

Learning Uncut Episode 54
Debbie Key – Low Budget, High Impact – Learning at Forty Winks
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Many of the stories shared on Learning Uncut come from medium to large sized organisations. While listeners often tell me that they pick up something they can apply from every episode, today's story will be especially valuable to the large number of listeners who are in a small learning team in their organisation – or a team of one.

Today's guest, Debbie Key, is the sole learning professional at Forty Winks. They are an Australian bed retailing franchise that was founded in 1984. Debbie joined as the first ever learning specialist 18 months ago. From a standing start of almost nothing being in place and with little budget Debbie has been very resourceful in implementing a learning strategy that absolutely fits the organisation's needs. The highlights of her story include the way she has created engagement with learning by building strong relationships across the business, creating an enjoyable end user experience and working closely with marketing to create the Learning League superhero characters. In our discussion we weave through the example of the Forty Winks Bed Match technology to illustrate the effectiveness and business impact of the learning strategy.

It's a credit to Debbie's work that from a blank canvas and with limited resources Forty Winks has received ten learning industry awards, including being recognised in the top 50 worldwide in Chief Learning Officer magazine's Learning Elite program. Her story demonstrates that you don't need to be big and well-funded to make an impact with learning in your organisation. It's all about resourcefulness, conviction and courage.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome Debbie, and congratulations on the recognition of Forty Winks in the 2020 LearningElite program.

Debbie Key:

Thank you very much, Michelle. It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm delighted to be speaking with you for several reasons which I've run through in the introduction to our guests already, and I know people are going to get a lot of value out of today's conversation. Can we start by getting an introduction to the organization, to Forty Winks? Those of us who live in Australia have probably, at least, seen some Forty Winks stores, maybe even gone into one or shopped at one.

Debbie Key:

I hope so.

Michelle Ockers:

But for our overseas guests, they might not be familiar with Forty Winks. Can you give us some context about the organization, the workforce and the environment that they operate in?

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Debbie Key:

All right. Forty Winks was established in 1984, so we've been going for 36 years. It was a group of independent mattress and bedding retailers that came together and decided that they should join forces in order to get better buying capacity, and through better buying capacity then you can offer better sales, et cetera. There was a small group of stores, off the top of my head I think it's about 15, but now we have 104 stores right across Australia. And we are a franchise model, so we have independently owned stores. They are really family run businesses. Quite often in the smaller stores it is mum, dad, and Mary the daughter and Joe the son that's running the business. And-

Michelle Ockers:

Sorry. I was just going to say, tell us a little bit more about the day-to-day operating environment for these people.

Debbie Key:

It's an interesting retail environment, because we're not a fast-moving consumer good. We're a very considered purchase. It's not something... You don't generally walk into a bedding store and go, "Oh, let me just browse here for a purchase." It's a considered purchase and it's something that people don't do very often. We should all be changing our mattresses every seven and a half to eight years; some people don't change their mattresses for 15 to 20 years, so we don't see our customers a lot.

Debbie Key:

Although, having said that, we've recently done some research and it appears that our customers do come back every two to three years, whether it be... It's not to replace their mattress, but to replace their pillows. Or it might be that a little child has grown into being a teenager and they need a bigger mattress, et cetera, so we do tend to see them a little bit more frequently than what we originally thought. And, as a business, we are absolutely serious about sleep. Our branding is all about making sure Australians get the best night's sleep. And if we can help do that, then, that's what we're here to do. And we're absolutely serious about it, and we've got a sleep specialist in our store who know what they're talking about.

Debbie Key:

They will guide the customer through the purchase because most customers don't know what is in a mattress, let alone what the mattress should be doing, how it should be feeling, et cetera. The sleep specialist will put them on a piece of technology, which is our bed match technology, and that will work out 18,000 measurements later, work out exactly the right support that individual people need underneath them to support them while they're sleeping, because comfort will get you to sleep, support will keep you asleep. And that's the difference between having a good night's sleep and not. We want to make sure they're on the right support. And then we'll walk them through the journey in regards to comfort and what they're comfortable spending.

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Michelle Ockers:

That gives us a good sense of what the business cares about and what the people working in the business care about. You've also mentioned that it's slow moving sales, so people are coming in infrequently. But it sounds like for each person who comes in the staff have to spend a bit of time with them getting the fit right or in making a product selection that suits them. Typically, how many staff would be available in a store at any one time, working at any one time?

