

making the case for e-learning

The Propane Education & Research Council has an important duty to the public and the industry it serves: the safe handling and transport of propane. To have the widest reach possible, they needed to take their certification beyond the classroom and into the virtual world—but doing it right took money, influence, patience, knowledge, and hard work.

By Stuart Flatow

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT BURKE



Stuart Flatow and colleagues at PERC developed the propane industry's first e-learning offerings.

Propane is an affordable, safe, efficient, and clean-burning fuel. At the Propane Education & Research Council (PERC), the safety of its workforce and consumers are priority number one.

Through the council, the propane industry has committed itself to a multiyear, multimillion dollar effort to improve consumer and employee safety, to fund research and development of new and more-efficient propane equipment, and to expand public awareness of propane and its many uses and environmental advantages.

As important as anything we do is training on the safe handling, delivery, and storage of propane.

Certification Programs

Since 1994, the Certified Employee Training Program (CETP) was, and continues to be, the propane industry's pre-

mier workforce safety and training curriculum. Initially developed and sold by the National Propane Gas Association, CETP provided job-specific course content on safely handling and transporting propane and propane installations and appliances. Provided mainly via classroom instruction, the course also led to a formal certification through testing and hands-on skills assessment.

While the classroom instruction of CETP was widely accepted, a small group of industry visionaries realized that there must be a better way to train their employees. They cited cost, convenience, and effectiveness as reasons for starting a groundswell to develop a CETP e-learning program. The need for such a program was underscored by the results of an industry survey in which 70 percent of propane retailers wanted to use CETP training, yet 70 percent indicated that the major challenges to

using the training were cost, convenience, and availability.

Working with industry leaders, the council approved funding to establish an e-learning focus group comprised primarily of industry members. In addition, two state association executives were asked to serve. The goal for the task force was straightforward: to determine if industry needs could be met by an effective e-learning program and what the priorities of such a program should be. Including the state executives served another important function: bringing sunshine into what could otherwise be a contentious issue.

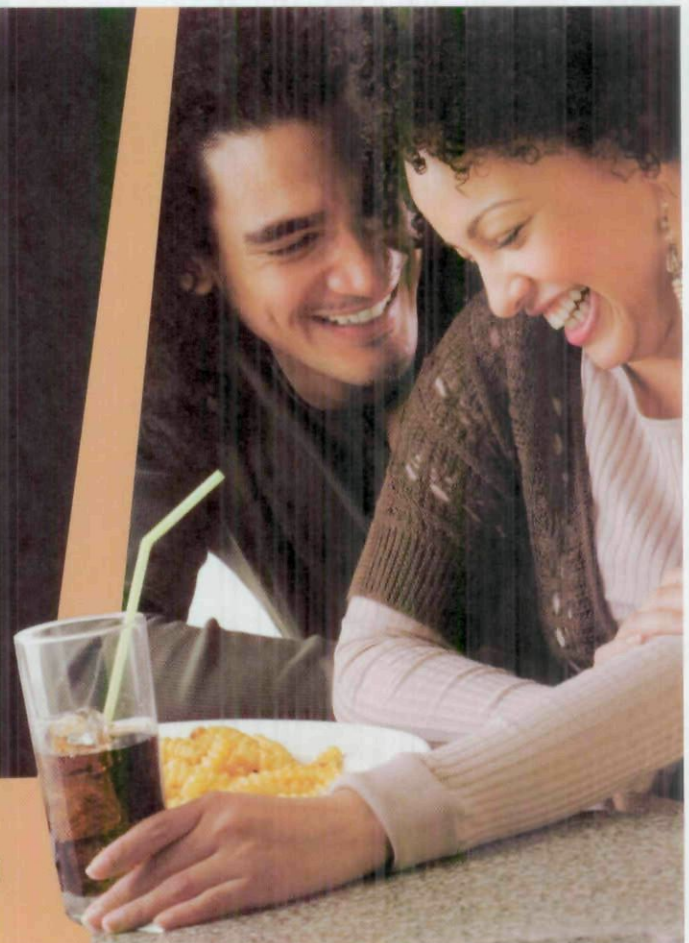
The task force recommended a DVD-based e-learning program that uses the current CETP curriculum as its source material. The task force made the DVD recommendation because too few industry members had access to high-speed internet at the time.

