



THE BUSINESS OF LEARNING:

A GUIDE FOR ASSOCIATIONS



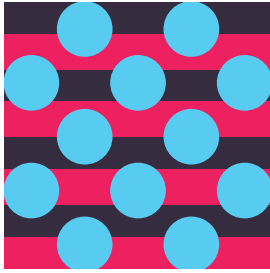


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INTRODUCTION



Online learning has become a critical driver of revenue, member engagement, and purpose for associations and professional organizations. Online learning creates opportunities to reach more and different members, enhance the learning experience, and achieve business goals. Even associations with established online learning programs are reimagining their education offerings in response to new technology, increased expectations of personalization, and greater member demand for flexibility.

Whether you're just beginning to map an online learning strategy or are hoping to elevate your existing offerings, careful planning and diligent execution are key. In this guide, we draw on the experience of the Alliance for Academic Medicine (AAIM) to offer 8 steps towards starting a successful online learning business.

DELIVER GREATER VALUE WITH BLENDED LEARNING

Blended, virtual learning offers members more flexibility, personalization, and dynamic engagement that delivers greater value and an enhanced experience.

Blended online learning typically mixes **synchronous** and **asynchronous** learning.

Real-time, synchronous learning allows members live access to instructors, recognized experts, and other participants. In a virtual classroom with interactive tools, the experience can be highly engaging.

Self-paced or asynchronous learning allows members to engage when they can make the time and space to do so. This at-their-own-speed option can add more depth to the learning experience.

Microlearning is a type of self-paced learning that offers short, bite-sized chunks of content for mobile learners. Associations are experiencing success offering subscription libraries of microlearning to their members.



A CASE STUDY: STARTING AAIM'S ONLINE LEARNING BUSINESS

The Alliance for Academic Medicine (AAIM) promotes advancement and professional development through education, research, engagement, and collaboration. The association's members are academic professionals who are preparing the next generation of internal medicine physicians and leaders.

OBJECTIVE

AAIM was in pursuit of an online learning strategy to grow non-dues revenue, extend their reach, and offer members more flexibility and opportunities for development.

Leaders at AAIM engaged Forj as consultants and partners to evaluate their readiness for online learning, help them define their goals, and map a process for implementation.



SOLUTIONS

The partnership culminated in the design of AAIM's first online offering, a blended course for internal medicine education administrators. Forj supported AAIM by coordinating:

■ An environmental scan and research.

Rigorous research yielded insights that paved a clear path to AAIM's online learning strategy. The research uncovered that AAIM's membership is roughly 25% non-physicians and 75% physicians. However, higher turnover occurs among administrators than physicians. This solidified the decision to develop the Education Administrator course vs. a Physician Program Manager course.

- **Processes for content development.**

Passionate member volunteers and experts played a key role in the development phase of AAIM's online learning business strategy. Leveraging a community-driven design process helped the association land on the right balance of theory and real-world content.

- **Selection of an online platform.**

AAIM emphasized content over technology but knew they would need a system to support their new curriculum. Together, Forj and AAIM identified requirements, evaluated providers, and made a selection. The Forj LMS now organizes the course, while Zoom handles live sessions.

The work culminated in a dynamic, blended curriculum that kick-started AAIM's online learning business and surpassed expectations.

OUTCOMES & INSIGHTS

AAIM launched their new online learning business with a course that met previously unmet needs, fulfilled a gap in the marketplace, enhanced learner engagement, and grew non-dues revenue. On their way to doing so, the association gained key learnings:

- **Take a product development approach.**

AAIM approached their online learning strategy with the same rigor an organization might use to

develop a new product. That mindset resulted in useful data and critical insights. For example, focus groups revealed that members have more time to devote to professional development at some times of the year than others. They also created a flexible pricing model that matched the professional development budgets for different roles.

AAIM'S FIRST COURSE
EXCEEDED THEIR
REGISTRATION TARGET BY

8X

- **Prioritize content over technology.**

Perhaps counterintuitively, AAIM elected not to choose an LMS before determining their content strategy. Different systems have different capabilities, and it was important to decision-makers that learning objectives—and business goals—come first.

