he world may, indeed, be flat, as Thomas Friedman figuratively proclaimed on the cover of his book, “The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century” (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, April 2005). But as any company that successfully has ventured beyond its native borders will tell you, a one-size-fits-all global sales strategy that fails to take into account the cultural, regulatory, geographic, and economic differences that exist across borders is a blueprint for failure.

For training organizations tasked with educating globally dispersed sales forces, the challenge is adapting to these differences while simultaneously realizing the cost efficiencies that curriculum standardization offers.

Here’s a look at how two companies manage to maintain this delicate balance.
Wyeth Pharmaceuticals

At Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, a global pharmaceuticals company based in Madison, NJ (biopharmaceutical company Pfizer completed its acquisition of Wyeth on October 15, 2009), Richard Creasy and his headquarters team develop and design all global product training for the company’s global sales force. Other enterprise-wide programs, including training tied to Wyeth’s “customer-focused” selling model and enterprise decision framework, are also designed by the headquarters training team.

Standardizing programs of this scale makes good business sense, according to Creasy, who is Wyeth’s director of marketing development, global training, and instructional design. “Because these products and models are used around the globe, standardizing the way in which we develop training around them allows everyone—be it a sales representative from Asia-Pacific, Latin America, the EMEA, or the U.S.—to speak a common language and meet customers’ needs in a way that is consistent with, and maintains, the Wyeth brand.”

He is quick to point out, however, that local markets play a pivotal role in developing other types of sales training for their own markets. They also routinely adapt the global training Creasy’s team develops so as to ensure the training meets the unique requirements of their region. “Once a course is developed and approved here, it goes out to our global affiliates,” explains Creasy. “At that point, each affiliate typically localizes the content, and then runs it through its own approval body.” This localization process is essential to the success of Wyeth’s sales training, he says. “Our affiliates are the only ones that understand and can address the important issues in their region, including everything from regulatory considerations and drug price controls to reimbursement requirements and cultural differences.”

The key challenge associated with this model, of course, is communication between headquarters staff and the global sales force—which takes place early and often at Wyeth, according to Creasy, particularly during the course design phase. “In our design process, we include input from our major global affiliates at every opportunity. They sign off on early blueprints, design documents, and content outlines, and provide input every step of the way. The result is an end product that may have been designed in the U.S., but was done so with global input. That, coupled with our global affiliate approval process and localization model, allows us to move fast, while delivering consistent training that meets each of our constituent’s needs.”

Another challenge associated with this model, notes Creasy, is ongoing communication among sales regions themselves. To facilitate this, his team conducts at least two “Global Summits” each year, during which key training coordinators, marketing representatives, and medical professionals from each region of the world gather together to share sales training ideas and best practices and to update one another on the goings-on in their region.

Creasy notes that Wyeth’s current global sales training model marks a dramatic departure from the company’s former approach to global sales training, under which almost all curricula were developed centrally in the U.S. and delivered to the field by trainers from headquarters who were responsible for rollout and delivery in specific geographies around the world. “Before, it was often difficult for us to understand all of the differences that existed in various parts of the world—particularly in emergent high-growth markets,” Creasy says. “By contrast, our new strategy allows our affiliates a greater degree of autonomy and empowers them to identify and implement their own sales and marketing strategies in ways that facilitate market penetration. At the same time, the direction, guidance, and assistance provided at a corporate level ensures each location does so in a way that is aligned with Wyeth’s brand and overall corporate goals.”

Hitachi Data Systems

Like Wyeth, Santa Clara, CA-based Hitachi Data Systems (HDS), a global storage solutions company that is a wholly owned subsidiary of Hitachi, Ltd., takes a global, yet localized, approach to worldwide sales training. Under this structure, a training services leader resides within each geography to communicate with the headquarters team about local sales training needs. To achieve worldwide consistency, the company’s global headquarters team typically develops all training with an enterprise reach, including global sales methodology training and global product launch training. In all instances, each of the company’s geographies is given ample leeway to adapt globalized sales training to its unique needs, according to Terri Casady, director of HDS Academy, the company’s corporate university. “If it is a global Web-based training program, for example, each geography might add localized content and hyperlinks to a course so it more closely aligns with the culture and selling style of that particular geography. Or, if we are rolling out global instructor-led training, we typically will conduct a train-the-trainer so each geography has a local sales expert running the program who can put the new product launch training into the context of his or her local market.”

At other times, notes HDS Academy Sales Training Faculty Leader Kerri Conrad, the company’s headquarters team
assumes responsibility for localizing sales training content itself—particularly when the team is designing large-scale, Web-based training programs for launch on the company’s learning management system (LMS). “We’ll often create baseline content that is standardized for everyone, but then insert tools, success stories, examples, and external links that are customized to each region,” she says. To collect this information, the HDS Academy team typically conducts in-depth interviews with representatives from each geography. “We ask them to give input on the baseline content to ensure it works for them,” says Conrad. “At the same time, we ask their designated subject matter expert to provide specific examples for the course and serve as a ‘star’ for his or her geography by running the virtual training session or Webinar.” In this way, says Conrad, baseline sales training content is standardized, but the content is tailored to meet the unique needs of each geographic region.

An added bonus? Having sales professionals from each location deliver training content themselves is a critical factor in achieving buy-in for global sales training from HDS’ sales force, according to Casady. “Salespeople, regardless of their geography, love to learn through examples and war stories. At the same time, most salespeople tend to have a certain level of distrust for trainers who aren’t salespeople,” says Casady. “This approach allows us to get the message out to them in a way that is credible to them.”

Another key to this model’s success, notes Conrad, is the willingness of HDS Academy’s headquarters training team to relinquish control. “The challenge with global sales training is the audience comprises such a huge, dispersed group of stakeholders and audience members who have unique, real-time needs. Even though it is important to develop standardized training that is aligned with our global strategy, it is equally important that we have people in the field who are empowered to develop and deliver their own training that addresses those immediate needs—and in a manner and style their geography prefers.”

Recognizing this, she says, the HDS Academy team views “ownership” of global sales as a secondary concern. “Instead, we place our entire focus on improving the effectiveness of the sales force. That framework and orientation is what helps us to be engaged in joint problem solving, to act as true consultants to each geography and its business, and to develop solutions that meet each geography’s needs.”

For more on sales training, visit www.trainingmag.com/callcenter.

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