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Once the focus group completed its work, the Safety & Training Advisory Committee (STAC) formed an e-learning subcommittee to develop a workable program.

The Road to Funding

The first step was to write a detailed request for proposals. While the subcommittee could easily determine the content of the e-learning program, it did

with it. This is where the fun really got started as various pro and con camps started to emerge and became quite vocal. Though it may sound awful, it was actually a positive experience because interested parties participated in a no-holds-barred session where they were able to, and encouraged to, speak freely. Transparency was the key to making this a positive experience; everyone was using the same set of

facts and knowledge, enabling the open exchange.

In the end, the committee voted overwhelmingly to recommend that the board provide more than \$5 million to fund the industry's first-ever e-learning program. Once the committee recommended that the project be funded, a funding request was presented to the PERC board. It is important to realize that, as is the case with many associa-

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not have the knowledge or expertise to write a coherent RFP with information technology specifications in sufficient detail to solicit good proposals. A consultant worked with the subcommittee to develop the RFP, saving countless staff and volunteer hours and ensuring the proposals would meet the needs of the training. After the full committee's approval, the RFP was sent directly to several vendors and was placed on the council's website.

The process was smooth; the proposals we received accurately reflected the work we wanted to do. Our consultant helped us evaluate the proposals, and the subcommittee chose four vendors to make in-person presentations to staff and volunteers.

The successful bidding organization employed not only information technology experts but also those with expertise in adult education and curriculum design—an important aspect of this project. Once a bidder was selected, the full STAC needed to decide whether it would recommend moving forward

FIRST FORAY INTO COMPUTER-BASED LEARNING

In 2002, leaders of the propane industry gathered to reach consensus on its safety vision, goals, and strategies over the next eight years, resulting in *Propane Safety & Training Roadmap*, a publication that describes the enabling activities required to meet "the vision." (The document is available online at www.propanesafety.com/userdata/documents/st_roadmap_0302.pdf.)

One of the enabling activities included information technology as a means to remove the various barriers (cost, availability, time, and so forth) associated with providing training to the propane workforce.

In describing the need to move forward with IT, the propane industry report says:

"Advances in computer technology have led to the creation of a wealth of new training tools. Although much new technology exists, the propane industry has yet to fully embrace the technology in its training programs. In comparison with traditional class-room style training, computer-based training tools could lower industry training costs by reducing the costs of materials, number of instructors, and the amount of time required to train employees. Additionally, shared industry computer tools can help propane retailers keep up with regulations requirements and industry news. Utilizing these new technologies will allow the propane industry to take full advantage of their benefits."

PERC funded its first computer-based training program—a CD-based application that assisted propane retailers with their regulatory compliance obligations to train employees who handle hazardous materials. The *OSHA/DOT First 90-Day Training Program* was developed in an HTML format with pictures, voiceover, quizzes, and a printable certification of training. While it may have lacked the sophistication of products generated in today's IT world, it was a tremendous success as it met the industry's primary needs of providing technically accurate materials in a format that would be used to train employees wherever they were and whenever they needed training in a cost- and time-efficient manner.

Proper industry oversight assured the board that the project wasn't developed solely by "computer geeks."

tion boards of directors, PERC's board is composed mainly of businesspeople. Thus, while they will all agree on the need to provide better means to provide safety training, the case to have them agree to fund several million dollars on such a program must be made from a business standpoint that includes illustrating a positive return on investment using metrics such as projected near- and long-term industry usage of the program.

The briefing materials included an introductory memo that provided an historic overview containing much of the items discussed above. This was followed by the actual funding request, cost-benefit analysis, case studies of other organizations' e-learning experiences, the e-learning subcommittee roster, the RFP, a report provided by an independent third party who reviewed the bids and provided recommendations based on various criteria, the selected vendor's proposal to PERC, and a few informational articles about how e-learning can improve the retention of critical and technical concepts.