- **Use existing data.**

AAIM used existing conference evaluation data to help shape their course development. By examining responses to questions about the type of content AAIM should offer, they correctly identified a topic that was in demand among membership.



8 STEPS TO BUILD A SUCCESSFUL ONLINE LEARNING BUSINESS

STEP 1 UNCOVER OPPORTUNITIES AND ASSESS READINESS

Research must inform your online learning business strategy. Analysis of the external and internal environment will help you identify target audiences, uncover their needs, and understand market trends to find gaps your course can fill.

- **Conduct a competitor analysis.** If you want to keep pace with—or leap ahead of—the competition, it's important to understand what others offer. And remember that your competition isn't just other associations. Consider all the places members may seek knowledge, from search engines to AI platforms.
- **Analyze your current content types and topics.** Your existing content may carry a wealth of insights into members' needs. Which articles are the most read? Which events are best attended? Which topics trend in their online searches?
- **Facilitate focus groups.** Gathering input from members or potential members via focus groups can yield both information and inspiration. You'll learn how they think and feel about options you put on the table, and they may share ideas you haven't yet imagined.
- **Create member personas and learner profiles.** Member personas and learner profiles can help you identify needs, wants, and goals more precisely to create offerings that inspire greater engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty. Personas highlight the resources your members need, the experiences they desire, and the problems they want to solve.



STEP 2 DEFINE OBJECTIVES AND SET GOALS

Each association needs a beacon to guide the development of their online learning business. Setting clear objectives with all stakeholders will ensure goals are aligned, milestones are mapped, and development stays on course. Here are a few examples of objectives that your online learning program might meet:

- **Increase revenue.** Online learning can be a strategic tool to generate additional revenue that supports your operations, funds new initiatives, and provides valuable resources and education to members. Subscriptions, course fees, content sponsorship, partnerships, and affiliates create new revenue opportunities.
- **Increase reach and expand membership.** Online learning allows you to reach a global audience, increasing your impact. Making learning available to a wider audience can inspire membership growth by reaching would-be members located in different regions or unable to attend in-person events or courses.
- **Improve learner outcomes and the member experience.** Online learning can (and should) be designed to meet specific needs, which results in a personalized experience that can improve learner outcomes. The dynamic nature of online learning can also help you build a stronger community and increase overall member engagement.



STEP 3 DEVELOP A SOLID CONTENT STRATEGY

They say content is king, and developing your online learning business proves it. Creating and curating high-quality, custom content demonstrates an association's value by delivering learning relevant to the needs of your members – whether early career, mid-career, or expert.

- **Promote blended learning.** Combining synchronous and asynchronous modalities allows learners access to content in multiple ways. Collaborating with peers and interacting with instructors enhances their experience and expands their development.
- **Encourage social learning.** Learning is a process with a large cultural component. You can easily offer members opportunities to learn through independent activities, but it's a much richer experience to create a cohort and enable them to embark on the journey with others.

AAIM IS A TRUE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN WHICH A MEMBER MIGHT BE A LEARNER AT ONE MOMENT AND A TEACHER AT THE NEXT. THEY APPROACHED THEIR FIRST ONLINE LEARNING PRODUCT BY COLLABORATING WITH PASSIONATE MEMBER VOLUNTEERS, LEVERAGING THEIR EXPERTISE TO BUILD CONTENT THAT WAS “JUST RIGHT” FOR THEIR AUDIENCE.



- **Design microlearning.** Bite-sized, easy-to-consume learning allows members to focus on specific skills or knowledge areas. It's especially helpful for busy professionals, alleviating time and location constraints, offering flexibility, and giving members greater choice.
- **Incorporate certificates and badges.** Gamification—using features like points, levels, and badges for learner recognition—can encourage engagement and inspire healthy competition in some learning scenarios.

HOW TO ADVANCE YOUR CONTENT DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Content is core to an association's value, but the development process can be onerous. A collaborative partnership between staff and member volunteers can be the key to your content conundrum.

