



FOUR KEYS

TO PROFITABLE LEARNING PRODUCTS FOR YOUR ASSOCIATION

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published by Tagoras*

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A blue silhouette of a city skyline with various skyscrapers of different heights and shapes, set against a background of light blue rays emanating from the top.

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It's a fear that's probably familiar—what if you build it, and they don't use it? The ugly truth is you'll never know for sure until you try.

But there are four keys that will dramatically improve your chances of building a strategic learning product with strong revenue potential.

Key 1: Know Your Market

The importance of knowing your market may seem obvious. But that doesn't mean your association does it as well as it could. Even if you're the go-to source for your field or profession, you still need to do your homework and home in on what your market needs to know and learn.



DEVELOP A LISTENING HABIT

You can't rely on an annual needs assessment to understand your market—you need to tune in and listen consistently throughout the year. Thankfully, there are tools that make listening easier. The following tools tend to be familiar to marketers, but those working in education need to know them too.

- Google Analytics

Google Analytics can provide data about who's coming to the education-related pages on your Web site, what keyword searches bring the users to your site, what the users spend time on and click on, and more. Odds are good your organization has Google Analytics, so it may just be a matter of getting access to the data so you can regularly determine what it tells you about what your market. Google provides great resources for learning more about Google Analytics at <http://www.google.com/analytics/learn>.

- An RSS reader
RSS readers are great for aggregating content and keeping your inbox from being choked with e-mails from the blogs you follow. We suggest Feedly or Bloglines. Or look for another that you like. To learn more about RSS, we suggest you check out <http://smallbiztrends.com/2013/06/what-is-rss.html>.
- Hootsuite
With Hootsuite, you can manage your social media accounts and see Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other feeds in one place. You can organize Twitter feeds to look at

Tools can help you listen to your market.



conference or Webinar hashtags, for example, to see what's resonating with your learners. Hootsuite offers a good Quick Start on its Help Desk site at <https://help.hootsuite.com/entries/21626925-Quick-Start-Guide>, as well as much more extensive training (for a fee) at Hootsuite University (<http://learn.hootsuite.com>).

- Zite
This mobile app serves up a personalized magazine by leveraging information about your interests in other tools you use (like your Twitter history) and by paying attention to how you rate the articles it provides you. The result is a distinct set of articles that, ever more accurately, focus on topics relevant to you, without cumbersome manual customization. We're don't have a specific learning

tool to recommend for Zite—but it’s pretty darned easy to use.

You, of course, should also, listen to your own communities, listserves, and discussion boards. There you can find discussions that might lead to new offerings, and occasionally you may even discover a slam dunk.

The Florida Institute of CPAs discovered a slam dunk by tuning in to a discussion about comfort letters on its federal tax listserve. (A “comfort letter” from an accounting firm assures a company is financially sound.) Ned Campbell, the senior director of education at the time, noticed a post about comfort letters led to 40 comments. He saw an opportunity.

Ned and his team reached out to a subject matter expert, and, within five days of that initial post, put together a two-hour Webinar on the topic. The Webinar quickly generated 90 registrations from the thousand-member federal tax list.

While your listening activities may not often produce such immediate returns, this example shows how opportunities can be discovered—or missed—based on your listening habits.

A LITTLE RESEARCH GOES A LONG WAY

Listening to your market is crucial to your ability to provide value to your audience—but don’t rely on listening alone. People don’t always know what they need or want, much less how to articulate it. You can use research to fill the gap.

You don’t have to be or employ a Ph.D. researcher (all the better, though, if you are or can). But you can use rapid research, particularly three forms, to become more familiar with your market and how to deliver learning it will value.

- Investigate primary sources.

We live in a world of recycled, hand-me-down information—retweets, reposts, blogs that reference books that cite studies—with accuracy and nuance often sacrificed to brevity or a clever headline or conclusion. People probably aren’t out to mislead or distort, but it happens. So go instead to the primary sources. Find the original study or the raw survey data or whatever it is, read it, and check the facts and the conclusions drawn from the facts. Following the primary source trail leads to opportunities to clarify, correct, or elaborate (bolstering your

authority) and can suggest topics for learning products.

