



3 STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING MEMBER LOYALTY VIA LEARNING COMMUNITITES



THE IMPORTANCE OF BRAND ASSOCIATION & MEMBERSHIP LOYALTY

Over the past two decades, many associations have gone through a familiar series of evolutionary cycles with regards to membership services and retention. They have moved from live events and workshops, to the addition of hosted video and other Web-based services, to fully online courses, to online certification programs.

At each stage of this evolutionary cycle, the goals have been the same: expand membership services, extend the reach of the association's brand, and add new revenue streams. In general, this shift in educational programs has been an effective strategy and has stimulated new membership and solid revenue growth. Moreover, the changes have helped organizations become much more adept at marketing and membership recruiting.

Brand growth and recruiting are only one part of the formula for sustained association growth, however. Long-term success requires that associations create increased member loyalty and personal connection to the association brand. The most successful associations actually become an integrated part of a member's professional identity.

The good news is that existing educational programs provide a nice foundation for creating the kind of member loyalty associations need for sustained success. With a shift in learning design strategy, current courses and programs can generate high levels of sustained loyalty and community interaction. Such loyalty results in improved year-over-year member retention, an increase in the number of events or programs accessed per member, and a growth in word-of-mouth recruitment by existing members.

The key to achieving these results through existing association educational programs is the creation of effective learning communities. These communities can transform traditional, centripetal recruiting workflows into powerful, centrifugal networks that significantly amplify existing efforts. Here are three strategies I recommend for enhancing member participation and loyalty through effective learning communities.

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**CREATE
PRE-SIGNUP
COMMUNITIES**

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We generally think of a learning community as being comprised of the members currently enrolled in a course or program. But we can expand this traditional model by beginning our learning communities at an earlier point in time—before the member even signs up for the course. This is what we call the pre-signup community. This triggers brand buy-in and loyalty to start sooner and, consequently, to send down deeper roots. The pre-signup community is a space where prospective participants can learn more about upcoming education opportunities, engage with course facilitators or topic experts, and access resources about a course or program area.

The pre-signup community serves multiple purposes for the association. First, it operates as an inbound content marketing tool that attracts prospective participants to a space where they can learn more and have meaningful interaction with a Community of Interest. It also extends brand expertise by positioning the association as an organization that provides useful and high-quality resources for the broader market. In addition, the pre-signup community links the association's identity firmly with networking opportunities and long-term personal growth. In other words, this community shows both potential and recurring members the enduring value of being aligned with the association. Finally, by allowing prospective subscribers to sample a program before purchasing, the association advertises its overall quality and value commitment to its members.

CASE STUDY

The Institute for Learning Environment Design (ILED) is preparing to launch its new certificate program for learning environment architects.

In order to promote the program, NextThought has worked with ILED to design a pre-signup community that includes information about the program, as well as a rich set of curated resources to serve program facilitators and course designers. This community will also serve as a meeting space for ILED Design Studio events and practitioner conversations.



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**BLEND EXPERT
COMMUNITIES
INTO YOUR
COURSES OR
PROGRAMS**



“Expert communities add value to program content, foster exploration and network building, and offer attractive opportunities for participants to connect with industry leaders and potential employers.”

Another way to increase member loyalty is through the incorporation of expert communities within existing association courses or programs. Expert communities add value to program content, foster exploration and network-building, and offer attractive opportunities for participants to connect with industry leaders and potential employers.

This value-add of expert communities begins with the addition of real-time expertise to existing content. By allowing participants to interact formally and informally with a broader network of experts, the association provides a differentiated blend of content and industry perspectives. Just as important, blending an expert community into a program expands each participant's learning trajectory well beyond a set of static information. It creates dynamic, relevant connections within a program's subject network and provides critical opportunities for participants to personalize their learning based on specific interests. Finally, expert communities increase association value by aligning the association's brand with industry experts and by showcasing the association as a source of valuable professional networking.

CASE STUDY

Consistent with the Learning Environment Model (LEM) created for Oklahoma Christian University's cohort-based Engineering degree, NextThought has created two expert communities to support first-year students in the program. The first is a community of third and fourth-year students that provide perspective and mentoring to the the first-year cohort. This community provides first-year students with peer guidance and also gives them a clearer sense of the program's purpose. The second expert community consists of 30 computer science professionals recruited by the program director. This community participates actively in course discussions and its members interact directly with first-year students. This group enriches program content with real-world experience, and offers meaningful professional networking opportunities.



**DESIGN
POST-PROGRAM
COMMUNITIES FOR
ALUMNIFICATION**



“Post-program communities are a way to keep participants engaged with the association and its education efforts even after the official learning period has ended.”

All too often, association educational programs are single occurrence transactions for members. The customary pattern is that members sign up for programs, complete them, and then move on without any follow-up or enduring learning connection. Post-program communities are a way to keep participants engaged with the association and its education efforts even after the official learning period has ended.

One benefit of post-program communities is that they promote the association as the source for up-to-date resources and expertise. By providing this valuable, ongoing connection to learning, the association creates a long-term value for its members. Post-program communities also provide a space for members to stay connected with their Community of Practice and to expand their professional networks. This “alumnification” channel creates obvious benefits in member retention and also provides a useful avenue for recruiting future program instructors and designated community experts.

CASE STUDY

While more than 2,000 Oklahoma principals and superintendents have participated in K20 Center's Leadership program in the past decade, the center has found no effective way to keep these participants engaged. As a solution, NextThought is creating a post-program community that features up-to-date resources for these school administrators, and also promotes ongoing events designed to keep program alumni engaged. This community will also serve as a place where principals and superintendents can share ideas and success stories with their Community of Practice.



NextThought, LLC is an online learning solutions provider that specializes in collaborative and community-based education. Founded in 2011, the company provides an integrated suite of learning design services, video and content production options, and online course technology, all optimized for connected learning. NextThought is located in Norman, Oklahoma and works with a number of leading education institutions and associations around the world.

Learn more about the solutions we provide for professional learning organizations at nextthought.com/associations.

Contact us to see how NextThought can help your organization reach your learning goals and engage your communities at sales@nextthought.com.