

5 Keys to Building a Distribution Network to Grow E-Learning Revenue

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Summary: Learn how a powerful distribution network can offer vast potential for e-learning growth that is beneficial to your association and to resellers, with some examples from the American Heart Association, which built a global network of healthcare e-learning for its CPR and first-aid education program.

When it comes to e-learning, there are three measures of success for associations:

1. Have we successfully created a set of e-learning courses that meet the needs of our members?
2. Are current members aware of and taking advantage of our e-learning offerings?
3. Have we leveraged our e-learning programs to get in front of new learners and potential new members?

This third measure of success—expanding e-learning to new audiences—is often overlooked; a distribution strategy is not considered during the planning phase. But, without a growth strategy beyond the “four walls” of current membership, an association’s e-learning business will not reach its full potential for growth.

There are five keys in growing the reach of an association’s e-learning program, whether through partners, resellers, or other distribution networks. One of our clients, the American Heart Association (AHA), has been able to grow a global network of healthcare e-learning by utilizing some of these important strategies.

1. Know Your Audience and Make It Applicable to Them

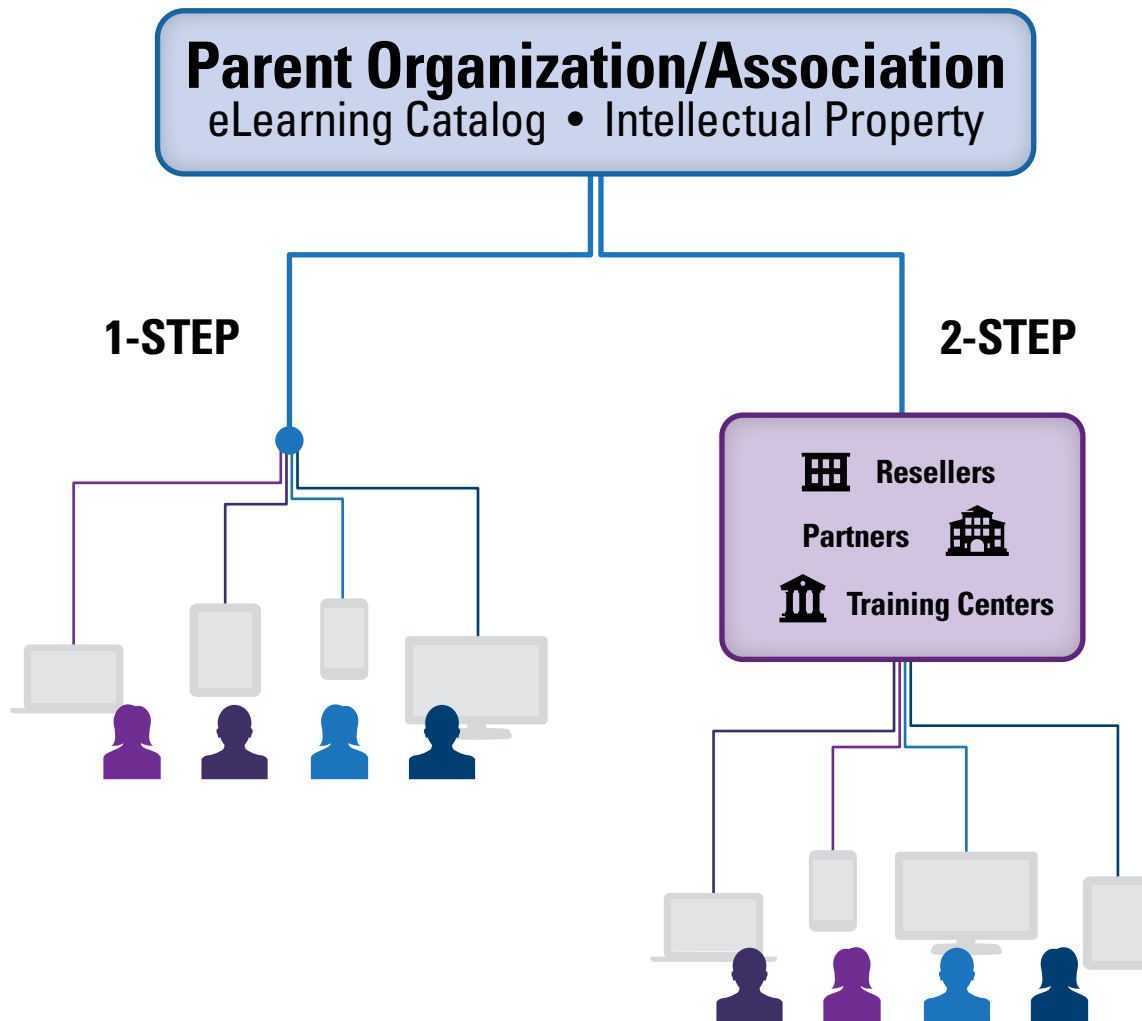
How do you plan on expanding and broadening the reach of your e-learning beyond your direct member network? For AHA, it was very important to get out in the field with its target CPR and first-aid learners and the training centers or resellers that reach these audiences. Our mission was to get the partners excited about the new AHA blended e-learning courses. Pilot programs built buy-in with key thought leaders and influencers in the target market. The more excitement you build on the front-end, the more champions you have in the field.