- Interview experts.

Interviewing experts and thought leaders in a particular field can be a great way to get fast-track access to emerging ideas and needs—and it’s also one of our favorite ways to develop content (through capturing audio and video recordings, creating transcripts, etc.). It’s a practice that tends to have value no matter what stage you’re at or what position you hold in your market. If you’re established and well respected in a certain topic, interviews let you engage with peers. If you’re new to a subject, interviews link you with known experts. You can use interviews to gather examples and case studies or discuss trends and their implications. Brainstorm a list of experts in the areas your audience needs to stay abreast in. Most associations can start this list by focusing on people who have spoken at their events. Book authors—usually looking for ways to promote their titles—are also good targets.

- Conduct informal surveys and polls.

Primary research, like surveys and polls, provides direct input from those you hope to serve and allows you to collect data—including stories, examples, and case studies—that potential competitors may not have access to. For trade and professional associations, often brokers for the authority of others, this type of primary research can focus position the organization itself as an authority. As a bonus, along with whatever you learn from analyzing it, the research you conduct can be presented back to the target market as a report, an e-book, a Webinar, or a video—all powerful forms of content marketing to help drive sales of your products.

Questions to Consider

- Who should you talk to in your organization for access to listening tools like Google Analytics and to receive relevant data from a learning management system and other platforms?
- Who are the experts it would be valuable to interview in your field, your industry, or other areas that will interest your customers?
- What primary sources can you read to get a better grasp on ideas and trends having an impact on your audience?

Key 1: Know Your Market

- Tune in and listen *regularly* to your customers and prospects —annual data isn't enough.
- Tools like Google Analytics, Hootsuite, Zite, Feedly, Bloglines, and others can make your listening job easier and more effective.
- Complement what you hear with original research—interview experts, mine primary sources, and conduct polls and surveys.
- When listening or research uncovers an opportunity, move quickly to provide a learning product that will capitalize on it.

RECAP

Notes

Key 2: Understand How Learning Happens

For a learning product to be profitable over the long haul, it has to deliver results—that is, it has to contribute significantly to making learning happen.



Andragogy—the art and science of adult learning—has been around for at least decades (Malcolm Knowles, often called the father of andragogy, originally published *The Adult Learner* in 1973; the seventh edition came out in 2011). But it's taken time for educators—and learners—to appreciate the implications and change their ways.

In recent years, scientists and researchers have been able to literally see what's happening in the brain when we learn. Thanks to all this brain science, we now better understand how we learn than ever before.

We offer seven rules—grounded in andragogy and brain science—to keep in mind when designing and delivering learning to adults.

- Position it.
- Prune it.
- Chunk it.
- Stimulate multiple senses.
- Remember to repeat to remember.

- Make it active.
- Share the responsibility.

Let's look at each in more detail.

POSITION IT

Adults, as a general rule, need to understand why they need to learn something—how is it relevant to their lives?

In the best of worlds, your prospects and customers understand their learning needs and see how what you offer fits in. In the world in which we live, though, you need to help your audience see the connection between your offerings and their needs. In some cases, you may even have to make your audience aware of needs that aren't apparent to them.

These awareness efforts begin in your marketing and promotions and extend to the actual learning product. In its simplest form, this involves making clear at the beginning of any structured learning experience what the intended outcomes and benefits are, framing them in terms that resonate with your audience.

You should also look to provide opportunities for your learners to see for themselves the gap between where they are now and where they want to be (Knowles stressed this self-awareness).

Malcolm Knowles, the father of andragogy, originally published *The Adult Learner* in 1973.



You might achieve this by incorporating writing exercises in which learners describe the future state they seek and the steps to get there. Or it may involve learners participating in activities that stretch them beyond their current knowledge or skill level.

Positioning your offerings—before and during the learning experience—helps ensure maximum motivation, engagement, and the best possible learning outcomes.

