



# Alpha Parking Seeks to Mix the Perfect Blend

## A look at blended learning

By Penny Winder, Director, Alpha Parking

Mention the phrase 'blended learning' to most people in the parking industry, and you are likely to be greeted by puzzled looks. Although the concept is a relatively new one, it is more than just a trendy 'buzzword' which will soon be forgotten. I believe the time is now ripe to use blended learning, an approach where delegates learn through a mix of different methods and activities; for instance, not just face to face learning but also via techniques such as e-learning and the use of interactive tools.

However the new Government's policies pan out during the latest parliamentary term, we all know that funds are tight and local government, along with the public sector in general, is facing a severe squeeze. Yet standards of customer service and professionalism in the parking industry cannot slacken, and the ongoing training and development of parking professionals remains a legal requirement under the 2004 Traffic Management Act.

So, every pound invested in training over the next five years has to deliver maximum 'bang for its buck'. During the last financial year alone, Alpha Parking has delivered around 77 training workshops, hosting approximately 500 plus delegates, and what has proved most effective is using a variety of training tools and techniques.

It's becoming increasingly clear that a 'one size fits all' approach certainly doesn't work in our diverse industry. From experience I know there is no such thing as a 'typical' training course in the parking industry; we have to cater for a tremendous amount of skills which need to be developed in the most appropriate ways. Examples range from understanding signs and lines to applying legislation and the writing and interpretation of traffic orders.

Trainers and their programmes must be flexible enough to deal with a tremendously varied mix of people, in terms of gender, ethnic background, ages and the different experience levels of the people undergoing the training. Just as there is no such thing as a 'typical' local authority - we've run courses for councils with about 50 CEOs (civil enforcement officers) and the 15 back office staff to support them, as well as training four CEOs and their single member of administrative support at a smaller local authority - there is no 'typical' delegate.

Everyone has different ways of learning and individuals are stimulated and motivated by different approaches. For instance, some people like to learn in peace and quiet while others prefer to take part in interactive sessions. To get the best results, you need a mix of approaches and delivery methods to meet the needs of your audience. Some of these will



employ existing technology such as the internet, to download an 'e-course' perhaps, but often there may be no substitute for face-to-face support and shared experiences.

And there's simply no excuse for training to be dull - your training provider should work hard to really engage the delegates in learning tasks. If the training experience is enjoyable, supportive and varied, people will learn much better!

Another advantage in these financially constrained times is that blended learning can see delegates complete their course at a faster pace. For example, compared to a traditional classroom based course that takes five days, a blended learning solution might cut the duration by two days.

That means CEOs or Notice Processing staff can learn more efficiently, and be back dealing with the public that bit quicker. This benefit could also be applied to other employees such as supervisors and team leaders.

With the new financial year already underway, and training managers again considering how to make their budget go as far as possible, can I recommend a few simple tips?

- Be clear about your objective for the training. What precisely do you want to achieve?
- Assess what methods; courses and learning styles are best for your audience
- Looking at the different types of learning on the market; and don't try to cram in all your courses at once
- Remember to assess what works best for your people. 'Hard assessment' - by which I mean exams and quizzes - should form part of this process.
- Ideally, it is best to build up a long-term relationship with your training provider so he/she really gets to know your organisation, its people and aims over a period of time and can tailor the very best solutions

The latter may sound like a panacea in these difficult times. But given the multiple, complex challenges often facing parking operators today, making the right investment in developing your people is not something to be taken lightly.

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