Debbie Key:

Look, depending on the size of the store, because obviously we have small stores as against large stores. But there would not be any more than perhaps maybe six to eight people, even in the large stores, working at the busier times, over lunchtime or on a Saturday for example. It's a fairly contained business, and we have stores that operate with simply two employees throughout the day. And, in fact, I've even been into one recently where one person was manning the store, which maybe not be right or wrong in regards to safety measure.

Debbie Key:

But, it's not a fast-moving retail business. It's quite... Reserved, I suppose, is the word to use because we do need to spend that personalized time with each of our customers. And it is quite a personal... It's quite an intimate experience when you go bed shopping. You're not on your own in a fitting room trying on clothes. You're actually lying on mattresses in the open, in the store environment. And that can be quite intimidating for some of our customers. The sleep specialist needs to be quite comfortable with walking people who are not comfortable through the process. And that's where our customer service training needs to be absolutely spot on and help them guide them through the whole experience.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I think understanding that workplace context is really important for people to understand some of the challenges with learning and some of the choices you've made with approaches to learning in the organization. Let's start talking a little about strategy. When you joined the organization, it was about 18 months ago, I understand you were the first learning professional employed in the organization since it commenced in 1984. What was in place with learning at the time that you joined the franchise?

Debbie Key:

Not much. Because of the introduction of the bed match technology, they introduced that about over five to six months before I started, they had received some videos from the provider of that technology, so good old-fashioned American videos. You've got multi accidents happening across those videos, great little short videos, but they placed them on the internet. And they had also been provided with some quiz questions that actually didn't really relate to the information that was in the video, so there was a real challenge for me that I wasn't expecting when I first walked in around the discontent, I suppose, with that first introduction to learning.

Debbie Key:

I keep saying to them, "I wish you'd started me six months earlier. I could have prevented all of that. We could've had a much smoother transition." There was this disregard, I suppose, for learning because of that bad experience that they'd had through the internet. Apart from that, there may have been some sporadic training that happened within stores. Some more innovative and creative store managers or store owners had purchased some training in

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individual stores, but nothing from a centralized perspective. There was nothing that was covering off health and safety, or compliance, or any of those sorts of learning programs; which is absolutely mandatory in business today. And I had a blank canvas to start with.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. What was the brief you were given then, walking in with this blank canvas? What were you asked to do?

Debbie Key:

There was a learning strategy that they had prepared for me prior to starting. And the brief basically was the learning strategy wasn't as learning professionals would put a great learning strategy together. But it was, over the next three years this is what we want you to do. We want you to work on the bed match training and get that embedded into our stores and into our staff members. We want you to create safety training and get that embedded. And we also want you to pay attention to compliance training, so training around an Australian consumer and compliance, and all of that.

Debbie Key:

I was going to say ACCC, but for those international people... Just compliance around you how you can and can't sell things throughout retail. They were the three big things that they had. After that they did have some personal development, and some management development and things like that, but they had put that right to the back end of this strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so it was more like a list of subject areas that they wanted something in place for, rather than anything to do with what sort of approaches, what sort of technology enablement or anything like that.

Debbie Key:

Correct.

Michelle Ockers:

There were a lot of gaps in it from a strategy perspective. What did you do when you started in the role?

Debbie Key:

When I started, the first thing I did actually was I went out to stores and I visited them, but I didn't visit them as the new learning professional coming in. I actually did some mystery shopping. Whilst they didn't know my face and they didn't know who I was, or what I was doing, I just went out there as a customer and I actually experienced what customers were experiencing at that stage. And that was essential for me to actually understand that process and how our team members we're coming across, how our branding was coming across, where the customer service gaps were missing, what was missing in the bed match information, et cetera.

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Debbie Key:

And that could frame up what I needed to do. Once I had done those mystery shops, I did those fairly early on in the journey, I then did some official store visits. I flew over to WA and visited the stores over there in an official capacity. Also, I went up to Queensland and New South Wales and just visited the stores, and conducted the interviews with store owners, store managers and the team members, so getting the three different levels and the three different perspectives of what was needed from a training perspective, which didn't come out with a lot of information.

Debbie Key:

There were certainly some opinions and thoughts about the type of training and how it should be delivered. And being a demographic within the business, particularly in the store owner store manager space of the older male demographic, their thoughts around training was really around you should be doing it face to face and none of this computer stuff; not terribly tech savvy. It needs to be a length of time. If you are going to have to do it on computer, well, it needs to be a good, probably, hour long. But I don't want to pay for a staff member to sit and watch your computer for an hour.

