WHY YOUR BUSINESS SHOULD OFFER ONLINE COURSES (AND HOW TO MAKE A COMPELLING ONE)

mediafirst

specialists in communication training
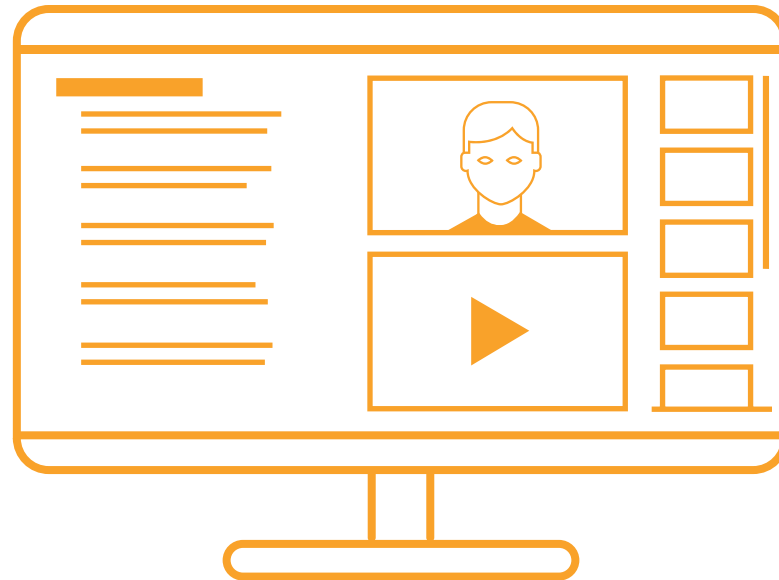
INTRODUCTION

Online courses have surged in popularity.

The pandemic and lockdown restrictions put them in the spotlight, allowing organisations to continue to develop and upskill their people when they could not get together face-to-face.

But the demand was there before Covid.

And even now those restrictions have eased, online learning continues to enjoy an upward trend.

According to the World Economic Forum, the online learning platform Coursera had 21 million students in 2016.

That number grew to 71 million in 2020 and 92 million in 2021.

So, isn't it time your business joined the trend?

In this eBook, we will:

☐ Guide you through the many benefits of online courses.

☐ Look at the risks and how you can overcome them.

☐ Explore whether online courses and face-to-face training can work together.

☐ Take you through everything you need to know about creating a compelling course.

MEDIA FIRST AND ONLINE COURSES

This eBook pulls on our experience of delivering training to many of the country's biggest brands.

We have spent the past 40 years working with organisations - and developing their people - across more than 40 different sectors, such as automotive, charity, finance, healthcare, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, retail and travel.

Traditionally, this training was delivered face-to-face in the classroom.

But the way we learn has evolved, and there is a growing demand for online courses.

We now have many online courses available.

And we have worked with our clients to take their expertise, knowledge, subject areas, and learning objectives and turn them into great online learning experiences.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ONLINE COURSES?

Sounds like a silly question, right?

But clarity is crucial.

Some people consider online courses to be training programmes delivered live through web conferencing platforms like Zoom and Teams.

That is remote training.

Online courses are accessed through a learning management system (LMS) and typically include pre-recorded tutor videos, text and interactive elements.

Crucially, they are available whenever and wherever delegates want to access them. And they complete them at their own pace.
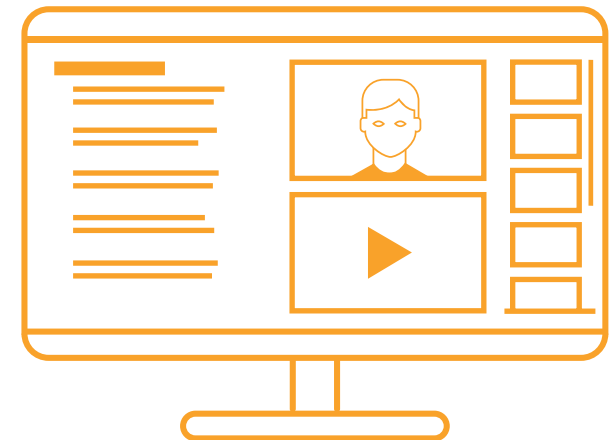
THE BENEFITS OF ONLINE COURSES (AND ARE THEY BETTER THAN FACE-TO-FACE TRAINING?)