Many associations have started to work with member experts more systematically. Unlocking the expert's halo has helped them transform the content creation and delivery process and build online learning businesses to generate additional revenue opportunities.



STEP 4 SELECT SUPPORTING TECHNOLOGY

It may seem counterintuitive, but the selection and implementation of an LMS should follow your learning content strategy. Different systems and platforms have different features and support different objectives.

■ **Integration with your technology stack.**

Creating a seamless learner experience requires some level of integration between the LMS and your current tech stack. This will create a more seamless experience for staff and members and can add up to time and cost savings. Think about how the system might talk to your AMS, CMS, e-commerce software, and more.

■ **Support for your strategy.** When your online learning business strategy relies on blended and social learning, a system that supports multiple

modalities in a single course is a must. You may also want to search for a system that supports multiple pricing models, allowing flexibility between subscriptions and on-demand purchases.

■ **Meaningful data analytics.** The data that lives in an LMS can offer valuable insights to help you assess how well you're meeting your objectives. Plus, data analytics will help you give members a more personalized experience by serving up learning that is most meaningful to them.

STEP 5 CHOOSE A PRICING MODEL

An online learning business can be used as a strategic tool to meet your revenue goals. Selecting a pricing model that aligns with your goals—and suits members' needs—is critical to success.

- **Subscription-based.** With subscription-based models, members pay a recurring fee (usually monthly or annually) to access learning. This pricing model is commonly used by associations with multiple courses and a wide range of content.
- **Pay-per-course.** With pay-per-course models, members pay for each course they take. The price may vary depending on the content and type of instruction. This pricing model might be used for in-demand “featured” courses or courses on specific topics.
- **Tiered pricing.** With tiered pricing models, members have the option to pay for different levels of access to learning. For example, you may charge a lower fee for basic access to a course and a higher fee for premium access that includes additional materials, assignments, or support. This pricing model offers members choice and flexibility to match their budgets.
- **Bulk purchase.** If your association sells education to corporations or other organizations, a bulk purchase model offers a solution allowing them to purchase course registrations on behalf of their employees.

AAIM USED “EARLY BIRD” PRICING TO BUILD BUZZ AROUND THEIR COURSE AND INCENTIVIZE MEMBERS TO ENROLL BEFORE THE PRICE INCREASED. 50% OF PARTICIPANTS TOOK ADVANTAGE OF EARLY REGISTRATION.





STEP 6 CREATE MEMBER-CENTRIC MARKETING STRATEGIES

Targeted outreach and relevant messaging will raise awareness of and attract learners to your online learning business. Your efforts to understand your target audience will lead to more effective and influential campaigns that use the right channels to reach the right members with messages that resonate.

- **Get the message right.** You worked hard to get the topic, audience, format, and timing right for your course. Use the insights you gained during the research and development phase to capture the attention of the members your course was designed for.
- **Promote the course where members are.** From email to social media to print, you have multiple channels at your disposal for course promotion. But rather than relying on habit, give careful consideration to member communication preferences. For example, are there upcoming events or relevant listservs you should leverage?

AAIM SPOTLIGHTED THE COURSE ON THEIR WEBSITE, COORDINATED A TARGETED EMAIL CAMPAIGN TO POTENTIAL LEARNERS, CREATED PROMO VIDEOS, AND ENGAGED SMES AND MEMBER VOLUNTEERS IN PROGRAM ADVERTISING.

- **Lean into member connections.** Some of the most successful marketing occurs via word of mouth. Ask your SMEs and course contributors to tap into their networks and talk about the course with potential participants and decision-makers who hold the professional development purse strings.

