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SIMULATION MARKETING MISTAKES

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Most of the simulations which are used in academia or industry have a purpose. That purpose is to teach or illustrate something to a group of people. In other words, to communicate information to a group of people in a way that they will retain and use it. Properly used, a simulation is a wonderful device for demonstrating pedagogical points. Retention is high and the lessons learned are easily applied to the "real world" Improperly used, a simulation creates confusion and can even distort what the teacher is trying to communicate. Much of the improper usage of simulations comes about from oversights in the marketing or in the design of the simulation.

Recognize the Customer: The marketing concept is a wonderful idea with one of its central tenets being to satisfy the customer. This raises the question of who the customer is for a simulation *I* experiential exercise.

Is the customer the teacher? If the goal of using a simulation is to communicate something to a group then the customer cannot be the teacher, because the teacher should already know what the simulation is trying to teach. Therefore the teacher is not the primary person that the simulation designer is to satisfy. The role of the teacher is that of decision-maker in a buying center. They do not use the product, but they do decide which product to buy.

Are the participants the customers? I would argue that they are. These are the people you are trying to communicate to. Even more importantly, the participants are the people who will be used to measure the benefits the simulation brings to the learning experience. Gentry, Stoltman and Mehlhoff (1992) quite rightfully point out that more emphasis is needed in delineating just what the student should be learning." and bring out their concern for the measurement of that learning.

This is a key concept for the simulation designer. The teacher is NOT the person doing the learning nor is the teacher the person to be satisfied. Satisfaction on the part of the participants can be tied to their perceived performance (Cabaniss 1992.) Because of this, the criteria for good performance must be clearly delineated to the participants.

Implicitly then, good performance should be the result of what you wanted the participants to learn. Teaching points should be clear and the reward for doing something correctly should be traceable by the participants to the application of a particular teaching point. If this happens, then the goals of the teacher and participant are congruent and the simulation has a much greater chance of success.

This leads to the first rule for simulation marketing. You should market to the decision-maker and satisfy the participant.

Failure to follow the KISS Principle: When designing a simulation the temptation to become more complex is almost overwhelming. Adding another decision variable is very easy and has little impact on the development time of a simulation once the basic framework of the simulation is established. Additionally, complex games appear to have an advantage when it comes to factual information being the learning goal desired (Wolfe 1978).

But there is a danger here. The more complex the simulation, the further you get from simple cause and effect relationships. Because of this, the ability to illustrate a particular teaching point may be lost (Cohen and Rhenman 1961; Raia 1966) While it is satisfying to the ego to build an incredibly complex and accurate simulation, it is quite possible that the very complexity you are so proud of is counterproductive. Therefore, the second rule of simulation marketing could be KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid.) In other words, have only as much complexity as necessary.

Assuming Competence: When designing a simulation the designer is working from a position of having detailed knowledge about a topic. Because of this, the lessons which the designer wishes to teach may not be as obvious to the participant as they are to the designer. Additionally, the computer literacy or literacy of the participants often necessitates some participants needing extensive tutoring to ensure that they can handle the mechanics of the exercise. While a program / booklet that starts slowlly at a low level will be viewed by the more advanced members of a class as demeaning, it is often the only way to prevent losing the people who are lacking some information / capabilities. This results in the third rule of simulation design:

Have the initial portions of the simulation and its accompanying instructions designed / written for the lowest common denominator.

Improper Selection of a Target Market: The design of a simulation / experiential exercise is an organic process. By this I mean that the seed of an idea is planted in the mind of the designer and grows into something that is not quite what was initially envisioned. The closeness between the designer and their product results in simulations being marketed to the wrong markets. The forth guideline for simulation design then becomes to let a third party give guidance as to the fit between the simulation and your proposed target market.

Conclusion: This partial listing of simulation design problems is not presented with the purpose of saying that all programs encountered suffer from these faults. Rather, the hope is that the people who write/design simulations and experiential exercises will be cognizant of these problems to make their products better. The ability to communicate and teach via a simulation can then be even more effective than it already is.

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