Let's take a detailed look at the main advantages of online courses.

But before we do that, it is worth addressing a pivotal question – are online courses better than face-to face training?

We've been delivering face-to-face training for around 40 years.

And we have developed many online courses during the past five years.

We see benefits to both. And we think they are both here to stay and have a role to play in the future of learning.

Organisations will opt for different options at different times to meet different needs.

> " **Online courses and face-to-face learning both have a role to play in the future of learning** "

ONLINE COURSES CAN BE GREENER

The environment is on everyone's minds.

And organisations face growing pressure to show their green credentials.

Online learning offers many environmental benefits compared to traditional face-to-face training.

For a start, you don't have to ask everyone to travel to the same location at the same time – transport is responsible for 27 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions in the UK.

Additionally, training rooms need energy for lighting, heating, and air conditioning.

According to Growth Engineering, online learning can cut energy consumption by 90 per cent compared to classroom training.

Another eco consideration is that online courses typically require fewer textbooks, handouts, and other learning materials, which all have an environmental impact.

ONLINE COURSES ARE ACCESSIBLE

Online training fits around people's different needs and lives.

People with disabilities or health conditions, who may struggle to leave the house, can access the same learning as everyone else.

Studies have shown online courses give people with neurodiversity greater flexibility over their routines and can remove some of the anxiety that may surround face-to-face training.

And it can aid concentration – the challenge of maintaining focus is a major characteristic of conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD, and dyspraxia.

As online courses are available whenever and wherever people need them, people can fit their learning around other commitments, including on business trips, or from offices anywhere in the world.

And they can access learning at the point of need.

Let's say, for example, you have a presentation coming up and want to remind yourself about the best way to structure a presentation. You could log in to our presentation skills online training course and spend 20 minutes going over the presentation structure module.

It is also worth highlighting that almost everyone in the UK has access to the internet – it has one of the highest internet penetration rates in the world, with more than 62 million monthly users.

And that figure is expected to increase to 65 million by 2026.

People use their laptops, tablets and phones everyday and are familiar with the technology.

One concern about online courses is that they may present barriers to people with visual and audio disabilities. But courses can be adapted through things like adding subtitles on videos and text-to-speech functions.

ONLINE COURSES ARE COST-EFFECTIVE

You don't have to factor in travel, and room hire costs into the price of delivering the training.

And there are savings to be found in removing the downtime spent travelling to a venue.

The only costs you need to consider are the upfront development ones and any maintenance and updates you require.

ONLINE LEARNING OFFERS FLEXIBILITY

One of the big challenges we have found in our 40 years of delivering face-to-face training is finding a day that works for everyone.

Senior leadership teams, in particular, have demanding schedules. And getting everyone together for training at the same time can sometimes feel like mission impossible.

Online courses are more flexible.

You can access the training when it is convenient and complete it at your pace – giving your delegates more time to absorb the information if they need it.

It fits effortlessly into schedules.

And that means delegates are more likely to focus on what they are learning rather than worrying about the work they think they should be doing.

> **Getting everyone together for face-to-face training can sometimes feel like mission impossible**

AND CONSISTENCY

Imagine being able to offer the same training to everyone who needs it no matter where and when they take the course.

An online course enables you to offer the same content and experience to everyone.

You don't have to worry about someone running late because of a delayed train or missing the session. Or a tutor delivering slightly different material.

There are no off days.

Everyone has the same learning experience and access to the same knowledge.

"Online courses enable you to offer the same content and experience to everyone"

REVISIT AND REFRESH YOUR LEARNING

Ever been on a training course and quickly forgotten much of that good stuff you learnt?

Maybe you took comprehensive notes but can't read them – we've all been there.

Or perhaps you completed the training a few months ago and think there was a module that could be helpful now.

You are probably not going to be able to get hold of the tutor to give you a quick refresher.