Debbie Key:

There was this 'it should be there, but I don't want to actually support that' type of thing going on. That was happening within the leadership team as well. When I jumped into the leadership team it was, "Guys, we got to think much smaller content." Micro learning was a very new term for them. They didn't believe that you could get information across in short sharp chunks. I had a couple of people slowly come on my team and, slowly but surely, we changed the thinking within the leadership team. And I just kept talking out in the stores around micro learning and the fact that we wouldn't have anything longer than 15 minutes in the eLearning.

Debbie Key:

We would create lots of little, short, sharp topic-specific micro-learning pieces, which they didn't really understand until weeks got them up and running in the system. I was also very big about talking to them about blended learning. They knew that we were going to introduce this e-learning through a learning management system, which I was... At the same time as doing all of this, I was actually doing all of my due diligence about which system we should use, what it needed to have, what I could go without even though I really wanted; and just pulled it all together to make sure that they could get what they needed at the right time. They-

Michelle Ockers:

I'm going to get you to pause there, because there's a ... That was a very rich flow of information, which I thank you for. I just want to move back into that and pick up on a few things that I think are really important to bring out. And one is you spent the time going out into the business and talking to people. I love the mystery shopping, by the way. That's the first time any of my guests has talked about mystery shopping as a way of understanding what's happening in your business, and I really liked that angle. You also spoke about 'my team', and of course you don't have anyone else in your learning team, so I think you're probably talking about the leadership team when you talk about 'my team'. Yeah?

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Debbie Key:

Yes. Yes I was. Yes. My team is me, myself and I; and, Debbie and Deb and Debra, if I need extra bodies on the table.

Michelle Ockers:

All right. Clearly when you entered the business, and one of the things you were doing in those early stages is building relationships, so how did you tackle the challenge of building relationships out in the business with the franchisees and the workforce? And what was your experience with what worked well there, and with some of the challenges might have lied?

Debbie Key:

I went out with a deliberate intent to listen and listen actively but also with empathy. Because when I train anything to do with relationships, whether it be customer service or whether it be management training or whatever, I'm very big on empathy, so I need to live and breathe that as well. And just by stopping and listening to them, regardless of the information that they were giving me, which was... probably the larger chunk was not relevant to what I needed to hear but they needed to say it.

Debbie Key:

It was just about building that respect, and the rapport, and really the credibility. Particularly from a store owner perspective, I was challenged as to my credibility of actually having the position, what made me qualified to be a learning professional, what made me qualified to actually be able to teach them anything. And that meant that I not only had to give them good solid understandings from a learning perspective, but I also had to ensure that they understood that I came from a retail background, that my family still actually owns a retail store. And I'm quite often there on a Sunday afternoon and I am the chief toilet washer. And I'm also... not at the same time.

Debbie Key:

But I'm hanging stock on the shelves, and I'm refolding, and I'm serving customers and I'm putting things through the till and all of those sorts of things. I made sure... And it depended on who I was speaking to as to which way you had to give more emphasis. It was essential, I think, in this particular role that if I had have come in without that retail background, and I've got extensive retail background from a couple of different types of industries, that wouldn't have sold them over. If I had have come in... I've also worked in manufacturing, for example.

Debbie Key:

If I had have come in with just a manufacturing background they would've gone, "You don't know what you're talking about. You've never served a customer. How do you even begin to imagine what we do?" It was about really getting that kudos behind me. And once I had that, the discussions became really easy. They would just... It's not that they were confronting or anything, but they would basically just back down and go, "Okay, well, you're the leading professional. You do what you think is best."

Michelle Ockers:

Did you find the same thing worked with your leadership team? Because your vision for learning was different to theirs as well, right? Was it a matter of did they trust you instantly? Did you have to use any sort of strategies or tactics to influence them to give you some leeway in doing things the way you wanted to do them?

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Debbie Key:

I had to encourage them to give me some leeway in what I knew was going to be the best way of moving forward; because, once again, they were in that older male learning. And this is not to put all older males in that space, but there is that headspace a lot in that age group and demographic where learning is as it was when they went to school back in 1918 and they haven't moved a lot. Particularly if they've been in a relatively closed environment. When I speak to our stores, particularly it's a family owned business so they have grown up in that business and they haven't experienced any outside world. You know? And it's been working, so why break it? Why change it?

