



Alex Cochran believes the traditional barriers to learning and education have been blown apart.

Photo: JIM RICE

Accessibility speeds success

In the next in our series on learning for winning, **Alex Cochran** says e-learning is the new frontier.

Most powerful learning experience

Having spent the majority of my career working in buying and marketing roles for major retailers I have sat (and no doubt will continue to sit) through presentation after presentation that is based on the premise of "moving the market".

I have learned that no matter how dominant your brand, how big your distribution footprint or how much you spend on advertising, the market is your master, not your servant. Try to manipulate or push a market against the prevailing current and punishment will be swift and severe.

I have seen literally millions of dollars squandered in futile attempts by companies big and small to move markets when some simple observations on identifying and filling gaps would have paid off far more handsomely.

Today the biggest competitive advantage is speed. If you can identify and fill a market gap quicker than your competitor you will win. It's not always necessary to have the best solution, just a solution at the right time. Beta was technically better than VHS in video tapes but VHS was first to market.

Making Australia better educated

The traditional barriers to learning and education have been blown apart over the last 10 years. I have just completed my marketing masters degree at Monash University. This was completed without ever sitting through a

lecture, in fact without meeting one lecturer or tutor face-to-face. I did however collaborate with fellow students in London, New York, Hong Kong, Mumbai, Beijing and Alice Springs. This was all made possible with advances in communication and computer technology.

This form of education delivery is the future. We as a society have an obligation to ensure our communications infrastructure is capable of delivering such a fruitful bounty and that we are not hampered by the lack of capital investment or legacy systems.

Recently I received an email from a colleague about a group who had posted a series of seminar videos on Google video all about internet marketing. Never has education been so accessible for such little (or in fact no) cost.

The well-educated recruit

I have had the honour of working with some of the top retailers in the country. They all have a couple of things in common:

- They have an uncanny ability to quickly identify, home in and focus on the core issue of a problem, and filter out all extraneous "noise".
- They present ideas and concepts in a simplistic form so the teams or markets "get it" — this way acceptance of the concept is almost guaranteed.
- They have an almost obsessive empathy with the customer and practise "management by walking around".

These are management practices that you do not necessarily obtain in formal education and therefore must be encouraged in newly employed graduates.

I also firmly believe that every new

recruit should be assigned a street-wise buddy whose task is to lead the newcomer through the labyrinth of process, procedure and protocol that builds up around any big business.

Predictions

The internet's ability to facilitate communication between disparate clusters of niche markets and their potential suppliers will mean a boom in highly specialised or customised products.

Cascading efficiency gains in all stages of product development and production will mean shorter product life cycles and lower break-even production cycles.

What this means to consumers is that they will be spoiled for choice. The consumer will have multiple models, and multiple brands from which to choose. Differentiation between these models and brands in the context of the consumer's personal needs and wants will become an issue. Increasingly the consumer is going to have to resort to some form of advocacy service to filter the offer.

What cheeses me off

Watching sane people becoming a slave to the machine. Process for process's sake. Not looking outside the square for the simple solution. Waiting in a post office queue standing next to people who seem happy to do this. Getting caught on the voicemail call-back carousel. Complexity (I just don't get it).

His career

Alex Cochran is merchandise manager for Dick Smith Electronics. In October he completed a postgraduate masters degree in marketing through the Monash University Studies Online program.