In order for an e-learning course to take hold within a broad network, think about making it practical and local. For AHA, CPR training had to be one part online learning and one part in-person hands-on learning; it had to be applied learning.

Also make sure you can localize learning. In the case of international training, there are legal and regulatory considerations, taxation challenges, and of course, the need to offer courses in other languages.

2. Build a Business Model That Shows ROI

Growing a distribution network takes quantitative research on the cost savings and revenue potential. It's important to illustrate the cost savings from on-demand, online learning. But you also need to show the revenue potential of having a two-step business model: selling online courses via business-to-business or reseller networks and selling directly through consumer channels. In other words, find ways to show the organizational ROI for your training.



Graphic #1: A successful distribution strategy allows associations to sell their online courses via business-to-business/reseller networks and/or direct through consumer channels, opening up eLearning to new learners, as well as potential new members.

Source: Scient, Inc.

3. Build a Win/Win Distribution Program

Growing an e-learning distribution network means your partners need to see the relationship as a win. Develop a compelling pricing model with margins that allow resellers and distributors to make money. Give distributors tools to support the marketing and sales efforts associated with your products.

4. Make It Easy on Your Network

Not only do your partners want to make money, but they also need to feel that reselling your e-learning doesn't require a heavy technology implementation or workforce burden. Use distribution technologies that don't require your partners and resellers to have a learning management system (LMS).

For AHA, it was also important to have an efficient system for distributing course access to training centers and an administrative tool that allowed organizations to manage and track their learners (who purchased a course, who has taken and completed an online course, who has been certified, and so on). These management tools provide a measure of independence to your distribution network while ensuring consistent and effective training.

5. Focus on Your Strategic Mission

Oddly enough, the key to an effective e-learning distribution strategy is to not spend too much time or money on e-learning—unless it is your primary organizational mission. E-learning business growth takes sales and marketing, technology, and (often overlooked) a customer support team.

The logistics of developing and managing an e-learning network could quickly overwhelm your staff, costing you in terms of lost opportunities, poor outcomes, and a wounded brand. Determine, ahead of time if possible, what portion of your channel network development and the resulting business requirements you want to incur as an expense versus outsourcing those functions.

In the end, an e-learning program should be sustainable with a continual revenue stream for your organization. Too often we see associations offering e-learning to members for free, for a nominal charge, or without a growth plan. The price of e-learning should represent the value of education to the learner, and a distribution strategy allows you to offer that product to a world of new learners—your potential new members.

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