Debbie Key:

And sometimes leaders in the leadership team can be a little bit that way as well. I was lucky that my CEO had... He had brought me in. He and I had worked together previously; he knew what I could achieve. He backed me a 100%, so it was just about really creating those relationships within the leadership team and saying, "Guys, we've talked it through, I fully respect your position. But at the end of the day, I'm the one with the learning credentials and you have to trust me." And which they have. And, thankfully, it's all worked out for the positive. I don't have to have that argument anymore. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. I like that you spent time building those relationships, getting some understanding, but you also moved relatively quickly once it was clear that people would trust you to implement the strategy and your vision of learning. What did you set out to achieve? What were the key approaches that you wanted to incorporate into learning in the organization and why? And I think you've given us plenty of context to make those linkages, but let's just summarize that.

Debbie Key:

Yeah. Look, the way the CEO and I talked about it even before starting was that he was very keen to create a learning organization, which is not something you can do overnight. But the first step of that is to create a little bit of a learning culture and to then keep driving that learning culture and living and breathing it through. What I had to do very quickly was to get something into the network that was easy to use, it didn't take a lot of initiative to play with; and it had engaging, exciting almost, way of presenting the learning.

Debbie Key:

I did all my due diligence around a learning management system. I would have liked to have introduced a learning experience platform, but not cost effective at all for us. I had quotes coming in at \$100,000 and it's just not viable for our stores to be able to spend that type of money. I came up with a little LMS that cost us less than \$20,000 a year. It ticks all of the boxes that it needs to tick, even though every now and again I go, "Oh, I wish it would do." There are some things that it just doesn't quite do, but that's only my experience and my knowledge of other platforms.

Debbie Key:

Got all of that up and running. I started in the December, by April I had that all up and running. It had been piloted by the leadership team, and by the state managers, and people within the head office support centre. And a couple of the stores also had trialled that. But to actually launch it to the store network, I sat down with my marketing team, and particularly the graphic designer there, and I said to him, "I want to develop these characters. I want five superhero characters. I want each one of them to represent a category of learning." And

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they each have their own colour. I've got names for each of them. I've got background stories for each of them.

Debbie Key:

And I really gave him some stick figure drawings which were pretty bad. I'm going, "This is what their names are and everything, and see what you can do." And, to my absolute pleasure, he came back with these characters. I took a few iterations, but he came back with these fantastic customized Forty Winks superhero characters that represent our different categories of learning. And each of those superhero characters now drive the learning pathways through our LMS. If the comps goes out and the guys say that it's, and it's got the sleep shadow superhero on it, they know that it's all about sleep and that's what they're going to focus on.

Debbie Key:

If it's purple and its professor tomorrow, then, it's something to do with compliance. It's health and safety, or it's a ACCC stuff, or whatever else, HR regulations and all of those sorts of things. That was really important to me. And I'd love to say that I came up with that concept, but I did... as we all do in this world, I did pinch, borrow, steal, et cetera. I heard about that concept at a LearnX event, which is a conference that's held here in Australia every 12 months. And I heard about it probably about, I reckon, three years ago. Another retailing store had done it, and I had just ordered in the back of my head going, "You know what? At some stage, I'm going to have to do something around this. And I'll be able to pull that piece out and put it together."

Michelle Ockers:

Debbie, we had done one episode on learning in the cut before which focused solely on marketing for L&D. I think it was called Create a Rockstar Brand for Your L&D, and it was with the Ovolo Hotel's Alex Lederer. We'll put that in the show notes to link to people, because I think there are some similarities although the concepts are really different. But I really like the level of detail and attention and thought that went into creating your superhero characters. Could you tell us who your favourite one of the characters is? And just give us a little bit of the back story to illustrate how much thought went into this.

Debbie Key:

All right. My favourite character is the red one, the Developmentor, and I'm pretty chuffed with that name. I spent hours trying to come up with the different names. And the developmentor is all about personal development, so whether it be interpersonal skills or intrapersonal skills, whether it be around coaching and mentoring, et cetera. He came out of a science experiment where he was trying to improve his brain and it just wasn't working. And this mix that he had, all of a sudden as all good superheroes, the story explodes.

