

Staying Successful in the Business of Certification

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In Part 1 of this series, *Getting Started in the Business of Certification*, we looked at what it takes to get started in the business of certification. Successfully launching a program is a significant accomplishment, but your work does not end there.

As your program matures, you will confront several business challenges that may be unique to your situation but are nonetheless predictable. The following four challenges are among them.

Demonstrate the Value of Your Credential

Because it has a track record to draw on, your established certification program may be under even more pressure to prove itself than a startup would be. Surprisingly, only a minority of certification sponsors have already taken steps to do this. The *2007 Knapp Certification Industry Scan* revealed that just 39 percent of organizations have collected data on the benefits that certificants experience. Only 18 percent have conducted research on the benefits to employers.

Although research on certificate benefits has been limited, a consistent theme runs through the findings – a theme contrary to popular belief. Tangible benefits that certifiers usually tout – such as job promotion and higher salary – typically fall at the bottom of the list. What comes out on top? Intangible benefits, such as increased knowledge, personal satisfaction in attaining a goal, and enhanced credibility.

The Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) is one of only a handful of certifiers that have conducted certification ROI studies with employers. In a large quantitative study comparing organizations that employ a high vs. low percentage of certified employees, CompTIA discovered positive findings regarding staff efficiency and retention, customer satisfaction, and system downtime. Using these data, CompTIA developed a certification ROI calculator to help employers analyze the impact of moving their organizations from a low to a high percentage of certified employees.

Create New Value for the Credential

In addition to providing evidence that your certification program is valuable, you should also engage in activities designed to *create* value for your credential. These activities include:

Implementing strategies to increase the recognition and prestige of the credential, particularly among employers and key influencers. It's true that many people initially pursue certification for personal growth and professional development. But once they attain the credential, much of its continued value rests on how widely recognized it is *outside* of the certificant population.

Hosting online communities for certificants. Cisco's online community has topical forums (including one in which candidates can interact with each other and with certificants), webcasts on technical topics, and an "Ask the Experts" feature in which experts and the community discuss a topic in depth for two weeks, after which the discussion is archived for future reference.

Offering exclusive networking and professional development events for certificants. You may even be able to secure event sponsorships from your industry partners. ASAE & The Center's Certified Association Executive (CAE) program has enjoyed a long-term relationship with Ritz-Carlton, which sponsors an annual CAE breakfast.

Providing professional development resources and tools. Consider developing self-assessment tools that individuals can use either independently of or in conjunction with your recertification process. Mentoring programs provide value to younger certificants and help to build brand loyalty.

The National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) creates value for employers through its Blue Seal of Excellence program, which recognizes businesses with a large percentage of certified technicians. Establishments that earn the Blue Seal receive a kit that includes a variety of promotional materials to help them showcase their commitment to excellence.

Introduce New Credentials

If you already have a successful program, you may start thinking about leveraging your brand equity by exploring the possibility of new credentials. Key business questions you should consider when making this decision are:

- Is there an important need for additional credentials? Or would you be creating another credential simply to satisfy a vocal minority – one that may not reflect the market as a whole?

- If there is an important need, is the market large enough to justify the level of resources required?
- Would it be smarter to devote the resources a new credential would require to making your flagship credential more successful? For example, would your industry benefit more from having greater penetration of the flagship credential than having a small percentage of workers with the new credential?
- How might the new credential affect your flagship credential? Would it cannibalize the volume of the flagship or otherwise devalue it?
- Do you have the resources and know-how to support additional credentials? Managing multiple credentials requires a different set of competencies and strategies than administering a single program.

Manage Rapid Growth

You may be tempted to say, "Managing rapid growth is a problem I'd *like* to have." But the truth is, growing before you're ready can be as challenging as struggling with low volumes. The two principle challenges that arise are:

Ensuring quality and consistency. This is important for all association products and services, but it is especially critical to certification programs because they are, in fact, in a "precision business." Any errors made by certification programs can cause stakeholders to question the accuracy of examination scores and the credibility of the credentialing process.

Identifying the best infrastructure to support program growth. Will you invest in building a new or enhanced infrastructure, or will you leverage infrastructures already in place (e.g., outsourcing)? The answer will depend in part on your current capabilities and whether you believe the volume increase is a short-term blip or a long-term trend.

When rapid growth occurs, certifiers typically manage it through a combination of outsourcing and leveraging technology and databases. One example of this comes from the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board (PTCB). It certified nearly 250,000 individuals in only one decade and did so with a relatively small staff. PTCB carefully appraised its core competencies and chose to outsource functions that did not fall within them. This enabled PTCB staff to remain focused on the big picture.

How you can leverage technology and databases? Here are a few possibilities:

Implement online application and fee processing. Online processing automates or reduces the time your staff spends performing standard functions. It also provides a mechanism for correcting errors in real-time, and thus avoiding reprocessing.

Maintain a database of standard correspondence and responses to typical inquiries. The members of your staff can query the database when responding to phone inquiries, or they can cut and paste responses to written inquiries. The result will be enhanced efficiency and consistency.

Automate email functions. PTCB has incorporated topical check boxes in its standard email inquiry form. Customers use the check boxes to specify the nature of their question/message, and then the email is forwarded automatically to the correct staff person.

So there you have it: four challenges you should address to keep your program running smoothly. Proactively planning for them will contribute greatly to your ability to succeed in the business of certification.