For more than six decades, SMUD—the Sacramento Municipal Utility District—has been providing its customers with reliable electricity at affordable rates while also taking steps to curtail reliance on carbon-based fuels. More than just a supplier of electricity, SMUD gives back to the community in ways that make life better for all who live and work in the Sacramento area.

The Challenges

“Having training be just adequate” is not a phrase you’ll ever hear at SMUD—and you’ll most certainly never hear it uttered by Karen Sutherland, of SMUD’s Software QA and IT Training group. Her work in compliance training is a case in point. “It takes a lot of hard work,” Sutherland admits. “And if it takes us a couple of extra weeks to get that extra bit of input we need for a truly outstanding training result, that’s okay; we’re not going to settle for less than a homerun. We owe it to our customers to maintain their information in a safe and secure manner, and we owe it to our employees to enable them to do that.”

Sutherland recognizes that effective employee education is a building block in achieving compliance behavior. So in 2007, she and SMUD’s Information Security Officer outlined a vision to bring a new level of compliance awareness to the organization. Their objectives were fourfold: “First and foremost,” Karen explains, “We wanted to change behavior.”

Secondly, they sought to involve SMUD’s many internal organizations in the initiative. “We support the business units,” Sutherland says. “We’re not in a position to tell the business units what they need; we ask them what they want. At the same time, however, we want to be proactive in identifying any compliance gaps; we want to get out in front of potential problems and provide information early. That’s an imperative for the organization.”

Third, “The training needs to be fun,” she explains. “And I don’t say that lightly. The training needs to be engaging. It needs to really capture people. The bottom line is the more creative we can be with the material the better it will be for the business units and our objectives overall.”

Lastly, the training has to be relevant to the learner. “We have nearly 2,200 people at SMUD, comprising a very broad audience. We rec-
Recognized early on that the training needs to be tailored to employees’ roles. That is, it can’t be talking accounting language to a person who is in customer service. That’s important not only to the employee, but also for getting the individual business units on board. It needs to speak their language, addressing their actual responsibilities in ways that are relevant to them, with information that is also very SMUD-specific, as opposed to being generic.”

**The Solution**

After issuing a comprehensive RFP for a compliance training solution, Sutherland and the team began the task of evaluating the responses. To score the proposals, they developed objective criteria, with each evaluation element weighted by its relative importance. “There were mandatories that everybody had to have in order to move forward in the process,” she explains. “It was a six-month process. We ranked them by overall score, considered the pricing, and then made the decision to go with MediaPro.”

With vendor selection settled, it was time to “turn the instructional designers loose” on the project. Their job: to make compliance engaging.

SMUD’s guiding fourfold objective was realized through best practices rooted in the principles of adult learning, which are based on the “ARCS” model: attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction—qualities the training must instill if it is to be effective. SMUD places a particular emphasis on relevance and the ability to change employees’ behaviors—but doing so in a way that puts the learners in control. “If I have a recommendation, my best advice regarding training is to let people work through the material at their own speed and in their own way. Give them control over their learning experience. Many training programs force a linear progression through the material. That is, you can’t go from one screen to another unless you’ve completed the preceding one. Some compliance people say they want to prove to the auditors that everyone completed the training, so they put people through that forced linear process. I think that says something about the culture of the company. If you have a culture of trust, you’re going to conduct the training in a very different way.”

Sutherland was convinced that flexibility within training materials would yield higher completion rates—and superior results. “You have to care about the people taking the training,” she says. “You want them to enjoy the experience. In some organizations the training is not engaging; people hate it and try to find ways to get around it. But if you design it in a way that respects people and their preferences and the experience they bring to it, they’ll actually look forward to it. When you sit at your desk for an hour, going through this kind of information, it very well better be engaging!”

The bottom line, she explains, is to simply do what you believe is right. “As far as best practices go, we just don’t know how else to say it: we target the end user in a relevant way, we design the course to be engaging, and we want it to be fun. And if you just reach out to people, tell them what you want to do, why you want to do it, and explain the benefits, they’ll be supportive.” That the SMUD awareness training course was also recognized with an industry award was an extra bonus: “We didn’t know any different. We just wanted to hit a homerun, and that’s what we did!”

In designing the course, SMUD leveraged existing content in MediaPro’s area of specialty, information security, and
working with MediaPro’s instructional designers, customized the material according to SMUD’s very specific objectives. “That process went a long way,” she recalls, “not only in terms of developing the subject matter, but in how to deliver the training in the most effective way. It was a very positive experience.”

To keep the content fresh, SMUD updates the content once a year. “We reach out to the subject matter experts in the various business units for the kind of changes they want to see, and we also change things up a bit so that the material doesn’t become stale. We believe reinforcement elements need to be coming from the subject matter experts themselves. That keeps it relevant and credible within their respective departments. It makes a positive difference.”

**The Results**

So just how effective has the compliance training initiative been? “From a risk management standpoint,” Sutherland answers, “we’ve not had any escapements. In fact, this program has positioned us well to preclude any type of escapement that may occur. Moreover, people have called in with questions about situations and events related to the training content. They’re concerned. They’re reaching out and asking questions and being preventive. And that’s what we want. We actually observe the behaviors; we can see that they have changed.”

In the end, SMUD’s goal is to make a positive difference to the business units. “I think we have been successful,” she summarizes. “We’ve received a lot of compliments. Also, every three years we get audited and we have to produce evidence that the training was executed and that people completed the class satisfactorily. I used to be an auditor, so nothing surprises me. The auditors were noticeably impressed with the training, and that it made it easy to see how committed SMUD was to compliance.”

**Taking a Holistic View on Metrics, Objective and Subjective**

By going beyond mere compliance, SMUD is seeking to instill additional skills. Has it worked? A brief review highlights the outcomes:

- Demonstrated active interest and engagement with compliance issues
- Observable positive changes in compliance-related behaviors
- Successful audits

As to business outcomes, despite the operational and budget challenges that come with an increasingly complex regulatory environment, SMUD has maintained its position as a progressive leader in the utility sector.

**About MediaPro**

MediaPro is nationally recognized for producing award-winning, Web-based security and privacy training solutions that reduce risk by improving security-aware behaviors. Our best-of-class awareness materials will help you safeguard your customer data and protect your business assets. In addition to training and reinforcement products, MediaPro also develops custom data protection and compliance courseware. MediaPro has won over 100 prestigious awards for instructional excellence and its products are used by the most security-conscious companies in the world.