Debbie Key:

And he goes into a bit of a coma and he wakes up, and all of a sudden he's got all of this superpower skill where he can just see into people, and see what they're thinking, and see what they're feeling, and where their emotional intelligence level is, and what questions need to be asked in order to move forward in that conversation. He's got quite a special skill. He's the only one of our characters also with a cape, so he does fly at super speed in order to help anybody who needs those intrapersonal skills happening. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

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The characters really personify the area of development. They're almost like the champion and they say something to people about what this area of development is all about as well. Right? They're not just sort of some trivial token thing. They've actually got more depths to them. What was the response in the organization when you launched the LMS with these superhero characters? I believe you called them your learning league.

Debbie Key:

Yes. They're our learning league. They're on the front of the LMS, and then they have their individual areas within the LMS. The catalogue or the library is categorized by the five superheroes and depending on what you want to go looking for whether is it business optimization, or is it compliance, or is it sleep, or interpersonal, or is it... customer service is our last one, they can go very distinctly into those areas depending on their needs. They're also very much a part of the courses themselves.

Debbie Key:

Most of our eLearning micro learning is developed in-house and we use the characters as part of the imagery in there. Instead of trying to find the right photos on Shutterstock or whatever, we actually use those characters. And because I've got a graphic designer, or if there's something that I don't have, he very graciously creates the character in that position for me. We initially introduced them because I didn't have a lot of information on the LMS when it was first launched. I had the level one bed match, and then I had created level two. I introduced them through those eLearning modules. They would introduce the module.

Debbie Key:

They would be at the start of videos saying check out what Dr. Oxman, who's one of our specialists, says around such and such. And then they were very much a part of the quiz questions. The main character who was responsible for the category would be the question asker, and then the other characters actually would give you a thumbs-up if you had it correct. Or they'd give you a 'are you sure you want to answer it that way' if you'd want to try again. We got quite interesting with the no answers or the incorrect answers.

Debbie Key:

And the developmentor is actually quite famous for his no answer, which is where he's got his head down and he's got both of his hands on his head. I think he's spread, going, "Oh my God, really?" 'You answered it that way?' type thing. The guys in the stores they actually, once they got in and started playing with it... We did all the comps. Once they got in and started playing with it, I'm still to this day being told, "You know what? I go through and I get all the answers correct. But then I always go back and I'll try to get the answers wrong, to see if you've caught any new images coming up." And they love to explore, to see what we might've come up with.

Debbie Key:

We try to make sure we change them up quite frequently, so that they're seeing different things. It wasn't all roses though, when I originally launched within our group meetings that this was coming and this is how we were going to do it. Obviously, we're launching to the store owners and this is so far removed from what they had ever experienced from a learning, even a learning thought basically. Very few of them had seen anything on a learning management system, let alone in a micro learning space, let alone characterized by these superhero statues.

Debbie Key:



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It was sort of like, “Are you sure? Really? Come on.” And it was just a little bit of pushback. I have no problems with pushing back and I was like, “Come on guys, who doesn't like a superhero? What's your favourite superhero?” “Oh, Batman.” “Oh, really? Batman. What's yours?” “Superman.” “Oh, so you guys need to talk. Don't you? Because, who wins that argument.” And just set it up so that it was fun and playful. And I think just that type of environment was unusual for them too. They hadn't really gone down that path before as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. You mentioned before that a lot of them were not necessarily comfortable with technology. Do you think making it more fun like that, introducing the characters, helped make the technology feel more approachable and gave them a little more of a nudge to actually get in and try the technology?

Debbie Key:

Yeah, I absolutely believe that that was the case. I think if I had have launched just, “Here's an LMS, jump on, have fun or whatever,” I don't think we would have had the engagement that we have. Because we have got an engagement rate that sits around 92%, 93%; and that's happened, really, from the launch... within four weeks of the launch date right through to the present day and-

Michelle Ockers:

How do you measure that engagement rate, Debbie? What does that represent, that 92%, 93%?

Debbie Key:

Engagement means that they have logged on and they have entered, at least, one program. When we're sitting at 94%... Sorry, 92%, 93% of our 600 learners, that's a fair percentage of them where over 500 people have absolutely logged on. And-

Michelle Ockers:

And it's all voluntary, of course. Right? You don't do mandatory training.

Debbie Key:

It is all voluntary. We have mandated as much as I can... I don't like using that word. We would like all of our team members to complete our bed match training, and we would like them all to complete five health and safety modules, just simply to be able to tick that box if a Work Safe auditor walks into any of the stores.

Michelle Ockers:

I understand.

Debbie Key:

But at the end of the day, from a head office perspective, I have absolutely no influence in that regard. I can't tell any of these store owners what to do. They are all owners of their own businesses, so they are responsible for what happens in their stores. And-

Michelle Ockers:

It sounds like you've got lots of influence but no authority, Debbie. You sound very influential.

