



# E-learning for Independents

Online training is a cost-effective way for independents to complement their in-store instruction.

By Laura Hawbaker

**W**ith high-speed Internet connections now commonplace at the office and home, online learning has come of age, delivering tremendous benefits for independent retailers looking to complement their existing training programs.

Because of this, companies that offer online training — like the IGA Coca-Cola Institute and its non-IGA affiliate, the Retail Learning Institute — have seen attendance steadily increasing. As of 2010, the IGA Coca-Cola Institute provides online training for 2,700 stores and more than 26,000 students worldwide.

“The knowledge is out there, right at your fingertips,” says one institute user, Terri Anderson, a store manager at a Houchens in Burkesville, Ky.

In working with the Institute, Houchens has access to a library of more than 70 food industry-specific courses, including Cashier, Grocery Stocker, Meat Apprentice, Food Safety and Sanitation, Managing People, and Customer Service, that employees can access either at work or at home. All that’s needed is an Internet-accessible computer. The institute also offers a social network through which retailers can exchange ideas and access training guides.

Because materials are online, they’re updated every day and incorporate feedback from all users, which means that they tap into the collective knowledge of a vast community of retailers from around the world.

According to Paulo Goelzer, PhD, president and CEO of the institute, this is imperative to successful e-learning. “Our learning management system allows individual contributions to become a part of the training, and we encourage this by offering monthly gift card prizes to contributors,” he says. “This helps establish an interconnected web of retailers.”

## A Complement, Not a Replacement

This doesn’t mean that online training should replace more traditional training practices; rather, the Internet should be used to enhance and streamline in-person training. Goelzer believes e-

learning can elevate training quality when implemented correctly into existing on-the-job approaches.

“As an observer of the food retail industry, I often see trainees — typically new employees — learn by either watching experienced workers or by performing the job themselves in an unstructured, illogical and nonsequenced way,” says Goelzer. “In many cases, the experienced craftsman in charge may not have the necessary coaching skills, so training turns into an unplanned activity. Imagine if that craftsman planned their protégé training, and also supported it

with online courses that provide basic information for the function, for example, for a cashier who wants to know what a UPC code is.”

In addition to providing structure, online training helps independents save on costs. In April 2010, Martin Cox, owner of Hindman, Ky.-based Cox Food Group and general manager Jeff Lutes launched a mandatory companywide training program using the institute’s online courses to keep expenses down.

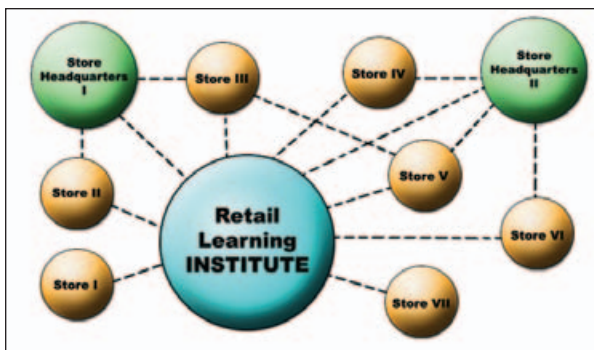
Online training isn’t limited to entry-level employees, though: The

institute’s courses can be tailored to employees at all levels. Real Value IGA Supermarket, an 11,500 square-foot store with 175 employees in Grenada, West Indies, has a policy requiring all employees — even managers and middle management — to enroll in at least 10 online courses, which are incorporated into its existing on-the-job training platform.

Real Value uses online training as a part of an overall blended approach, or learning that combines different methods. Goelzer says this is the most successful approach, because “training is more efficient by combining different delivery modalities. Adding another training method to an existing one has a significant impact on learning results.”

Among the most important benefits of online training is the empowerment it can give employees. According to Paul Crawford, the project coordinator of Olsens IGA Marketplace in Ajo, Ariz., “Employees who completed courses felt the spark of learning, accomplishment and pride in their jobs and in themselves.”

For more information on the institute’s learning programs, visit [www.retaillearning.org](http://www.retaillearning.org) and [www.igainstitute.com](http://www.igainstitute.com). ■



The Retail Learning Institute enables grocery associates to improve a range of skills over the Web.

*Laura Hawbaker is an editor at the IGA Coca-Cola Institute, a people development organization founded by IGA (Independent Grocers Alliance) with the support of the Coca-Cola Co.*