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– Rob Baker, Technical manager, STIHL



STIHL animates its dealers with online training

Customer and industry

Stihl, retail distribution,
outdoor power tools

Cisco WebEx services

Training Center
Support Center

Summary

With 430 dealer outlets across Australia, in-person training sessions are impractical and expensive for STIHL. After pushing its existing web conferencing service to its limits, STIHL turned to WebEx (now part of Cisco) to provide a more dynamic online training experience for its dealer network.

About STIHL

STIHL is the world’s leading brand of chainsaws and a market leader in the outdoor power equipment industry. Established more than 80 years ago, the international STIHL Group spans Asia, Australia, Europe, Africa, Middle East and North, Central and South America. The Australian network, launched in 1971, is headquartered in Melbourne and employs more than 90 staff.

International company, STIHL, is represented in more than 120 countries worldwide. STIHL Australia was the first subsidiary company established outside Europe, in 1971, and is the sixth largest in annual turnover. Locally STIHL employs more than 90 staff and manages a distribution network of 430 retail dealers. STIHL relies on its dealers to continually increase sales and provide technical and mechanical support to customers.

The Challenge

Keeping its dealer network motivated, involved and knowledgeable about its product range is key to STIHL’s business success. According to Rob Baker, Technical Manager at STIHL, most dealers have multiple suppliers selling in different brands and products. This makes it a real business challenge for STIHL to retain dealer support and consequently, market leadership.

Mr Baker says, “We need to be regimented and smart in our communication with the dealers so they remain excited and informed about our products. We used to rely solely on in-person training sessions, but with a large network spread across rural and metropolitan areas we found that only one person from each dealer outlet would typically attend a session. This meant we couldn’t guarantee that the whole sales team would receive our information.

“Another challenge was sharing product updates and other company information

in between in-person training sessions. A change in our approach was needed if we were to continue growing. We rely on our dealers to sell our products and it’s up to us to engage them in a way that’s easy and meaningful,” said Rob.

STIHL is no stranger to web conferencing. In 2004 the company began to substitute part of its in-person training program with online training sessions that could easily be attended by whole sales teams. This e-training program was successful but STIHL reached a point where it wanted to take its online training approach to the next level.

“We felt it was time to set the benchmark a little higher in terms of the training experience we were providing dealers. PowerPoint presentations are not that interesting and we wanted to use things like VoIP, video and animations in our sessions to keep people engaged. These features weren’t available with our previous service, so we started looking for a more dynamic option. At the heart of this was our drive to keep an edge on our competitors,” said Rob.

The solution

After lengthy research, STIHL decided that Cisco WebEx Training Centre and Support Centre was the answer to improving its e-training program.

Mr Baker says, “Out of all the solutions we looked at, WebEx offered us the most functionality – it can support all our online

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needs and wants. Introducing things like video, real-time polling capabilities and animation to our training sessions is easy and all our dealers need is a phone and internet connection to take part. It’s simple to use but really smart technology.”

Getting interactive in the virtual classroom

Web conferencing lets STIHL disperse information to its dealer network more regularly and in real-time, without incurring enormous travel costs. It offers more opportunities for dealer sales teams to learn about products and, industry and company information.

STIHL holds two online training sessions each week. They’re done on a State-by-State basis to ensure training content is relevant to the environmental and market needs of each region.

“We can run animations now, which are great for engaging our audience and getting your point across in a unique way. We couldn’t do that with a previous web conferencing provider without incurring any additional expense. A picture is worth a thousand words when it comes to explaining complex new technology.

“WebEx is also very functional, uploading training content is easy, you just access it all from your desktop or incorporate the elements directly into your web portal. The live polling feature is also a great way to make sure the dealers are responding to what we’re presenting about,” explained Rob.

STIHL’s training sessions are hosted from the head office in Melbourne. More than one presenter is used in each session to provide an extra dynamic that keeps dealers engaged.

“We have a team of three who host the sessions and they do a great job. We usually start with some agenda slides, and then incorporate live video to bring in some personality. Then we’ll give our presentation, where we’ll use the web cam to actually show the dealers particular equipment or parts samples. Then we can interact with the dealers by having a Q&A session on specific issues they’re experiencing and polling them about the product or issue.”

STIHL tries to limit its virtual classrooms to 15 people, but estimates that it could be presenting to about 30 people at any given time because of unregistered staff that often gather around to view the presentation.

“We still leverage face-to-face training when we need to communicate something very technical and hands-on, but WebEx is the perfect way for us to heighten our communication with people who are fundamental to our success. It’s a great relationship-building tool,” said Rob.

STIHL’s dealers are excited

According to Rob, feedback from STIHL’s dealers has been fantastic. “They really enjoy receiving the information in a fun and creative way, without having to leave the shop.

“Some of our dealers even make an event out of the sessions. They have a data projector in the staff room, so they’ll bring in some drinks and pizza, and get the whole team together to join the session. This is great because it means we’re overcoming the challenge of ensuring communication at the coalface. WebEx is helping us thoroughly train-up dealers on their product knowledge, which breeds enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is what sells.

“Overall we’ve found WebEx an easy service to use, and the dealers haven’t had any issues either. The team at WebEx have been very supportive of our needs, and are responsive when we need to ask questions,” said Rob.

The Future

The success of STIHL’s online training programs in Australia means the STIHL Group is considering its use in other regions.

“I’ve recently been to Germany to show my technical counterparts in Europe what we’re doing with WebEx locally. I’ve also discussed our training program with offices in Brazil, New Zealand and the USA. They were all really impressed.

“There are plans underway to host dealer training sessions from Australia to other countries, which is something that WebEx will have a role in. These are likely to be pre-recorded training sessions that international teams can access when required. So I can see us expanding the use of WebEx in a big way,” said Rob.