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Debbie Key:

Correct. That's a better word. That's a better word.

Michelle Ockers:

All right. Tell me a little bit more about content. It's one thing to have... And we will come back to the platform in a moment. But it's one thing to have these great characters that are attracting people and making it a bit of fun, but of course, you've got to have quality content as well. Using the bed match as an example, you mentioned that there had previously been some videos on the internet and some quizzes, what did you do to either modify or create new content for bed match?

Debbie Key:

What I did was I had to retain the information that was already being used. But what I did was I embedded the videos into the... I used the Articulate Storm as my... Articulate Storm... Articulate Storyline even would be better, as my tool and I embedded those videos into the program. And then what I did was I did basically a reflection piece at the end of each of those videos, so instead of just watching the three, four, five-minute video and then moving straight to the quiz, I've gone, "Here's the video. Okay." The sleep shadow then would come in. She's the character responsible for sleep.

Debbie Key:

She comes in and she goes, "Okay, let's review. What are the three key takeaways from that video? What is it that we do need to remember? There was a lot of information that came out, but these are the important parts." And when needed even going into that information a little bit deeper because in the videos, the videos are very informative and they tend to touch just very top level on a whole heap of things, and just name-drop basically. There are instances where I've gone, "Okay, well, they mentioned this. Let's explore that a little bit deeper so you've got a more thorough understanding before we then head off into the quiz questions."

Debbie Key:

And that has actually assisted the embedding of the learning so much within the team's knowledge. Because apart from the fact that they're not frustrated like they were with the initial concept going out there, but just giving them that extra piece. And, of course, we all know that people learn slightly differently so giving them that extra piece of information and a different way of looking at it, different perspective, it just embeds that learning to a deeper level.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. The videos came from one of your partners or suppliers for the bed match technology, right? They were...

Debbie Key:

Yes. Yes. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. What is done in addition to supplement the micro learning and the quizzes that are part of the micro learning for people to be able to apply their skills and improve their skills using the bed match technology? Because it's a key part of your competitive advantage, right?

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Debbie Key:

Absolutely, yes. It is absolutely a differentiator between us and our competitors. And for those that don't know our stores, quite often our stores have got six, seven, eight, nine, 10 competitors immediately around them on their doorsteps. If we have a customer who gives us the privilege of walking into our stores then we need to absolutely use our point of differentiation, which is our bed match technology, and then guide them through that process. Apart from the eLearning, there was... in each of the modules or all the learning programs that I use, there is always something that they can download whether it be a PDF or whether it be a checklist or whether it be a cheat sheet, a quick reference guide.

Debbie Key:

There are things that they can absolutely download. There's always hyperlinks to other pieces of learning, whether it be sending them off to watch a YouTube clip or whether it be digging deeper into the information. Because, as we all know, learning is quite individual; so those people who just want short and sharp, they're fine with what we put up there, but those people who really want to explore and go deeper into it you need to give them that information. I don't know what type of learners are sitting out there, but there's all types of learners in my stores. And I've got people who are absolutely exploring this to the nth degree, and I've got others who are just ticking it off. Yeah, job done, move on.

Debbie Key:

I've got to have that overall conceptual framework where there's enough for everybody without being too much for anybody. It's interesting when we get into the blended learning programs because I've also, within that timeframe, set up situational leadership on my credited situational leadership trainer where we're running face-to-face workshops. That now can be run virtually. All of those sorts of things are going on in the background as well to support the main pieces of what was originally deemed to be the learning strategy. However, now it's probably just, "We've ticked those things off, let's put a proper learning strategy together."

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah. And the bed match supplier actually does store visits as well. Don't they?

Debbie Key:

Yeah. The bed match supplier does go in, so they've got representatives on the ground. They haven't been into our stores for a couple of months now with COVID, but they are on the ground and they will basically do any face-to-face training that's required. If any of our guys aren't quite sure of the information that they've read about or watched or taken in, that they can definitely ask those reps questions. The guys will also observe what the guys are doing on the floor with the customers and go, "Hey, look, I saw you do this. How about we try it this way?"

Debbie Key:

And if you remember back to the learning, we talked about doing it this way, and this is how this is going to work. This will help these transitions to this particular place." They're on the ground just connecting some of those dots for them, if they haven't quite connected them themselves.