But you can with online courses.

They give delegates the option to dip in and out of the training and revisit what they learnt when it is needed.

YOU CAN MEASURE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Everything needs to be measured these days.

But how do you measure the effectiveness of that last face-to-face training programme you organised?

That can be tricky to gauge.

Online courses give you much more data and analytics to go on.

You could, for example, look at how long it takes delegates to complete different modules.

You might want to measure engagement levels.

And you could look at quiz and assessment scores.

There are many different measurements you could use to determine how successful you are in meeting your organisation's learning aims.

ONLINE COURSES OFFER VERSATILITY

One of the other great benefits of online courses is their versatility.

They are most commonly used by organisations internally to learn and develop new skills, build on prior knowledge, achieve learning goals, increase productivity, deliver change and create a better onboarding experience. But there are other options to consider.

An online course could help educate your customers. Let's say you are a tech company, and you notice your customer service team is repeatedly asked the same questions.

Short courses answering those questions could improve the customer experience, increase morale in the customer service team, and make it more efficient.

You could also create an online course as part of your content marketing strategy. Or to sell.

We have a range of courses customers can pay for to develop their communication skills and knowledge. And our sister company, The BCF Group, offers online business coaching and management training.

ONLINE COURSES ARE EASY TO SCALE

You might only have a small number of delegates you need to train.

But what if the training needs to be more widely available? What if it needs to go from tens of delegates to hundreds? Or thousands?

You will need a pretty big meeting room if that training is face-to-face.

There are no such problems with online courses. They can be easily scaled up to meet increased demand.

RISKS AND MYTHS (AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM)

So, there are many advantages to online courses.

But they are not risk free.

And there are some myths that can make them feel less appealing.

It is sometimes claimed online courses are impersonal or detached.

But using video throughout your course can inject the human element and add personality. We additionally suggest having an introduction video from your boss or project sponsor at the start of the course. Ensuring the course is created by a company that understands your audience and is empathetic to their needs and challenges can also help overcome the impersonal barrier.

Another concern is screen time. We all spend too much time staring at screen, don't we?

That's an important consideration. And is one reason why it can be crucial to break courses down into small modules that create natural breaks in the training where people can get away from the screens.

RISKS AND MYTHS (AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM)

What about loss of focus? How do you overcome distractions like the need to check emails and social media feeds or take part in office gossip?

Again, short modules are helpful. The system will save your progress so you can dip in and out as much as you like. And building in interactive elements like games, quizzes, videos, and questions can keep engagement levels high.

There can also be a few questions around technology. Does it exclude people with limited IT skills? Do technology problems damage the learning experience?

Well, firstly, a good online course won't require more than basic IT skills. If your people can log in to a work computer or use a smartphone, they should be fine.

And, while you can't rule out the Wi-Fi going down occasionally, thorough testing should resolve other issues and ensure a high-quality learning experience for delegates. And the system will aways save your progress.

ROOM FOR BOTH?

We've already said we believe there is plenty of room for face-to-face and online training.

It is not an either-or scenario.

The conversations we have with our clients show there is space and an appetite for both. And there may be times when in-person training is the better option.

There will be other occasions where the two formats work perfectly together. We call this blended learning.

It is where the theory and knowledge delegates need are delivered through an online course.

And they then have the opportunity to put their learning into practice with a practical face-to-face training session.

> **Face-to-face and online training should not be an either-or scenario**

CREATING YOUR COURSE

So, how do you create a compelling online course people want to complete?

Well, it all starts with a question. Why?

To create a brilliant course, you need to be clear on its purpose.

What do you want the training to achieve?

What outcome are you looking for?

It might be that you're looking to teach your employees about a new skill or service.

It could be a course to help your customers overcome a problem they are experiencing.

Maybe you are looking to create a course you can sell.

You also need to be clear on whether this is a course you are planning to build yourself or do you intend to use an online course creator, like Media First.

AUDIENCE

Once you've answered that question, you face another one: Who?

Who is the course aimed at?

And what do you want them to learn from the training?

