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—Barbara Thompson, Training Manager

USA Funds cost-effectively increases the breadth of its training program with WebEx.



INDUSTRY

Financial services, non-profit

WEBEX APPLICATIONS

WebEx Training Center,
Consulting Services

SUMMARY

In order to train financial aid administrators across the country, USA Funds needed an online solution that would minimize travel costs and maximize the organization’s reach. Using WebEx Training Center, USA Funds has been able to implement a blended training program for highly customized learning delivery. WebEx enables a collaborative learning environment for both trainers and trainees, delivering training materials to a far larger audience than ever before.

ABOUT USA FUNDS

- **Line of Business**
Higher education loans
- **Headquarters**
Indianapolis, IN
- **Number of Employees**
77
- **Target Market**
Higher education institutions, lenders, students, and parents
- **WebEx Customer Since 2003**

Established in 1960, USA Funds® is the nation’s largest guarantor of student loans under the Federal Family Education Loan Program. In association with thousands of educational and financial institutions, the organization has supported a total of nearly \$154 billion in financial aid for 18.2 million students and parents across the country. USA Funds offers training for financial aid administrators through USA Funds University, a service provider that specializes in advising educational institutions on best practices for administering student aid.

The Challenge

For years, USA Funds sent its 10 trainers all over the country to deliver intensive, multi-day training programs on college and university campuses. The training was aimed primarily at new financial aid administrators who needed a comprehensive introduction to regulatory policies and procedures. However, these administrators were often so busy that scheduling events proved a constant challenge. “We were spending far too much time and money trying to meet with all of these administrators on their own campuses,” recalls Barbara Thompson, Training Manager for USA Funds University. “So we took a step back and realized that an online solution would make a lot more sense, both in terms of lowering costs and reaching more people.”

The Solution

USA Funds first implemented WebEx Training Center in late 2004. By 2007, the organization was providing 65 live webcasts to more than 3500 participants over the course of a year. The core of the training program is a semi-annual series aimed at new financial aid administrators, with 16 sessions delivered over an eight-week period. Each session covers a different topic, and the topics shift from year to year depending on changes in the industry.

Thompson recalls that her team was apprehensive about online training at first. “Everyone knows what it’s like to sit through a bone-dry webinar that doesn’t offer any interactivity,” she says. “But as soon as we realized that we could take advantage of all of the interactive WebEx features, we saw that there was a real opportunity to create a truly engaging program online.” In order to help each other acclimate to the new format, trainers sat in on each other’s courses and provided feedback. “It was very much a collaborative team effort,” notes Thompson. “The apprehension didn’t last long.”

Each USA Funds training session begins with a game or activity to warm up the crowd and ensure that all participants are comfortable with the WebEx environment. Due to the high number of attendees for each webinar, the participants are muted during the webcast itself, but they can submit questions via the chat function or provide feedback through quick polls.

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—Barbara Thompson, Training Manager



“I think the biggest surprise for our instructors is that the online training is every bit as interactive as a live classroom setting,” notes Thompson. “We’ve found that a remote session with 100 students can be just as engaging as an on-site event with 10.”

In order to help ensure that her team was moving in the right direction, Thompson brought in WebEx Consulting Services to offer guidance and best practices for the transition to an online training format. “We were taking some real risks in doing such a major overhaul to our training program,” says Thompson. “It was incredibly helpful to have WebEx consultants suggest ideas for making the presentations even more engaging for our attendees

The Benefits

By turning to WebEx, USA Funds is able to send its trainers to fewer on-site training sessions. More importantly, however, WebEx has enabled the organization to implement a blended training program for highly customized learning delivery—all without sacrificing efficiency. “We use the online sessions to cover a lot of the basics,” notes Thompson. “Then we’ll go on-site to follow up with sessions that are geared to a particular school’s needs. Since we can cover so much of the nuts-and-bolts training with WebEx, our on-campus visits are briefer than before.”

WebEx makes it possible for USA Funds to increase its reach as an organization, delivering training materials to far more people in less time. The training sessions are gaining in popularity, too. In 2007, USA Funds increased its number of webcasts by 50 percent, with a 20 percent increase in attendance. “It would’ve been simply impossible to reach this many people through on-site visits alone,” says Thompson. “WebEx has really helped us broaden our visibility and our impact, no question.”

The organization’s trainers have grown to love the online training capability. WebEx not only enables trainers to collaborate more easily, but also enables session attendees to learn from each other through small-group activities. “Online training creates a really collaborative, non-threatening environment,” observes Thompson. “Students aren’t afraid to ask questions because they can just submit them through chat. Instructors can learn from each other through observation. I think everyone’s pleasantly surprised by the rich educational experience that online training makes possible.”

The Future

Besides offering training for new financial aid administrators, USA Funds has started to develop training programs for other audiences, including webcasts aimed specifically at graduate and professional schools. “We’re even talking about doing a series that trains school officials how to train their own students,” says Thompson. “WebEx has made it easier for us to present ourselves as a crucial resource to a growing audience. We’re really pleased about that.”

HIGHLIGHTS

- USA Funds implemented a blended training program for highly customized learning delivery without sacrificing efficiency.
- WebEx makes it possible for USA funds to increase its reach as an organization, delivering training materials to far more people in less time.
- WebEx not only enables trainers to collaborate more easily, but also makes it possible for session attendees to learn from each other through small-group activities.