3 Simple Steps to Starting an Online Learning Program
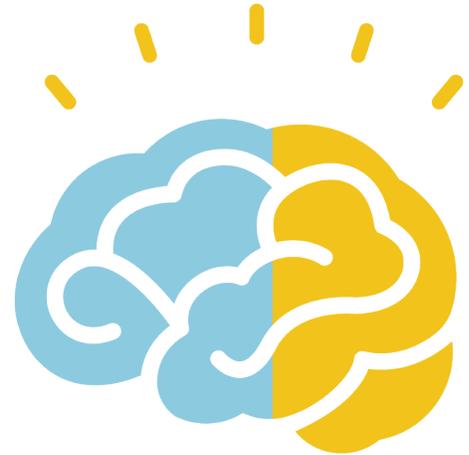
How to Leverage Your Resources to Enhance Member Value

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Why launch an online learning program?

Administering an online learning program — whether it's simply granting access to certain resources or helping with industry-specific certification — has become pretty popular among associations. And for good reason!

Your members and the industry at large already consider you an expert, and you already have tons of valuable content that they want. Plus, there are a number of ways such a program can easily make an impact on membership value.

Getting started on a new initiative, though, is tricky. We understand! It can be pretty overwhelming when you think about the big picture. But, we're willing to bet that you're already set up for success and you don't even know it...

That's why we put together this guide. In this guide, we'll show you that starting your online learning program is a whole lot easier than you may think. (And, we'll give you some tips for using it to strengthen the value of your membership.)

Let's get started!

You HAVE the resources, and the means for creating more, it's just a matter of building a learning program that's digestible and meaningful for your learners. (Members and non-members! More on that later.) Here's how:

1

Get your content in order

Make a list of every single resource you already have — videos, whitepapers, eBooks, webinar recordings, blog posts, etc. — and where the file is located. Doing a comprehensive audit will give you a good idea of what you have to work with. (And not only that, but it'll be inspiring, too. Just look at all that content you've already created!) Then, start to build out your program by creating categories based on that list. For example:

- **Helping your learners earn credit toward an industry certification?** Your categories might be similar to the certification requirements.

- **Creating a simple content distribution system?** Perhaps you categorize by topic, role, or career level — or all three.

- **Creating your own accreditation program from scratch?** Categories are totally up to you!

As you can see, these categories are really dependent on your organization's goal for starting your online learning program. Once that's defined, and your content is audited, you should be well on your way to having your program spelled out.

Now that you have a good scope on your existing content, do you notice any information gaps? Brainstorm a couple lists of resources that would complete each category: one of your immediate needs and one of the "nice to haves" you can work toward later.

Tip: Your association's events are one of your most valuable sources of content. If you aren't already, consider looking into videography services that can capture that value to be distributed later. (Doing so could help fill in any information gaps, too.)

2 Find a platform to host your program

A truly beneficial online learning program needs to be administered through a learning management system, or LMS. Keeping documents on your computer and sending them over email isn't going to cut it! Using an LMS will create a refreshing, polished experience that your learners will want to return to again and again.

Don't fret! Finding the right platform should be simple if you keep three things in mind:

- **Focus on ease-of-use, for *everyone*.** For your learners, you'll want a platform that loads quickly, is easy to navigate, and matches the look and feel of your website. And for the administrator (aka, you), look for something that'll easily manage content, grant/restrict access to certain groups, and track a learner's progress.

- **Look at it as a means for generating revenue.** This should be a cinch as long as it can differentiate learner access between members and non-members. You'll attract more members by adding it to your benefits package and earn non-dues revenue with paid access for non-members.

- **Finally, you want to partner with a technology provider that is known for excellent customer service.** They are a partner, after all — they should be ready and willing to help build out your platform quickly, give their expert advice, and continue supporting you as needed after you're up and running.

3 Spread the word! Your program is ready to market

Woohoo! You've developed your program and found a platform that'll make administering it easy as pie. But your work isn't quite done yet. Now you need to tell people!

- **Announce it on multiple channels.** Social media, your newsletter, in person at events or meetings, through email, even direct mail — include an announcement in the channels members engage with most. An online learning program is an exciting benefit, so don't be afraid to go all out.

- **Put it on your website, front and center.** Your homepage is another spot you should make your announcement. But after that initial message is taken down, your content should still be easy to access from the homepage. That makes for a great member experience and shows the program off to prospective members who are researching you!

- **Take advantage of word-of-mouth.** Once your program has a few active learners, you can start leaning on them in a number of ways: create testimonials about their experiences, highlight their accomplishments in your various channels, incentivize them to promote your program to their network outside of the organization, etc.

Strengthening Membership Value

Just by reading and thinking about these steps, we're sure you can already see the major impact that an online learning program would have on your membership. To really kick it up a notch, consider these tips:

1 **Create a community.**
Don't just set it and forget it! Whatever your program's purpose, foster community activities among your learners: get program thoughts and feedback at meetings, encourage study groups — anything that'll inspire collaboration and discussion.

2 **Make it work with your benefits structure.**
Offering free access to your online learning program as a member benefit is a no-brainer for strengthening your membership value as a whole. But, if your organization offers multiple levels of benefits, consider how you would strengthen each package by only granting access to certain membership levels.

3 **Think professional growth.**
Many members join associations intending to get the tools that'll set them apart and advance their careers, so creating some kind of certification to associate with your program will really give membership value a boost.

If your members already work toward a certification, don't worry — there's additional value to be had for them, too! By formalizing your certification process in an LMS (step 2), you'll be giving them a way to easily do the necessary work, and visibility into their progress every step of the way.

4 **Stay up-to-date.**
Block off some time on your calendar every six months or so to revisit your program's content. Accuracy and relevancy are key for maintaining an exceptional learner experience.

5 **Diversify the types of resources.**
People learn in different ways, so you'll want your library to include a variety of ways to absorb information: eBooks, videos, live webinars, articles, etc. You may even

consider taking one piece and using the information to create another. (Record a voiceover of eBook for those who prefer podcasts, for example.)

6 **Solicit guest content.**
As long as it aligns with your association's goal for your online learning program, adding new voices to your resource library can help keep it fresh. Look to your members and industry experts for contributions.

7 **Talk it up to the industry.**
Your online learning program will inherently strengthen your reputation in the industry. That said, don't be afraid to talk about it, and even see if you can get some of the major players to promote it.

8 **Take a cue from Netflix.**
Netflix is known for recommending content based on what you've already viewed. Keep your learners engaged with your platform by doing the same! It should be easy to come up with a few suggestions for each resource.

And just like that, you're on your way to creating an online learning program that members will benefit from for years to come!

The step that will probably take the longest is finding an LMS to host your program. And that's just because you'll want to do your research! Allow us to get your list started (and maybe even finished): **Introducing MC | LMS, the full-scale Learning Management System from MemberClicks!**

Backed by a proven association technology provider, MC | LMS is built to help associations easily deliver valuable content and streamline the certification process.

Click here to learn more!

More about MemberClicks

MemberClicks offers all the tools that membership organizations need to make the most of the web. From online databases and event registrations to custom-designed websites and member communities, our products are tailor-made for professional associations, trade associations, and chambers of all sizes.

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