Michelle Ockers:

And I believe the results of the work that you've done, with the learning program and the bed match technology in terms of the business results, that they're quite clear. And that's one of

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the reasons that you did so well in the Learning Elite program, Debbie. Maybe share some of those business results for us and how you know the program's done its job.

Debbie Key:

Yes. One of the big things that we can see is the uplift in our bed match profiling. Before we rolled out the learning, we were lucky to hit 1,000 bed match profiles per month. We really need to be hitting 10,000 bed match profiles per month. Within a couple of months of the learning being available, we had elevated that to 4,000 per month. The elevation is happening. It's still not where we would like it to be, so there's still a lot of work to be done; but just simply having some confidence and some competence out there is absolutely proving the results in our sales.

Debbie Key:

When we uplift the bed match profiles, we also see an uplift in our sales, and we also see an uplift in our average unit value. Sales absolutely correlate to the bed match profiling. And the average unit value of our goods increases because we're not guessing at what support the customer needs, or we're not listening to the price the customer wants to pay so much. We do but there's a point; that we need to get you on the right support so let's talk about support first, then let's talk about your comfort preference, and then let's talk about price. And in that process the customer actually realizes that they need to pay a little bit more to get the right support underneath them.

Debbie Key:

That increases our average unit value, which is super positive for the stores because we are traditionally a bricks and mortar business so our foot traffic... If you look at our foot traffic over the last couple of years, it has been going down. We've got some pretty heavy competitors that are purely in the online space. And we are cognizant of the fact that you can sit at home on your kitchen bench and just order something to come to you. And we need to ensure that the experience that the customers have, when they give us the luxury of walking into our stores, is absolutely the best experience that they can ever imagine.

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Debbie Key:

Following the process that we've put in place, having people who are competent and confident about using the technology, and then guiding the customer through that process absolutely ends up with very positive results.

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. Thank you. There's one other area I'd like to dig into a little bit, which I think there's some good lessons for people to take away, and that's around technology. And, of course, we've already spoken about the fact that you actually had no budget for technology, for learning technology, when you started but you managed to secure some budget for the strategy you had created. And we will share a link in the show notes if anyone's interested in what the LMS was that you actually ended up choosing. But, of course, there's always a trade-off. Right? What did you discover, or what did you find, worked well with the LMS? What areas were there, perhaps, some shortages? And what did you need to do about that?

Debbie Key:

All right. The LMS looks super easy from an administration point of view, to set up and get going. And from a user perspective, and I'm very conscious of that end user perspective, really, really easy. Really easy to get into. And then once you're in there, it's super simple to get around. That, to me, was gold. From an administrative perspective, once I started to lock things down... I needed an LMS that I could actually have each of my stores locked down so that store A can only see the information for store A, as against looking into store B's information. Obviously, those people who own store A, B and C can see across all three stores, but it needed to be locked down.

Debbie Key:

Individual stores were actively responsible and held accountable for the learning within each of their stores. That was all fine. It all set up beautifully. We'd piloted all of that, no problems. And one of the features that I was very excited about was the discussion forum. Here I was going, "Okay, let's lock everything down and then in level two of bed match training let's open up discussion forum. We'll ask them a really interesting question and get them to talk across the country around what they're doing and how they're answering this question." I did that... And I need you to discover to my absolute horror that in locking down each of the branches that locks down the discussion forum as well.

Debbie Key:

And you should have heard me go and speak to the help desk going, "Are you serious? Do you actually understand what a discussion forum is? You don't lock it down to a branch. They can talk to each other on the floor. Come on, let's be real here." But that wasn't their view. And I'm sort of, "God, I'm stuck. What am I going to do? This changes my entire thinking, and formatting, and how I'm going to roll this program out." Never to be caught in a difficult place, I just got my curious out. I love being curious and I can quite often end up in rabbit holes, but I had to make sure I kept on target with this and find a way around this.

Debbie Key:

Now, one of the things you can do within this platform is to insert iframes. And I hadn't had a lot of experience in that, but I explored that option and went, "Okay, well, this is interesting. If I could come up with a discussion forum that I could insert as an iframe, well, then maybe that's problem solved." I then thought, "Well..." I remember using WordPress years ago when it first came out, so I went to WordPress and I had a look around and I set some things up; and thought, "Okay, this is fun." And it's relatively cheap, WordPress. I created a

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discussion forum, stuck it in as an iframe, and all of a sudden I've got a discussion forum where 104 stores can interact; and went, "Okay, this is great. Fantastic."