You need to answer these questions to build a course that meets the needs of your organisation and its delegates.

If you are creating a course to sell, you need these answers to ensure you build a course around the needs of those likely to complete the training.

This information will also help you shape your course content.

Let's say your course is for your middle managers. The content is likely to need to be different to a course for the senior leadership team.

We recommend building an audience persona. Internally, this should include things like position, age, employment status, and time with the organisation.

If you are creating a course to sell, a buyer persona might include age, gender, occupation, education and salary.

PLATFORM

You've guessed it, another question.

What platform will you use to create and host your online course?

There are many learning management systems (LMS) out there, and they can feel pretty similar.

A key consideration is obviously cost. And you need to be mindful of hidden costs. For example, a basic plan may seem more affordable but is unlikely to meet your needs long-term.

Ease of use is also vital. As is external integration – you'll need a platform that works with the tools you are used to using. Otherwise, the course-building process is going to become time-consuming.

Does it have a range of platforms you can use?

And you will need to ensure the course-building software works with your online learning system. The industry standard online course file format is called a SCORM file - it is an international standard

for e-courses. If your course is published in this format, you can be sure that almost any learning management system will recognise it.

And think about the features you need to bring your course to life. Does your platform allow you to bring in quizzes and games, for example?

If this all sounds a bit tricky, we can take care of it for you.

We use industry-standard software and the courses we build work across any online learning environment.

If you don't have an online learning management system, we can even host the course for you.

MEASURE

Bit odd to think about measurement at this early point, isn't it?

Well, we believe you need to consider how you measure the success of your course during its development, as this can shape the content.

Think again about those objectives and ambitions. And use them to create measurable goals.

If it is an internal course, success could include better staff engagement levels, boosted productivity and improved retention.

If you are giving your course away for free, you could measure the quality of leads it generates and brand awareness.

If you plan to charge for your course, will the topics covered boost revenue and improve customer satisfaction levels?

OUTLINE

Once you've answered these questions, the next stage is to outline your course.

It will help you understand how long it will take to build and what content and material you need.

This part of the process can be reassuring – you might find you already have much of the content and just need to pull it together in an online learning management system or give it a revamp.

For example, you might have a blog post, eBook, whitepaper, or PowerPoint slides that covers one of the modules. Perhaps there is a key infographic you used in a presentation.

Maybe you've already created videos that would seamlessly fit into the training.

You can then use this content to build the basis of your course.

DESIGN YOUR COURSE

You've put the foundations in place.

Now it is time to put your course together and create a brilliant learning experience for your delegates.

How do you do that?

Well, we think it is based on a simple principle - the good qualities of an online course are the same as those of face-to-face learning.

And we pride ourselves on combining the best of face-to-face training with the ease and flexibility of an online class.

It starts with multimedia. Bring your course to life with videos, images, infographics, quizzes and games.

It will make the training more appealing, engaging and memorable. No one wants to sit there and read endless pages of text in the same way they wouldn't want a tutor in the classroom to present to them for hours on end. Concentration levels will fall away.

Multimedia is also vital because people learn in different ways. The majority of people – around 65 per cent – are visual learners and need to see information to retain it.

Auditory learners make up about 30 per cent of the population and learn best by hearing information.

Other people learn through reading and want to engage with text.

And, the other main group are kinaesthetic learners. They learn by experiencing and doing. They also tend to need more regular breaks.

Your online course needs to try to embrace these different learning styles.

The one crucial variation between online and face-to-face learning is that you should break the training into small, easily digestible chunks.

This makes the course feel less daunting and helps people retain what they are learning.

DESIGN YOUR COURSE

Have you heard of The magical number seven, plus or minus two theory? It may not have the catchiest title. But written by cognitive psychologist George A. Miller, it shows there is a limit to the information our short-term memory can retain.

It says most people will only recall about seven pieces of information. Some can retain slightly more, and others a little less.

But almost none can retain double digits. So, limit the amount of crucial information contained in each lesson.

Creating these natural breaks in online courses also allows people to step away from the screen and take a break.