PRUNE IT

We humans have limited working memory in our brains for processing new information. There's a finite amount we're capable of digesting and moving into long-term memory in the context of a learning experience.

Subject matter experts, though, usually have a lot to say on the topics they know so much about. Too often they try to

convey more information than the audience can take in.

To teach more, it often pays to say or write less.

Practically, this means taking the time to edit instructional content to expose the core concepts. For written content, this means segmenting content, using headings, writing short paragraphs, and bulleting lists. In speaking, this means pausing to allow learners to absorb ideas. Visually, it means using unambiguous images that relate clearly to the idea being conveyed.

The use of *prune* is intentional—when you prune something, you cut it back so it can thrive more fully than it would have otherwise.

Removing ideas, details, images, and other materials not directly relevant to

what you're teaching frees up information-processing capability available to the learners, who then have more opportunity to connect the current content with knowledge they already have.

CHUNK IT

Provide learning in short segments whenever possible. We're talking about segments, not necessarily the overarching learning experience, which may need to be long to cover all the important or complex material.

In fact, chunking is even more important in longer sessions, as the average person's mind is likely to start wandering after about 10 minutes focused on one subject (this is just one of the many excellent points we've gleaned from John Medina's *Brain Rules*).

Maintaining attention is critical to learning because the level of attention a learner devotes to a subject directly impacts learning. For structured learning experiences, keep the average attention span in mind, and aim to focus on a particular point for no more than 10 minutes before moving on to the next.

Even in unstructured learning experiences (e.g., a membership site with a variety of resources the learner

is free to explore on her own) where sustaining attention may be less of an issue, chunking learning is still valuable. The amount of time we have to devote to a single session of learning seems ever shorter as we get busier and busier, inundated with information and choices.

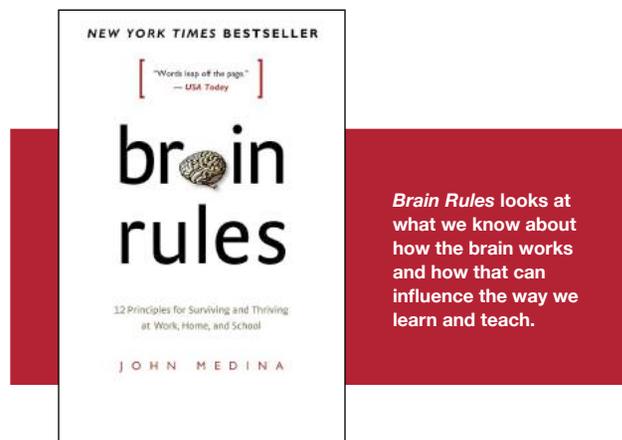
If you can offer something of value that can be learned in a relatively short time, people are likely to seek you out and keep coming back.

STIMULATE MULTIPLE SENSES

All five senses play a role in how humans process and remember experiences and information. Traditional educational experiences, which rely heavily on listening to a lecture or reading a text, don't take full advantage of this fact.

Providing content in multiple formats (e.g., illustrations and text, rather than text alone) tends to improve retention. Keep in mind, though, that the stimulation of senses should be relevant to the learning. If it's not, you risk distracting the learner from the core concepts.

An animation of bulleted text zipping into place may put off learners, but an animation explaining how to insert a feeding tube reinforces the procedure a nursing student just read about.



Ways to Stimulate the Senses Without a Big Budget

- Add narration to text-based slides.
- Animate data charts to show trends or emphasize important points.
- Add video snippets from experts.
- Use quizzes to engage learners and gauge retention.
- Link to a discussion or chat on the topic.
- Offer a live online session using Skype, Google Hangouts, or another tool during a self-paced course subscription period.

REMEMBER TO REPEAT TO REMEMBER

To establish new information in long-term memory, humans typically need to encounter it multiple times. Think about infants who repeat the same action over and over to see if the result is the same—that repetition is key to learning.

