

Reimagining Learning: Sales Kick Off in a Virtual World

Introduction

Sales Kick Off (SKO), a much anticipated annual tradition in enterprise sales, is the event of the year; it's the time when our salespeople descend on Las Vegas to network, celebrate, and learn from each other.

When COVID-19 hit in March, no one could have fully imagined the implications. Within weeks SKO in Vegas was no longer an option, and our tried and true approaches for delivering learning and binding collaboration were off the table. With less than four months to go we had to completely rethink how to deliver scalable, engaging, and relevant learning in a virtual environment for 3,500 sales people - people notorious for having high expectations of this event.



Challenge

A new kind of SKO needed to be developed. We'd deliver a virtual event, but one that would excite our salesforce, equip them with tools needed to drive sales, and provide the necessary engagement with peers and leaders to energize them for the year ahead. This required taking the best of 21st Century Learning and optimizing it to fit the unique needs of the organization and the event - and doing so in record time.

Approach

To achieve this we narrowed our focus to address the following:

Develop learning to **elevate the new capabilities** required in a distributed work environment

Develop leaders and managers to coach to address employee gaps and maximize strengths, ultimately elevating performance

Personalize the learner experience enabling the employee to guide and direct their own learning requirements

Tailor learning to a purely virtual environment, adjusting for engagement and output

Several factors had to be considered to ensure we hit the mark in each of these focus areas. In addition to content (all of which had to be created for the virtual environment - a process which in and of itself takes considerable time), we zeroed in on the **format, engagement, and personalization** of the learning to create an event that would surprise and delight our salespeople - four months into pandemic work conditions.

1.

Format

Faced with the very real constraint of Zoom/online fatigue, we knew that we couldn't follow a typical SKO learning agenda based on one week of intense learning. Instead, we took advantage of the virtual environment and expanded the timeframe across which SKO would be delivered. We built a six-week agenda that spread self-paced eLearning, podcasts and videos, live interactive workshops, and follow-up on-the-job application.

The self-paced content was structured so that it could be consumed in bite-sized chunks on a daily basis; but, we also provided the flexibility for attendees to consume all the content at once should they choose to do so. This flexibility was critical as SKO coincided with summer vacations. Prescribing a strict timeline for completing the pre-work would have proven unsuccessful, but was also not required in this new environment. By introducing 'any-time, any-place' flexibility for learners to consume content, we saw much higher pre-work completion rates (~90%).

2.

Engagement

Given the very nature of SKO, it was critical to intentionally recreate multiple opportunities for peer engagement and learning in the virtual space. These are some of the benefits of SKO that attendees value the most, but can be difficult to deliver in a distributed environment.

To meet this objective, we provided a weekly opportunity for extended teams to connect and share insights from the eLearning that they had completed on their own. At first these 'Friday Huddles' didn't seem like a critical program element, but, as we quickly learned, the teams relished this opportunity to come together and discuss broader topics than their forecasts. We armed the District Sales Managers (DSMs) and Sales Engineering Managers (SEMs) with discussion guides they could tailor to their team's specific interests enabling them to lead these meetings more effectively. These extended team discussions helped to reinforce and clarify the learning, and gave attendees an opportunity to engage with, and learn from, each other.

Another interactive touchpoint in the agenda was the live applied workshops. During the week of SKO, attendees participated in four 90-minute activity-based workshops that provided an opportunity to apply the pre-work learning. We assigned 80 people per workshop supplemented with small breakouts of 5-6 people. To ensure the Zoom-based workshops were small enough to allow for meaningful interaction, we determined that we would need to run 174 different workshops across four time zones. This presented a significant scaling challenge! We overcame this through partnering with 250+ DSMs and SEMs across the globe, training them to facilitate the workshops. We paired each DSM/SEM team with a third-party virtual classroom producer to handle all technical aspects of the Zoom workshop, allowing the DSMs and SEMs to focus on what they do best: driving conversation and synthesizing key insights.

Partnering with the DSMs and SEMs for the Friday Huddles and interactive workshops provided the added benefit of helping that cohort build their coaching skills, giving them a playbook for developing their teams in the coming year and fostering an overall culture of learning and development.

This unintended consequence may prove to be the biggest advantage of our virtual SKO learning approach.

3.

Personalization

Virtual SKO afforded us the opportunity to personalize the attendees' learning in ways not possible in the traditional event. First, attendees had on-demand access, allowing them to complete the learning 'anytime, anywhere' at their own pace. Second, the content was translated into local languages to ensure comprehension for non-English speakers. Third, attendees were assigned pitch practice, giving them an opportunity to tailor key messages to their own style. Fourth, the follow-up activity required attendees to apply what they learned to their own real-life scenarios by creating opportunity plans for live customers.



Learning

While SKO was the first time we used this model at scale, it won't be the last. We gained insight into learning that underscored the relevance and efficacy of this model, and also uncovered how to make improvements next time.

We were surprised to learn how eager the DSMs and SEMs were to take on leadership roles at SKO and facilitate learning discussions. When carefully supported and trained, and given enough time, sales leadership can be a strategic scaling partner for development initiatives.

We also learned that while virtual events allow for a bigger audience, you need to ensure you have a plan tailored for each audience segment. For example, we had determined that the SKO interactive workshops would only be relevant for people in customer-facing roles, since the small group breakouts required active participation in customer-selling scenarios. However, we had invited non customer-facing teams to SKO because it was virtual, and it was easy to do. In the end, some felt left out and were not engaged since there wasn't an agenda specifically designed for them.

A further key learning was that extending learning over six weeks versus one or two weeks, allowed us to build in more opportunities to reinforce and ultimately, drive stronger learning retention. Our metrics to date prove this out.

A virtual event provided additional benefits we hadn't considered at the start. Since attendees participated in the event in their own time zones, we didn't have to worry about jet lag impacting productivity. Also, while there are plenty of distractions working from home, they don't compete with the distractions that are part and parcel of big SKO get-togethers (especially in Vegas!). Lastly, we asked participants to document their learnings from the workshops via online workbooks, which were very easy to share with extended teams since the data was captured digitally.

By running SKO virtually, we saved ~80% of our typical SKO budget, while still achieving goal of ensuring 90%+ of sales team is clear on company goals and mission

Conclusion

SKO 2020 propelled learning and growth for our sales and leadership teams alike. Additionally the Talent Development team experienced first hand the importance of meeting learners where they are, empowering them to tailor their development to their own needs at their own pace in their own time, and also when to bring learners together for practice and reinforcement, and in so doing building deep collaboration through feedback and co learning.

Quotes



I think we are getting way more participation in the breakout rooms because you are "forced" to participate...I'm learning a lot and have had some great conversations...even had a funny Majors/Channel classic conflict moment today, we all laughed"



Keep it virtual forever. I learned more than I ever have before at any SKO and loved how small the breakout sessions were. Allowed me to collaborate, meet people, present, ask questions and retain so much knowledge."