STEP 7 FOSTER LEARNER SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

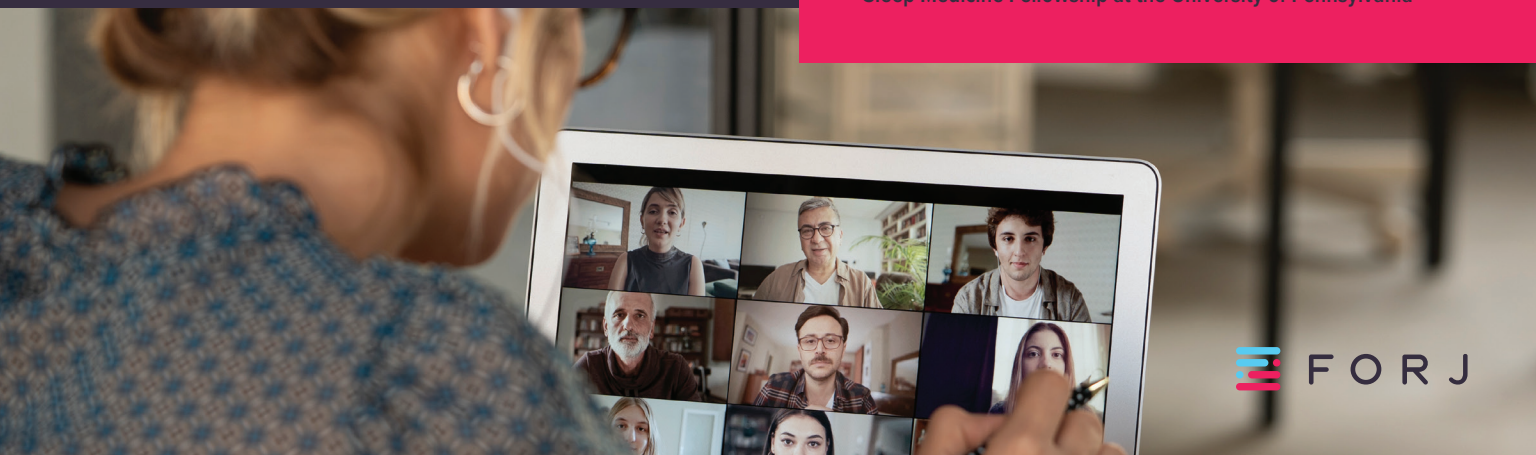
You've built and launched a well-thought-out and comprehensive online learning program and are eager to welcome your first participants. One of the essential elements of success is providing learner support and fostering deep engagement—for the duration of each course and beyond.

- **Foster learner interactions.** Creating synchronous learning opportunities allows members to benefit from the community's collective expertise. Learning directly from peers and member experts creates a sense of community and collaboration that enhances the overall learner experience and value of the course.
- **Offer content beyond the “classroom.”** Pairing coursework with on-demand resources extends members' learning and advances their development. Deliver value outside their time spent formally learning with downloadable resources that help them on the job and serve as just-in-time tools.
- **Incorporate mentor opportunities.** A lot of learning takes place peer-to-peer when students find themselves in need of real-world answers from someone with similar experience. A cohort format or adjacent mentoring program encourages networking and advances community learning.

I WAS IMPRESSED WITH HOW PANELISTS AND INSTRUCTORS WERE WILLING TO SIGN UP AS A MENTOR AND BE AVAILABLE TO STUDENTS IN THE “ASK THE EXPERT” DISCUSSION FORUMS ASYNCHRONOUSLY.

- STEFANIE CORDOUE

AAIM contributor and Program Administrator
Sleep Medicine Fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania





STEP 8 EVALUATE AND ADAPT

During the first run of your course—and with all future cohorts—it's critical to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of your online learning CE business. Continual evaluation empowers you to make data-driven decisions to adapt and optimize your programs for long-term success.

- **Seek learner feedback.** Collect and analyze learner feedback using surveys, focus groups, and more. Input from participants can provide valuable insight into what they appreciate or dislike about the course and how you can improve the learning experience.
- **Leverage member expert input.** Involving member experts in ongoing development allows for the continuous improvement and iteration of course content. Experts can provide feedback based on their experiences to identify areas for improvement and updates, ensuring the course remains relevant and provides ongoing value to learners.