Most adults dislike rote repetition, but our brains still need repeated exposure to new skills and concepts for us to learn them. As a rule, the more complex the learning, the more it requires repetition, and we benefit from this repetition

occurring over time and in different contexts.

In a single, isolated learning experience, like a Webinar or a conference session, it can be hard to build in repetition. Effective teachers, though, will work to present new material from a variety of perspectives, drawing on a range of examples.

For longer-term learning, like a series of courses, a certification program, or a learning community, opportunities for repetition are more abundant—but you must still design and plan for it and explain the importance to learners.

MAKE IT ACTIVE

Learners need to engage actively with new information to move it to long-term memory.

The actions can range from simple (taking notes during a lecture or while reading—did you notice the areas for notes in this document?) to complex (practicing inserting a feeding tube). Providing checklists, worksheets, and other tools along with instructional content encourages learners to take action. When the activities draw on examples and situations that reflect and apply in the learner’s real-world circumstances, all the better.

SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY

As Knowles notes in *The Adult Learner*, “Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, their own lives.” And this responsibility applies to learning.

With technology advances and the accelerating pace of change in recent years, adult learners have more options, more opportunity than ever before to be self-directed, to seek out what they want, and to choose what to participate in.

This choice—and the sense of responsibility it implies—should be extended to the learning experience.

Ways to Make Learning Active

- Remind learners to take notes.
- Ask them to think about how an idea presented might apply to their lives or work—and have them write it down.
- Have them practice *outside* of the learning experience—e.g., send them away from the online course or the classroom to do something in the real world.
- Provide checklists, worksheets, and other tools for practice and to reinforce important concepts.

The Risk of No Risk Thoughts from Digital Ignite's Tamer Ali

Strategic success isn't far out of reach, but taking the steps towards strategic initiatives does require some comfort with risk and potential failure.

Most organizations may fear the potential fallouts of strategic initiatives, but consider a few thoughts to counter internal objections.

1. No risk, no change.

If you continue to do things as you have done, assume nothing will change.

Sounds pretty simple, but if you consider your organization's initiatives, how many are truly shifting from traditional constructs? If you're just repackaging, upgrading software, or migrating, you're not preparing for strategic-level change. Those are tactical, operational maintenance programs that typically clog our project plans and block us from true creativity.

Asking the simple question "Why are we doing it this way?" may help spur a new perspective on building successful products.

2. Risk mitigation is not a gray science.

There are ways to control exposure to, and the impact of, this dreaded word *risk*. A few ideas follow.

- Segment your audience.
Determine who are the key priorities in your membership/constituency—don't build for

everyone; this will just present your product or educational activity as a Swiss Army knife that likely will neither meet core needs of any section of your membership nor bring value to their professional development.

- Close the store model.

Many organizations simply catalog all educational activities and courses in an à la carte listing of content organized by topic and/or industry-relevant categories. This restaurant menu approach has brought us what we'd expect: random activity by participants, unpredictable revenue and cash flow, and drowning out of personalized relevance in product purchasing.

But are we truly online commerce sites, or are we building programs to serve as professional development hubs? Removing the store model and moving towards a competency- or skill-based model of paths and concentrations will increase predictability, frequency of visits, and, ultimately (if it applies to your model), revenue.

- Less is a lot more.

Related to the above point of moving away from the store model, where your "shelves" must look full of stock, focus on "specialities" first. Try to be great in a few things. This is instead of offering a long list of education products just for the sake of depth and breadth. The quest for the "big box store model" will make the quality of your offering suffer.

- If worried about brand, create a new one.

Take the Scion approach of Toyota—if your brand is untouchable (or, at least, you think it is), consider creating a new approach, separate from your existing education program. Even adding the ubiquitous *beta* beside the name of anything new offers a forgivable disclaimer to any education program. It’s an acknowledgement that you’re trying to innovate, which already indicates a change from the past.

- Iterate, and get your audience involved.

Lastly, what better way to protect yourself from risk than to include all stakeholders and audiences in the innovation and strategic development process with you? If you iterate, building towards shorter release cycles while incorporating the input of your target audience throughout, there are fewer surprises, and you’re always informed of stakeholders’ perspectives.