My presentation to the board, including many questions and discussions, lasted more than two hours. The bottom line for these professionals was not so much the monetary expenditure but whether or not PERC staff could indeed deliver what it said it would. After the two hours, the board overwhelming approved the funding request.

The bottom line here is that I am doubtful that without having at least a few influential industry leaders and visionaries, and without doing one's

homework, that the funding would have been forthcoming. Perhaps even more important was acknowledging to the board that the project would be reviewed on a scheduled basis by industry oversight. This deflected the concern that it would be developed solely by a bunch of "computer geeks" that had little knowledge of the propane industry.

Soon after receiving the board's approval for the project, a group of STAC members volunteered to serve on an e-learning subcommittee to help work on the project by providing industry-specific technical support and oversight. These members volunteered mainly due to their professional passions. However, let's face it: As in many such organizations, they also wanted to make sure that the final product was one that could be used by their own companies. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this even if it is perceived as being self-serving. Let's be honest: Self-servitude is a powerful motivator, and motivation is what drives a successful project. As such, CETP e-learning was on its way.

Peaks and Valleys

The e-learning initiative provided for the development of four individual CETP courses into four e-learning DVDs. For the first several months all was going smoothly—perhaps too smoothly. But then several industry experts had reservations about the source material. They said there was way too much repetition in the source material to be directly transferred into an e-learning format; too much "nice-to-know" information for those for whom the program

was developed; and, most troublesome, some serious technical flaws in the information itself.

As a result, the subcommittee and e-learning vendors regrouped and decided it would be necessary to develop the learning content as part of the e-learning production activities. This resulted in anticipated time and cost overruns, not to mention a dent to PERC's reputation and that of the source material used for this project.

Despite the setbacks, the project continued and was completed successfully. We constantly updated the board with straightforward reports on our progress that highlighted any problems we were encountering. This honesty led to the board's continued support of the program. Another reason the project was a success was the continued passion and dedication of a handful of industry volunteers. I cannot stress enough the importance of having industry volunteers ready to spend countless hours reviewing the program as well as spending time in meetings and on conference calls.

In fact, to ensure that we got it right, the program was disseminated to more than 150 industry members not involved in the program to serve as a beta testing group. Their input was invaluable. While changes to the program based on their input required additional time and expenditure, it was more important that the final product be technically sound and operationally relevant. After all, with the asynchronous e-learning approach we were taking with the course, there is no instructor around for questions.

One cautionary note: As hard as you and your team toil to ensure a bug-free system, bugs will appear. As such, it is critical to establish a maintenance contract to be able to rapidly respond to unforeseen issues. One such issue I encountered was the advent of Microsoft's new Vista operating system, which would not run the CETP e-learning program. This was not a major issue in terms of time and cost to rectify but an important one. Having the maintenance contract in hand allowed a quick fix to this issue.

After more than two years, the e-learning project was completed in 2007—or was it?

The End Is Not Near

You know the cliché: Build it and they will come.

If that's your e-learning motto, you may want to polish your resume.

The truly tough part begins after the work involved in obtaining funding for and the development of the e-learning program.

It is critical that a marketing and outreach plan be developed and deployed (yes, more funding) in order to make your industry members aware of the program, its availability, and why they should use it.

Articles and advertisements in industry trade magazines, press releases, continued email notices, seminars, and a strong presence at industry tradeshows and state association events were critical parts of our marketing plan. We deployed several outreach pieces and onsite presentations on CETP e-learning and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future to ensure that the industry recognizes its value.

I am estimating that it will take at least a year for the propane industry to

fully embrace e-learning. The good news is that those who have purchased and used it say they love it for all the reasons we developed it: to overcome the barriers associated with providing workforce training and education and to increase efficiencies in doing so. In fact, they are clamoring for more. **an**

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