And completing a lesson can also build a sense of achievement.
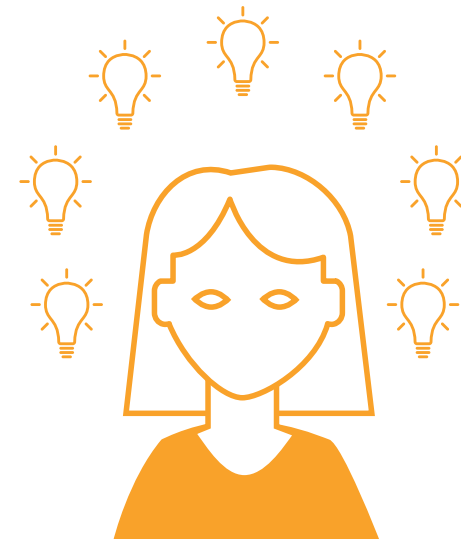
STRUCTURE

A good course structure is critical.

Online courses – like their classroom cousins – need to be well-organised and logical.

Delegates must be able to follow where the course is going.

If they can't, they will lose concentration and interest.

A step-by-step structure is the most commonly used one. It is where each lesson or section builds on the learning of the previous one. And it offers natural opportunities for people to dip in and out of the training.

Long courses containing content that takes time to learn sometimes have a week-by-week structure, which again is built to logical progression.

The reference structure is another one to consider. Here, course content is neatly grouped together, and students can jump between different sections when they need it.

> " **If delegates can't follow your course, they will lose concentration and interest** "

VALUE

Unless your online training course is on a particularly niche subject, there is a good chance the information can be found elsewhere.

We all have Google. There are plenty of tutorial videos on YouTube.

That information might be bity, come from many different sources and require plenty of digging. But it can still be accessed.

There may be similar online courses out there.

The uniqueness and value of an online course often come from how you pull all that information together, tailor it for your audience, present it, guide delegates through it and make it engaging and memorable. And mix it with your insight.

You need to ensure your delegates have the best experience from your course.

That's why we use broadcast-quality video in our courses, presented by current working journalists. And all content is based on the latest thinking and methodology.

SIZE DOESN'T MATTER

When it comes to online courses, there can be a temptation to add more and more to it in a bid to make it better.

But bigger isn't always better.

It is the outcome of the learning that matters. Not how long it takes to complete the training.

There is little value in suggesting an ideal length because that will vary on what you need to cover and want your delegates to learn. There is no one-size-fits-all answer.

But keep the course to the point and cut out the fat. There is no correlation between length of course and learning outcomes.

And remember, people are busy.

While they are willing to learn new things, they have other work and life commitments.

> **There is no correlation between length of course and learning outcome**

OFFER EXTRAS

It may seem to contradict what we just said about cutting the fat from your online course.

But online courses should offer opportunities for delegates to continue their learning.

It may be you have some relevant blogs or eBooks. Perhaps you have been part of a podcast or produced a webinar on a related subject.

How could you help your delegates continue to explore the topic and develop their thinking?

The key is to make it clear these extras are optional and not part of the main course.

How can you help your delegates continue to explore the topic and develop their understanding?

QUALITY CHECK

Videos are pivotal to the success of online courses.

So, make sure they are good quality. And the audio is clear.

And ensure the videos all work seamlessly on different devices.

Do they load and play quickly? People don't like lag.

Are there any distractions, such as poor lighting or plants and coat stands looking like they are growing from the presenter's head?

Has all your text been proofread?

Test your online course thoroughly. And then test it again. Test it with colleagues, friends and family and eliminate any silly mistakes before it goes live.

ONLINE COURSE PROMOTION

No matter how good your online course is, if people don't know about it, it offers little value.

If the course is for an internal audience, it will need to be promoted through your internal communication channels.

Consider recording a video of a member of the leadership team taking the course and explaining why it matters.

What about for a course you want to sell or that forms part of your content marketing strategy?

Use your email list. Email marketing is a brilliant way to promote your course.

You will also have a ready-made audience on social media. So, use those channels as well.

Turn part of the course into a blog to give people a taste of what they could learn. If you've got a podcast, talk about it on there.