In short, don’t take 9 to 12 months to build a black-box strategy to surprise your constituency. That’s the real risk.

So, as you can see, there are ways to mitigate risk. What ways can you think of? Let’s continue the conversation: #strategiclearning.

*Tamer Ali
president and cofounder
Digital Ignite*

About Digital Ignite

Digital Ignite was founded in 2006 with the vision of building a better learning experience for the adult, working professional. Our goal was to break the model of impersonal e-learning technologies, to create a personalized, social, and engaging experience that was learner-centric. Moreover, we wanted to develop a platform that could handle the rigors and demands of critical learning and professional education programs: a platform with scalability, global presence, and the infrastructure to deliver great, rich experiences. In short, we thought e-learning deserved the same advances in personalization, aesthetics, analytics, and overall infrastructure that the Internet continues to experience.

We round out our offering with a key focus “beyond implementation” with a dedicated team of learning experts with decades of experience implementing successful education programs. Our team works with client stakeholders to maximize their investments in technology, while also strategizing best approaches for future educational product development.

www.digitalignite.com

Key 3: Adopt Value-Based Pricing

The profitability of a learning product is directly tied to how it's priced. But many organizations struggle with pricing, and many wind up pricing in a way that doesn't ensure appropriate levels of profitability (or, if you prefer, net revenues that can be reinvested in the organization).



A typical approach to pricing is to determine your costs (so you can cover them) and then add a profit margin that doesn't make your price stick out compared to the competitors. This is downside pricing. It's great for making sure you don't lose your shirt, but may also mean you're leaving money on the table.

Pricing is ultimately about what the market will bear, or, in other words, the value customers place on your expertise. If you price a product at \$50 and customers are willing to pay \$75, you're losing money even if you're covering costs and achieving your target margin.

The alternative is upside pricing, based on the value of the offering rather than on intrinsically limiting approaches like underlying costs and time and materials.

We see four foundations to successfully implementing upside, or value-based, pricing.

- Understand the customers' needs and the value they place on fulfilling them.

Figuring this out isn't likely to happen by asking a "What courses do you want?" question in an online survey. More useful are the techniques already discussed in the "Know Your Market" section.

Additionally, one-on-one conversations with members and customers can be powerful tools for discovering the impact of helping customers achieve specific learning objectives. Maybe learning new skills or knowledge means career advancement or a pay raise. Or less stress because the learner can get her work done more efficiently. Or better outcomes for the learner's own clients, patients, customers, etc. The higher the level of motivation and the more intrinsic it is, the greater the value the customer is likely to place on an offering.

Be Daring — Strategically

A willingness to put things out there is a major advantage when trying to identify and develop high-value, strategic learning products.

Minimum viable products (MVPs)—which are bare bones but still valuable to their market—are a great way to check that what you're building is what your audience wants. MVPs let you take something to market quickly and get feedback from actual users.

Sometimes a product will fail, but if you adopt the MVP mindset, you find out sooner if your read of the market's interest was wrong. Even if the market doesn't want to learn from your product, you can learn your lesson and move on to the next thing without spending unwarranted time and energy on an offering destined to languish.

- Test to help you set pricing.

You can test directly by attempting to presell an offering at a particular price or prices. Less directly, demand during a testing phase (i.e., a beta or early-release version) can indicate what you may ultimately be able to charge for a product—the stronger the demand, the more flexibility you have in pricing.

- Differentiate your product from the competition.

With upside pricing, you don't completely ignore the competition, but you do consider more than just the price. You look at the value

competitors offer. How can you position your product to show value above and beyond what the competitors claim? The more effectively you differentiate, the less tied you are to any pricing anchors set by the competition.

- Offer different levels of value and pricing across your products.

This idea of a value continuum in your portfolio is important, so we're going to devote the next section to it.

