities today.



Computer Based Training (CBT) was the predominant force in training development throughout the 90s and is still very important today. It makes obvious sense to use a computer to train computer skills and CBT ought to be the epitome of focused, brief, training but unfortunately, most CBT is overlong and falls into the trap of simply training "everything" rather than what the user needs to know.

Today, elearning is the generic term for training that takes place both online and on CDROM and, if you look hard enough, it's possible to see examples at both ends of the quality spectrum. In general, the biggest elearning libraries tend to contain the worst examples: the impression I sometimes get is that they've simply dumped books onto the screen. Really good examples are harder to find, particularly online. You may want to look at our driving theory test elearning for what I consider to be a pretty good example (<http://www.passyourtheory.co.uk/preview/cat11/default.php>). I see no reason why, in this day and age, there should be any noticeable difference between online learning and CDROM based learning.

Advantages

Developing e-training has the following advantages over traditional methods:

- It's much cheaper than classroom training unless the audience is very small. For more on this, see our elearning page which includes cost comparisons. It's at http://www.nlightn.co.uk/alpha/multimedia_elearning_about.htm
- It has more potential as a learning tool than paper-based training. Adding multimedia (especially a voiceover) and interactivity to the training transforms its effectiveness
- It's quicker to deliver to a mass audience than traditional methods. We're not comparing with a faxed memo but with the equivalent of a properly designed classroom course or paper based manual.
- It's consistent. Delivering training electronically means that the message is the same each time. Get it right first time and it's right every time.
- It's measurable. We're not talking about "happy" sheets here: but proper tests that can take place both during and after the training.
- It's under user control. Users are far more motivated to learn if they feel in control of their learning. Don't underestimate the importance of handing the reins over to your trainees. You can set targets, they manage the process of getting there.
- It's updateable. E-training that's written with updatability in mind can be renewed whether it is delivered online or even on CDROM. Most of our CDROM products include the ability to update themselves whether that means changes to text, graphics or voiceover.

Disadvantages

The main disadvantages with e-training include:

- Impersonal. Some people prefer to learn through human contact. This is one reason why e-training often works better alongside some form of human involvement even if this is no more than a forum or telephone contact.
- Requires individual motivation. Whereas you can force people to attend a training event (how much they will learn, of course, is debatable), it's much harder to force someone to log onto an e-training programme. In most cases, however, you can check to see whether they did it (assuming you have a learning management system in place).

EDUCATION

Educational elearning offers many of the same advantages and disadvantages as elearning. The main difference is that educational elearning is almost never designed to replace classroom (except, sometimes for adult courses).

Commercially produced educational elearning tends to be delivered on CDROM into schools and, through retail, to parents.



Educational elearning has these advantages in addition to those for elearning:

- it is often used to support and reinforce classroom learning. This ensures that children who might not have grasped the concepts presented in the lesson have the opportunity to catch up. It also offers an alternative view often.
- it is used to present learning that is very difficult to adequately cover in the classroom environment. For example, describing the seasons in geography or science is much better handled with a CDROM or online animation. For an example, take a look at the Virtual Geography demo on our website: <http://www.nlightn.co.uk/vgdemo/VGOLmenu.html>
- it can cover for a lack of specialist teaching
- it can present information in a more elaborate, dynamic and novel way that will engage some children.

COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING

eCommunication has huge potential for communication within companies and to the outside world. Despite the fact that CDROMs have been around for many years now, there remains a novelty value associated with them: the vast majority of corporate communication is still delivered in paper form.

COMING UP IN PART 2: *Getting the message right*