AAIM RECEIVED
OVERALL
POSITIVE FORMATIVE
(DURING DEVELOPMENT) AND
SUMMATIVE (POST-LAUNCH)
EVALUATIONS FROM LEARNERS.



- **Use LMS data.** Your LMS will come equipped with a range of analytics tools to help you track and evaluate the performance of your online courses. From tracking learner engagement to evaluating assessments, the data can provide valuable insights that may lead to changes and enhancements.
- **Monitor market and industry trends.** Staying abreast of challenges, interests, and requirements in your industry will help you keep your online learning current and create added value for participants. Regularly reviewing offerings from other sources will also help you keep pace with—or get ahead of—the competition.



PARTICIPANTS IN AAIM'S COURSE REPORTED THAT THE OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE IN COURSEWORK WITH PEERS AND MEMBER EXPERTS GAVE THEM PREVIOUSLY UNFELT PERMISSION TO TALK ABOUT THEIR JOBS AND EXPLORE SOLUTIONS TO THEIR CHALLENGES. ONE EVEN SAID IT WAS "LIKE WANDERING IN THE DESERT AND FINDING AN OASIS."

CONCLUSION

Building a successful online learning business requires careful planning and diligent execution. From identifying your target audience to establishing a process for ongoing development and adaptation, each step is critical to the success of your strategy.

- 1 UNCOVER OPPORTUNITIES AND ASSESS READINESS
- 2 DEFINE OBJECTIVES AND SET GOALS
- 3 DEFINE A CONTENT STRATEGY
- 4 SELECT SUPPORTING TECHNOLOGY
- 5 CHOOSE A PRICING MODEL
- 6 CREATE MEMBER-CENTRIC MARKETING STRATEGIES
- 7 FOSTER LEARNER SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT
- 8 EVALUATE AND ADAPT

Following these steps can help you create a dynamic learning experience that meets the needs of your members and contributes to your association's goals in learning and education, member experience, and revenue growth. With the right approach, your online learning business has the potential to become a valuable resource for members and a strategic tool for your association.





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON FORJ.AI

[4 STEPS TO DEVELOP MEMBER PERSONAS](#)

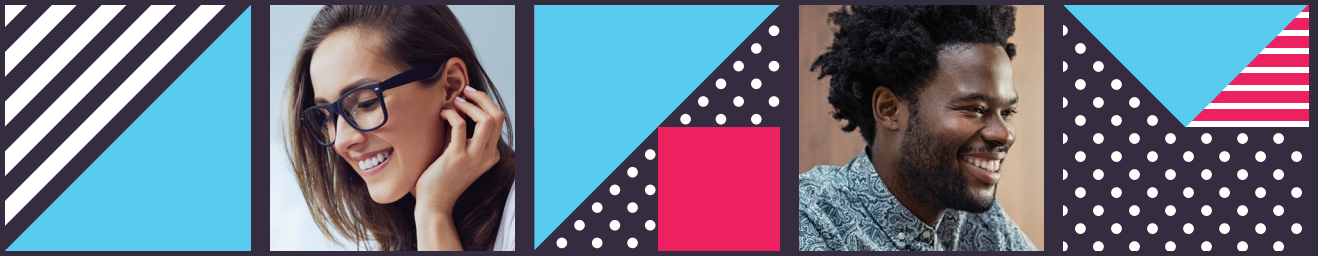
Member personas can be a powerful tool to uncover what influences members' wants, needs, and decision-making. Those insights can equip you to create a member experience that drives revenue, retention, and engagement.

[UNLOCKING THE EXPERT'S HALO AND COMMUNITY DRIVEN LEARNING](#)

Great content is generated by member experts and association staff working together. A systematic process can transform content creation and delivery and build an online learning business that generates revenue.

[MEET THE MODERN MEMBER: 8 TRAITS](#)

An association's ability to thrive depends on understanding and responding to their members' wants and needs. Exploring the traits of the modern member can reveal the changing expectations and needs of today's professionals.



ABOUT FORJ

Forj is the leading community platform provider.
We're purpose-built for associations and professional networks
to grow their membership, revenue, and impact.



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