DEVELOP A VALUE CONTINUUM

Options often underpin success. If you hold a single, place-based conference each year, and that's it, you're giving

prospective customers only one chance to say yes to you. If you offer a place-based conference along with a weekend workshop and a self-paced online course, prospects have three things they can say yes to.

While the number of options is important, it's not as important as having *strategic* options. To develop strategic options, think of your learning products as part of a continuum.

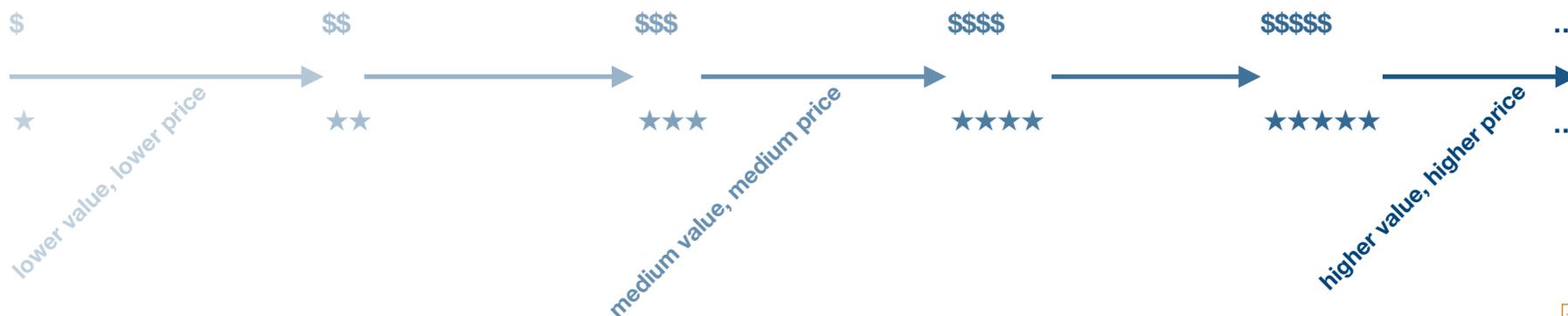
On one end, you have lower-value, lower-price products, which should also be relatively easy for you to develop and deliver—these might be blog posts, an e-newsletter, a podcast, a short video, etc. As you move along the continuum, the

value the products deliver increases and therefore so does the cost.

In the middle you might have specialized seminars or a semester-long course facilitated by an expert. At the far end of the continuum, the development or delivery of these products, which might include, for example, customized training, is likely to be intensive—but, again, those products should support higher prices because of the value learners see in them.

The goal is to spread learning products along the continuum. If you don't have a range of products now, recognize it's going to take some time to achieve—but even knowing a continuum is your goal can guide and shape your product

Offer valuable learning products along a continuum. As the value to the customer increases, so can the price point. Avoid large gaps in your range of offerings—if you do, you risk losing customers rather than moving them along your continuum.



Key 4: Know the Impact You Want to Have

You can't build strategic learning products with strong revenue potential blindly. You need to know the impact you're after—and you need to be able to show you're achieving that impact.



Be sure the learning objectives for your products are specific about the actions learners should be able to perform as a result of the learning experience, and be sure they're measurable. That'll position you to track results.

The data we collected for our 2013 *Speaker Report* shows that under half (47.5 percent) of the organizations surveyed measure whether learning occurs at their major meeting, and only 14.0 percent of those conduct post-session assessments or follow-ups. Think how valuable a differentiator it is for an organization to demonstrate the impact of its offerings to could-be customers.

MAKE USE OF YOUR MEASURES

Consistent, verifiable measurement serves at least two purposes—first, you can use the feedback to fine-tune what you offer, and, second, the data can be used to promote and position your

offerings as you're able to show you're moving the learning dial.

For short-term measurement, you may focus on Kirkpatrick Level 1 assessments (i.e., the learners' reactions—did they like the learning experience?) and Kirkpatrick Level 2 (i.e., the learners' increase in knowledge, often determined by comparing pre- and post-test scores).

