



INDUSTRY TRENDS
**ASSESSING THE FEASIBILITY OF
DISTANCE-LEARNING STRATEGY**

Assessing the Feasibility of Distance-learning Strategy

Written by Dean West, FASAE, Association Laboratory

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Traditionally, associations relied on event-based strategies to both educate their members and provide significant net income for association operations. Recently, though, event-based income has suffered a serious decrease for many associations. As a result, these organizations are attempting to pursue a portfolio-based strategy for both educational and financial reasons.

A key component of any portfolio strategy is distance-learning methodologies. Unfortunately, distance-learning methodologies are not appropriate for all associations. Optimally, distance-learning strategies should be integrated into the overall professional development and product/service mix of the association.

The following briefly describes issues to consider when assessing the feasibility of a distance-learning strategy for your organization.

Market

The first step in assessing the feasibility of any new strategy is to review your target market and determine the market's acceptance of your potential new strategy.

Assuming you're educational curricula is appropriate for distance-learning methodologies you must assess the following:

- What is your target market's access to the technology necessary for distance learning?
- What is your target market's knowledge of the existence of different distance-learning methodologies?
- What is your target market's acceptance of different distance-learning methodologies?
- What are the key features of distance learning desired by your target market?

You cannot conduct online distance-learning programs, for example, to individuals that do not have access to a computer. Furthermore, you must understand the education necessary to make your target market aware of and accepting of distance-learning methodologies. This awareness and acceptance is vital to their decision to buy.

In a recent study conducted by eBrain Market Research, the actual awareness of a sample of online consumers of different distance-learning methodologies was relatively low. For example, only 52 % had heard of online education via streaming video. The study demonstrated that actual usage of distance-learning methodologies was also quite low. Yet, actual interest in distance-learning methodologies was relatively high.

Do not make assumptions regarding the awareness and acceptance of distance-learning methodologies based on your own experience. You must conduct accurate, quality research into these areas if you want to truly understand the true market potential.

This study also identified convenience and price as the two key features considered by consumers when evaluating nontraditional educational delivery methods vs. traditional classroom education. If you're association cannot provide distance learning in a convenient fashion and at a price competitive with other educational options, the difficulty in developing a successful distance-learning strategy is reduced.

Once you have analyzed your target market and assessed their awareness, acceptance and ability to participate in distance-learning methodologies, you must now identify the relative value of this market for pursuit by your association.

Consider the following questions:

- What is the size and growth trend of your market universe?
- What is the size and growth trend of your specific target market?
- Is your market geographically centralized or decentralized?
- How familiar are you with the educational needs of your target market?
- What is the demographic and psychographic profile of your target market?

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Only by clearly defining the size and value of your market and creating a profile that accurately describes their educational needs and demographic and psychographic makeup can you effectively determine whether or not a distance-learning strategy is potentially successful.

Competition

When developing distance-learning products you must consider your competition in order to develop appropriate positioning strategy.

You will probably face both direct and indirect competitors. By understanding the existence and relative strengths and weaknesses of these competitors you can determine pricing and promotional strategy to most effectively introduce your distance-learning products to your target market.

Consider some of the following questions:

- What is the prevalence of competition within your identified target market?
- What are the marketing, financial and staff resources of your competition?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of their individual product line as it relates to professional development?

Remember that competition also includes your existing association’s educational product line. Review the markets for your existing products and attempt to identify the potential level of cannibalism.

Finally, remember you also compete with traditional classroom education options. Your distance-learning product must provide features and benefits that cannot be readily reproduced in the classroom setting.

Product

The nature of your distance-learning product will influence the feasibility of a distance-learning strategy. Not every professional development topic is appropriate for a distance-learning arena.

First, your distance-learning product should specifically satisfy a unique market need. You must clearly understand what particular problem you are attempting to satisfy. This knowledge should be used to craft a specific curriculum that can guide the identification and selection of content experts.

Second, the content area should be such that it easily translates into the distance-learning environment. The distance-learning arena may not necessarily be the optimum learning environment for what you are trying to teach. You must select educational content that can be appropriately translated into this arena.

The struggle for many association educators is not in designing and broken educational product but in creating a product that fulfills strict business criteria. Unfortunately, given the economic needs of many associations, if association educators cannot demonstrate the ability to craft programming that meets strict business criteria, they may not be able to justify the allocation of staff and financial resources to their priorities.

About the Author

Association Laboratory is a national consulting firm that specializes in the research and development of marketing and organizational strategy, including professional development, for associations. Dean West, FASAE is Vice Chair of ASAE’s Professional Development Council and an association executive with 15 years experience in association management and consulting.