Debbie Key:

We've got all of that happening. My CEO - love him to bits. He responds to every single person that has left a comment on the discussion forums so that they know that somebody is reading them and somebody cares enough to actually... And he writes back very personal comments to each person. That is gold, absolutely gold. And we're actually seeing more and more multiple responses and interaction happening across the country now. Instead of just getting stuck in the box that the LMS helped desk had very kindly pushed me into, I made sure that I banked my way out of it and had something that would achieve the purpose that I wanted it to achieve.

Debbie Key:

I still would like to see the change in the learning management system. And I have sent the information back to them that this is the way around; that, guys, you might want to maybe share that with others who fall into this trap. But they're not keen to change their setup at this point in time. That was a really big challenge that didn't quite work out the way I had a plan.

Michelle Ockers:

I love the way you were really resourceful, and just tinkered with it, and got hands on and figured out a solution. And I think, for me, one of the key points that comes out of your story is that you can do a lot on a budget if you're willing to think outside the box, be a little resourceful, try things, and you don't have to sacrifice user experience. You can find ways to protect that as well. Well done on the approach you took there. I really like it. Debbie, looking back over the past 18 months, what do you think went especially well, and why?

Debbie Key:

I think the engagement piece really is the part that has made a difference. We've been very privileged to win 10 awards over the last 12 months, none Australian and one international, and all of the awards talk about that engagement piece effect. I have a working relationship with our marketing team. It is one that I will not forego at all, because between us we've got all of these interactive skills. And I can draw on their skills as much as they can draw on my skills, and we're now sharing those skills across the two departments. And, in some ways, L&D could sit just as easily under marketing as what it does under our HR component.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm just going to pause you there, because what's really interesting is that other example I referred to before, the Ovolo hotels example where they had the really amazing brand for their Learning and Development team, they reported in to the Marketing Manager.

Debbie Key:

Yeah. Yeah. There is so much synergy between the two functions, and where you can draw on those resources absolutely use them. Because the guys, they love doing whatever their niche is so bring that to the party. My stick figures would not have got the engagement that Richard Superhero designs have actually got, so... Yeah, keep it... Whatever you do when you're talking about that engagement, you got to keep it fun, make sure you communicate. And communicate consistently with that message so that there is that link, and that relevancy, and that almost immediate connection when you're 12 months or more into the journey.

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Michelle Ockers:

What have been the most significant things you've learned along the way, Debbie?

Debbie Key:

I think there's always a workaround, and never get stuck in that corner. As I said before, I love getting curious, but I tend to tuck it away when I get into the nuts and bolts and then the nitty-gritty. But, it's a fantastic place to be. After having that experience, I deliberately set some time aside every week where I can just give myself that opportunity to be curious and stay... I wouldn't say that I stay in front, but definitely stay informed and know what's out there and know what's potentially possible. Because you just never know when you might be able to weave something into what you're doing.

Debbie Key:

And it doesn't have to be overly complicated or expensive, so always... always there's always a workaround. And the other thing that sticks with me over this experience is that in past lives I think that I haven't necessarily stood up for what I believe in as much as I have in this particular journey. And I think standing up for what you believe in, having that trust and confidence within your own self and capabilities, is absolutely essential to be the difference that you can be within not just the organization but in that end users experience. Because if I had have stepped back and allowed some of the things that others desperately wanted to have happen, we wouldn't be where we are.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Conviction and courage are vital, aren't they?

Debbie Key:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

To everyone listening to Debbie's story today, thank you for joining us. At the time we're recording this episode, we're still in the midst of physical distancing due to COVID-19, and people are more open to adopting new approaches as a result of where we find ourselves. Now is the perfect time to be looking for stories and case studies or practices that have worked for others, such as yours Debbie at Forty Winks. Thank you for sharing that work with us. And, for our listeners, please take a look through the full catalogue of episodes for more great examples to draw upon and figure out what you might be able to adopt and adapt right now.

Michelle Ockers:

Also, take a moment to rate the podcast and leave a review comment wherever you're listening to it. It does help get our wonderful guest stories out to more listeners. Debbie, thanks again. I'm going to include a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes, if anyone would like to get in touch with you to find more out about anything that you've discussed today. Thanks so much for sharing your work and insights with us.

Debbie Key:

Thank you, Michelle. It's been an absolute pleasure.

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About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events. Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

- *Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of learning and development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*

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