In the medium and long term, you want to get to Kirkpatrick Levels 3 and 4—are the learners applying what they learned, and what's the impact of that application? To answer those kinds of questions, longitudinal studies that look at learners and their performance over time are excellent—and achievable, at least at a base level, with simple survey tools and phone interviews. It's more a matter of deciding that demonstrating long-term impact will be an area your organization will focus on than of learning elaborate methodologies or buying expensive tools.

This infographic explains Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation. Source: flirtingwlearning.wordpress.com

UNDERSTANDING KIRKPATRICK'S 4 LEVELS OF EVALUATION

what is it for?
 Assessing training is critical. Luckily for instructional designers, Donald Kirkpatrick developed a four level model in the late 50's to do just that. Decades have passed since and still no one has come up with a more effective method to evaluate training. That's because the Kirkpatrick model works!

REACTION

1

what does it measure?
learners' reaction to the training

how do you measure that?
questionnaires after training



LEARNING

2

what does it measure?
improvement in knowledge, skills and abilities

how do you measure that?
pre- and post-training testing



BEHAVIOUR *

3

what does it measure?
capability to apply new skills, knowledge & abilities on the job

how do you measure that?
testing and observation



RESULTS

4

what does it measure?
impact of training on the business

how do you measure that?
scorecard looks at impact/return (financial, customer, internal)



*referred to by some as "performance"
**created by @nicole_legault

Key 4: Know the Impact You Want to Have

- To build strategic learning products with strong revenue potential, you need to know the impact you want to deliver.
- Be sure the learning objectives for your products are specific and measurable.
- Measure short-term and longer-term impact.
- Don't stop at satisfaction scores—look at how your customers apply what they learn.



Questions to Consider

- Do you know the impact you're trying to achieve with each of your learning products?
- Are you measuring the short-term and medium- to-long-term impact of your learning products?
- How can you best use your measurement data?

Notes

Continue the Path

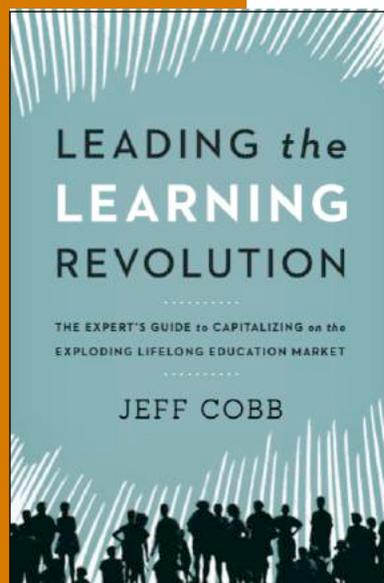
We've outlined here four fundamental keys to building a strategic learning product with strong revenue potential:

- Know your market.
- Understand how learning happens.
- Adopt value-based pricing.
- Know the impact you want to have.

None of these four concepts is hard to understand, but using them to create and maintain a successful education business means assiduous execution of and dedication to each over time as you fine-tune or revamp what you offer and how you offer it.

We don't know how many steps there will be on your path to building strategic learning products (although it's safe to say there will be many). But we're confident these four keys will set you off in the right direction.

Safe, and successful, travels.



Acknowledgement

Many of the concepts presented in this resource are discussed in greater depth in Jeff Cobb's book *Leading the Learning Revolution* (AMACOM, 2013, available at Amazon.com).

Thanks to Digital Ignite for its intellectual and financial contributions to this resource. www.digitalignite.com



About Tagoras

Through a combination of independent research and strategic consulting, Tagoras helps organizations in the business of lifelong learning maximize the reach, revenue, and impact of their offerings. We provide our clients with a unique blend of experience in marketing, technology, and education and back it up with years of successful projects with clients like the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), the Association of American Medical Colleges, the Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA), the American College of Rheumatology (ACR), and the College Board.

Tagoras reports include *Association Learning + Technology*, *Association Learning Management Systems*, *Association Virtual Events*, and *The Speaker Report: The Use of Professional and Industry Speakers in the Meetings Market*.

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