

yourmembership[®]
.com

INDUSTRY TRENDS
**E-LEARNING: THE EVOLUTION
CONTINUES**

E-Learning: The Evolution Continues

Written by Sara Cameron May, Association Laboratory

INDUSTRY TRENDS

Over the past few years associations have pursued e-learning activities for a variety of reasons--and with varying levels of success. That's what I've discovered after researching for three years what e-learning project teams are doing to manage their programs better.

Most recently, during the first half of this year, I interviewed educators and technology staff at almost 40 associations. Based on those conversations about key business practices, here is an overview of what executives have experienced up to now, what they expect in the future, and how they're adjusting accordingly.

Registrations have not kept pace with expectations.

As one executive said, "Three years ago we expected thousands; now we expect hundreds." Nevertheless, program organizers plan to maintain a presence with e-learning simply because they believe it is the wave of the future. They anticipate an eventual "e-learning flip-flop," a time when most members will have used technology all their lives and will expect to use it for professional development.

In addition, even though there may be little or no short-term profit from e-learning, associations expect a payoff in the long term because their staffs will learn to produce e-learning programs more effectively even as members learn to use them more efficiently.

Associations that hire vendor-partners are screening them more rigorously.

Because associations want to create strategic partnerships with vendors that can deliver today and tomorrow, selecting the right vendor has become an art form. In short, associations are considering vendors that can?

- prove their financial stability,
- offer a strong track record in providing the required services,
- assure the client of their compatibility with existing technology,
- understand the unique association environment (complete with its volunteer committees and celebrity subject-matter experts), and
- offer the services of super-talented instructional design staff who can work magic within the required parameters.

Associations that rely primarily on staff rather than vendors are realigning and reprioritizing their internal resources.

The really good news is that in high-performing associations, the old silo approach has been replaced with truly integrated staff teams.

When I first started conducting best-practice research three years ago, associations recognized that live courses need meeting planners, educators, and registration and accounting staff, but they failed to see that successful e-learning demand the same attention.

Now, top leadership is charging staff teams from all functional areas with ongoing responsibility for e-learning's success. These groups report having daily one-on-one communication and regular face-to-face team meetings supplemented with constant e-mail to keep everyone working together.

Associations are putting more stock in good planning.

In addition to allocating staff and fiscal resources to e-learning initiatives, association leaders want a business plan that articulates the specific strategies the staff team will undertake and keeps staff, top leadership, and volunteer committees on the same page.

E-Learning: The Evolution Continues

Written by Sara Cameron May, Association Laboratory

Unlike strategic planning documents that gather dust, the new business plans are living documents that make expectations and responsibilities clear. Each association's plan may look different--and most staff members still feel they're far from finding a perfect business model. But successful e-learning initiatives are built, as much as possible, upon a solid business foundation.

The e-learning educator is emerging as a strong leader and taking on a far more assertive role.

Sound adult education theory has always been considered essential for effective e-learning. But now vague generalizations have been replaced with a quest for e-learning strategies that, in early evaluations, seem to foster actual learning. ?

Pioneering e-learning educators have had to master such diverse fields as Internet-based learning, instructional design, and educational technology. They're now emerging as a cadre of exceptionally well-informed technological learning specialists.

Associations understand more about their current e-learning audience (especially in contrast to how little they knew about early adopters).

Three years ago, when many educators I studied relied upon traditional, generic "member need" surveys to determine interest levels, they often got false readings. As several executives told me, "Everyone said they were interested, but no one came." Prospective users couldn't accurately predict their preferences or their participation in e-learning because they had so little experience with it.

Today, association educators understand more because they've had experience working in the trenches and talking with actual customers. The new research approach is much closer to specifically targeted market research than the old-style association surveys were.?

In the marketing arena, the most successful e-learning executives have become very savvy about product design.

To make their e-learning programs more attractive, they're offering must-take courses, such as those required for credentialing, and subjects that speak directly to the customer's bottom line. To make their program formats more appealing, the trend is toward "simple and safe," using technology that the learner can easily master and that the staff can definitely support. And to ensure success, many associations are combining easy-to-use, engaging formats with superior customer service and a strong emphasis on quality products and technical support.

The overarching marketing strategy is to create satisfied students who return for more courses. Although associations are watching completion and satisfaction rates closely, their real measure of success is repeat business. But an ongoing source of marketing frustration is course promotion. So far there is no reliable substitute for the traditional--and expensive--print-based approach?

INDUSTRY
TRENDS