Honda’s Latest Model:  
Training That Drives Lifetime Customer Loyalty

By Julie Straw

To help strengthen—and deepen—customer relationships, Honda overhauled its training with the help of iPads and DiSC.

Keeping customers coming back for more is a mark of any successful business. In the automotive industry, where brand devotion can be erratic, customer loyalty is especially important. Today’s car manufacturers are driven more than ever to retain customers, and the smartest industry players know that customer satisfaction does not equal customer loyalty.

Satisfaction is about meeting expectations; loyalty is about relationships. This fundamental principle led the parts and service group within American Honda Motor Company to radically shift the way it trains service and parts managers, service advisors, and parts counter employees. These employees—the people who greet customers at the parts counter and in the service drive with, “What can we do for you today?”—are the face of Honda, interacting directly with customers during the time they own their vehicles. Their ability to build positive relationships with customers is key to
short-term customer satisfaction and
to the greater goal of lifetime customer
loyalty.
Honda knew it could boost customer
loyalty by making revolutionary changes
to its training program. Rick Kramer,
national manager of dealer development
at Honda, and Marian Proffer, assistant
manager of fixed operations training,
assembled a team to make the vision
a reality. The team included Terry
Coates, president of 16/10ths Develop-
ment Corporation, a training and
development company specializing in
behavioral assessments; Matt Bown,
Honda’s instructional designer; and
automatik, an instructional design firm.
Together they developed a new program
that is being rolled out to more than
1,000 U.S. Honda dealerships.

**Personal styles drive results**

Honda’s previous training program, a
three-day class in interpersonal skills, was
built on a traditional classroom model:
lecture, paper, pen, and workbook. “It
was pretty conventional,” says Kramer.

“An instructor-led workshop with limited
interaction [and] a book you might never
open again—if you could find it.”

Understandably, employees were
calling for a better learning experience.
Surveyed participants said they wanted
much more interaction and better
resources to use outside of training,” says
Proffer. “The only thing they wanted us
to retain was the DiSC style.”

The old curriculum had used a paper version of
the DiSC behavioral style assessment, and while participants valued the tool,
the team knew it had to become more
interactive.

With these insights and challenges
top of mind, the team created a more
dynamic and participatory training plan,
one that uses new technology and makes
the behavioral style assessment a vibrant
core component by using the latest third-
generation Everything DiSC Workplace
Profile. The new four-part training series
was called “Building Lifetime Customer
Loyalty,” or BLCL.

BLCL was both bold and necessary.
“The automotive industry’s been chasing
’satisfaction’ for years, but ‘satisfaction’
doesn’t get you what you want—people
coming back,” explains Coates. “That
takes a serious focus on human
communication and relationships. The people at
Honda stuck their necks out to make such
a radical change to what had been done
in the past. It’s nice when that risk pays
off.” And pay off it has.

Moving from paper to electronic assessments
via iPads makes it easy
for participants to
immediately apply their
results to what they’re
learning in the classroom.

“People love it. We’re getting glowing
comments not only from the dealer
network but from our district parts and
service managers, and zone manage-
ment teams as well,” says Proffer. “They
believe what they’re learning is going to
really help them be much more effective
in relating to their staff and their
staff relating to one another. We’ve
even had dealers that want to deploy it
organizationally.”

Honda launched the first BLCL
class, “Establishing the Relationship,”
in April 2012 at the start of the com-
pany’s fiscal year. In the first quarter
of the program, a team of facilitators
conducted 151 workshops with an aver-
age of 22 participants in more than
50 U.S. cities. The momentum continues
as subsequent classes in the BLCL series—
“Branding the Relationship,” “Growing
the Relationship,” and “Cementing the
Relationship”—are rolled out quarterly.

Honda created a customized, Flash-
based curriculum. A voice-over with
on-screen graphics is used to review key
information, providing an alternative
to traditional facilitator lecture. In addition,
the behavioral style assessment creates
a rich, personalized experience for each
participant.

The curriculum uses the profile to help
individuals understand their personal
behavioral style, which is a combination
of four tendencies: dominance (D),
influence (I), steadiness (S), and conser-
ventiousness (C). Far from simply labeling
an individual’s style and placing him in a
box, Everything DiSC Workplace demon-
strates that the various styles have much
to learn from one another and serves as a
reminder that everyone exhibits “shades”
of all four styles.

The behavioral style assessment is a
fitting curricular foundation for BLCL,
says Proffer. “They’re learning about
themselves and what makes them tick.
They’re also learning how their behav-
ioral style affects others and how styles
interact,” he explains. “Once you know
yourself and how you affect other people,
you can adjust and personalize every
interaction with each customer. This
builds a solid foundation for trust, which
is the basis of customer loyalty.”

Employees said they not only
intended to use what they learned from
the profile to improve their relation-
ships at work, but also in their personal
lives. Take these comments, for example:
“I have been using what I have learned
every day since, in and outside of work,”
and “I have found the methods to be very
helpful and I will continue to use them in
both my professional and personal life.”

**The only papers in class
are the nametags**

Eager to create a more engaging, stream-
lined, and contemporary learning
experience, Proffer and the team began
a process of elimination that makes it
clear—from the moment participants
walk through the door—that this will not
be a typical training session. First, there
are no tables. Instead, participants see
only chairs arranged in a horseshoe with
the room divided into four quadrants, one
for each behavioral tendency.

As participants find a seat, each is
handed an iPad. There are no books,
papers, or pens. After familiarizing them-

selfs with the technology, participants
use the tablets to read about the four
behavioral tendencies. They are then
asked to choose which behavioral style
they believe they are and to move to the
corresponding quadrant on the floor.
After interacting briefly with classmates
about their predictions, they return to their seats and, using the iPad, complete the full DISC assessment.

Each person’s results are delivered immediately on the iPads and “that’s when all these epiphanies start happening around the room,” says Proffer, who conducted many of the first BCL classes. “Within 15 minutes, the temperature of the room has shifted from closed individuals to open, sharing, and enthusiastic attendees needing and wanting more,” describes Kramer, who also has attended sessions. “And when it ends, it’s like they don’t want to leave.”

Moving from paper to electronic assessments via iPads makes it easy for participants to immediately apply their results to what they’re learning in the classroom. They also can easily email notes to themselves for later reflection. The response to the technology has been overwhelmingly positive, says Coates. And the shift from paper to electronic has created efficiencies as well. By enabling participants to take the assessments and view results on iPads, Coates and his company created a process that simplified profile distribution and Honda’s record keeping while decreasing costs. Workshop facilitators no longer need to record attendance and the company no longer needs to print participant workbooks, handouts, or rosters.

**Training down the road**

To provide continued access to resources and support outside of training, Honda also created an online mobile learning environment where participants can access the tools they used in class through their smartphones, tablet computers, or PCs. “Being a very environmentally conscious company, this shift follows our brand philosophy,” says Kramer. It also ensures employees have ongoing access to the knowledge and tools—access that will help Honda achieve its objective of converting satisfied customers into lifelong loyal brand ambassadors.

“Given this opportunity to rewrite what training should look and feel like, based on what we’ve done and how it’s being received, I think we’ve accomplished and even exceeded our goal of delivering a learning experience that doesn’t feel like a learning experience to most. It’s huge,” says Kramer. “Participants want more. They want next steps. They want to go deeper and deeper in using this learning.”

Proffer agrees. “People are engaged. They’re talking. They’re sharing ideas,” he says. “It’s just really exciting to see it all come together.”

**Julie Straw** is vice president of channel sales for Incapsule Publishing, where she works with a network of independent trainers, coaches, and consultants; jsstraw@incapsuledpublishing.com.

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