How about a livestream or webinar to show what people can learn from you?

You could also consider using pop-ups on your website, or paying for adverts on Google or LinkedIn, to give a few examples.

FEEDBACK

Once your course is up and running, it can continue to be improved.

Ask your delegates for feedback and use it to make improvements to the course and make the learning experience even better.

You can incorporate surveys into your online course to help you gather feedback.

Questions should focus on both the course content and the learning outcomes.

Consider questions like:

- [ ] What do you think of the quality of the course content?

- [ ] Was there anything you would like explained in more detail?

- [ ] Was there anything you found difficult to understand?

- [ ] Was there anything relevant to the subject you thought should be covered?

- [ ] Was the course easy to follow?

- [ ] Did the course make you think differently about the subject?

- [ ] How confident do you feel about the subject now?

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

We've covered most things.

But there are a couple of additional points to consider.

VIDEO

Firstly, be careful about the length of your videos.

Don't go out and record your tutors giving lengthy lessons.

People have limited attention spans – social media shows us short videos perform better.

So, look to keep videos under five minutes and support them with text, infographics, games and questions.

If you have something that needs 20 minutes to explore, break it into smaller sections.

DON'T AIM FOR PERFECTION

Strive for continuous improvement with your online course rather than perfection.

If the goal is perfection, there is a good chance your course will face continuous delays while you make endless tweaks and changes.

And if it never goes live, you won't know how good it is.

We have created many online courses for ourselves and our clients.

And we have made many changes to them. We have changed the wording, updated videos, tweaked questions and replaced images.

Just like face-to-face training, you can improve and evolve your online course once it has gone live.

As we said earlier in the eBook, seek feedback and use that to make your course even better.

> **If your course goal is perfection, it might never go live**

HOW WE CAN HELP

We believe online courses should be engaging, challenging and practical, allowing delegates to reinforce their knowledge and new skills by putting them into practice.

So, we fuse compelling course content - produced by our current working journalist trainers - with broadcast-quality video production, design and graphics that allow inspiring and entertaining lessons to be delivered remotely.

We can write the scripts, instructional materials and learning resources. We can even provide experienced journalists to present your videos, deliver professional narration and keep students engaged.

And, often, we can provide the content and knowledge too.

But an online course shouldn't just be about reading and watching.

It can be tricky to keep students engaged in an online environment without the power of social learning.

So, we create activities to help delegates apply what they've learnt and put it to the test - which also gives you the peace of mind your students understood the learning.

Our team will help you take your expertise, knowledge, subject areas, learner needs and learning objectives and turn them into a great learning experience.

WHO HAVE WE CREATED ONLINE COURSES FOR?

We've created plenty of online courses of our own.

From media skills refreshers and presentation skills training to creating videos on smartphones and writing engaging content, you can find our full range of courses here.

And we have created plenty for our clients.

Here's what Guide Dogs said about the course we built for the charity:

"We wanted to give as much help to our new volunteers as we could. To make it easy for them to pick up on what we were looking for from our regional 'media champions' and to give them an insight and understanding on what the media want from a story, direct from the journalists themselves.

We've worked with Media First many times before and we knew they had the ability to understand and deliver on our brief. The online course they created is a perfect fit. It's easily accessible, always available and the content is pitched at just the right level. It's made it much easier to get our new volunteers quickly briefed and we're really happy with the way it's working."

Emma Tucker, Lead Regional Marketing Manager, Guide Dogs

ABOUT MEDIA FIRST

We've been delivering communication training for around 40 years.

This includes working with 40 of the FTSE 100, public relations companies, charities, public sector organisations and businesses of all sizes.

Our customers are increasingly asking us for help creating compelling content for them, including online courses, as well as webinars, masterclasses, live streams, videos and podcasts.

All our course content is created by current working journalists who know how to inform, educate and entertain audiences.

And they are based on our belief that the best online teaching and learning shares the same principles as the classroom.

As well as creating a course that combines the best of face-to-face training with the ease and flexibility of an online class, we can also work with you to produce the marketing material to help you promote your online course.