Best Practices for Creating, Credentialing E-Learning Programs

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Providing online certifications can boost your association's nondues revenue, mark you as an expert in the field, and provide greater value to your members. These best practices can help build high-quality e-learning content.

E-learning programs are worth the extra time and effort required to create them because they provide benefits to both an association and its members. If an association is tapped into its membership needs, such certificate or credentialing programs can offer greater value to members through lifelong learning and critical knowledge steps.

And because these programs command a greater investment on the association's part, they should be priced accordingly for sustainability. When marketed properly, the content can open new revenue streams and attract new members.

With most associations offering a discount for members to take their courses, credentialing can also be a cost-effective way for members to continue their education and gain credibility in their profession. It is a clear way for them to highlight their expertise, build their reputation, and enhance their professional profile.

However, associations that are creating e-learning programs for industry professionals may want to consider undergoing the process of having a third party credential their e-learning content. Doing so can enhance an association's reputation, establish it as an expert in the field, and give the e-learning program credibility.

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Credentialing e-learning content and building certificate programs—especially if your association is in the early stages of online learning development—can be a complex and arduous process. Even those who have valuable content to offer may be deterred if they aren't familiar with the scope of the work needed to succeed.

Creating Credential-Worthy Content

Keep in mind that creating e-learning content requires a keen understanding of the body of knowledge and core competencies of the topic presented, and demands a higher level of instructional design and content development expertise. You must also have the technical tools in place to effectively and efficiently present and distribute the online content in accordance with the organization that is credentialing your course.

In addition, don't forget that this is premium content. Consider the investment, audience, and sustainability objectives when you develop your certificate program, so it can create a nondues revenue stream.

Here are some best practices for creating e-learning content that will earn a third-party credential:

1. Begin with an eye on the end. Beyond a deep understanding of the topic or skill covered, there is additional paperwork involved in the process of credentialing e-learning content, so it is important to map out detailed tasks and timelines before starting. Meticulous planning will help keep the project on time and on budget. Some example steps include disclosure of any relationship between the author and your association or the accrediting provider and gathering copyrights, sources, and citations.

2. Conduct a needs assessment. What gaps will the course fill in your industry? This can be anything from a knowledge gap to new guidelines that need to be presented to your members. Spend time on the front end identifying the discrepancy your course can address, then build your e-learning content accordingly.

3. Create learning objectives. You wouldn't embark on a cross-country road trip without first identifying a route to take. In the same way, you should map out detailed learning goals and objectives. Identify your main learning objectives and obtain input and buy-in from key internal stakeholders. Once these goals are agreed upon, everything from assessments to subject matter and e-learning tools can be tailored to support those objectives.

4. Select the right authors. Before creating premium content worthy of credentialing, select the right contributing authors or subject matter experts to collaborate with. The expertise and reputation of the faculty is paramount to driving learners to your content.

5. Request feedback. Many associations work long and hard to successfully create online certificate programs, but then fail to close the loop with member and non-member learners who experienced their course. It is vital to the ongoing success of your e-learning program to seek participant feedback. Armed with this information, your association can make data-driven decisions about current courses and future endeavors.

6. Be honest about resources. Lastly, be honest with yourself about your association's available bandwidth to successfully create certificate programs. Building and credentialing an e-learning course requires many steps that you may not be able to accomplish with your association's current infrastructure, expertise, and staff. If you don't have the resources for tackling this project in-house, consider partnering with an external team who can collaborate in support of your effort.

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