

# Continuing Education: Your Association's Shield Against Economic Headwinds



## Introduction

When members are weighing every expense, organizations need to make their value easy to see, access, and justify. Unfortunately, that pressure often grows during periods of economic uncertainty. Budgets tighten, priorities shift, and members start taking a closer look at what they're getting in return. In this environment, the strongest strategies often center on what members *already need*.

High-quality continuing education (CE) offers one practical path forward. It can help member-based organizations create non-dues revenue streams, support professional development opportunities, and give members clear reasons to stay engaged.

This whitepaper explores how CE can strengthen revenue potential, member engagement, and organizational influence. It also examines ways organizations can build their programs to stay relevant and easy to manage as they grow.

## The Challenge: Member Value Under Pressure

When budgets tighten, members may look more closely at whether membership still feels useful, relevant, and worth the cost. That scrutiny can put pressure on organizations' engagement, renewals, and dues-based revenue.

According to the Association Laboratory, Inc. (2026), the greater the economic hardship members face, the less likely they are to engage with an association. In its *Executive Summary and Discussion Guide: Looking Forward Impact 2026*, they found that association leaders and professionals are more pessimistic about the 2026 economy than they've been in any year since 2021.

Membership growth shows a similar strain. Marketing General Inc. (2025) reported that, while many associations continue to expand, growth rates have softened from 49% in 2023 to 47% in 2024 and 45% in 2025.

At the same time, members have more access to lower-cost training, online communities, and networking resources now than ever before. This, therefore, begs the question: how can organizations prove their value? Marketing General Inc. (2024) supports this line of inquiry, explaining that value remains one of the most reliable predictors of membership growth.

As Li (2025) argues, organizations need a value proposition that's not only *concrete* and *current*, but also *easy to communicate*. It should clearly explain what members will gain that would be harder, slower, or riskier to get on their own.

So, where should organizations focus on providing that value?

## The Solution: Quality CE Programs

This is where high-quality CE comes in. It connects directly to what many professionals already need: career development, credentials, industry knowledge, and skills they can apply at work.

According to the American Society of Association Executives (2024), CE is an increasingly popular reason for joining an association. It also notes that associations reporting increases in professional development registrations and certifications tend to report higher new member counts. This suggests that education can both improve the rate of member attraction *and* the overall value of membership.

Likewise, member expectations point in the same direction. In a Wiley (2018) member survey, learning and development resources were the top benefit respondents wanted more of (selected by 80% of respondents!), alongside networking opportunities and mentoring.

## The Benefits of Hosting Your Own CE

High-quality CE can help member-based organizations turn member value into practical outcomes. When programs are relevant, accessible, and well structured, they can help an organization create value. For example:

### 1. They Create Sustainable Non-Dues Revenue Streams

CE presents reliable revenue opportunities for member-based organizations. As the job market becomes more demanding, professionals are more likely to turn to trusted organizations to sharpen their skills and maintain their edge.

CE and continuing professional development (CPD) are already meaningful revenue categories in adjacent education markets. These courses are offered to individuals, businesses, and non-commercial organizations. Mosley (2024) notes that UK universities reported approximately £720 million in combined CE and CPD revenue in 2022-23, with more than 40% of that income coming from courses for individual learners like professionals, adult learners, and career changers.

While this data focuses on universities, it also points to a broader opportunity for trusted knowledge providers to package professional learning in ways that learners are willing to pay for.

### 2. They Provide Ongoing Value to Members

Quality CE offers members practical, career-focused value that helps justify their membership investment. Carson-Newman University (2025) explains that CE helps professionals build work-related skills, thus improving job performance. These benefits can support career advancement by helping professionals pursue opportunities that might otherwise be harder to reach without additional external training.

CE can also create value through connection. University of West Florida (2024) explains that bringing professionals together around shared learning goals can support networking, peer exchange, mentoring, and career development. These relationships may lead to collaboration, referrals, or future job opportunities.

### 3. They Strengthen Your Organization's Influence

CE helps turn internal expertise into practical learning that members can actually use in their careers. In a crowded information market, people have access to more content than ever; what they often *really* need is guidance from a trusted organization that understands their profession, standards, and day-to-day challenges.

High-quality CE can position your organization as a reliable source of knowledge. Courses that address timely issues, emerging skills, compliance needs, or sector-specific challenges help reinforce its leadership role. These can strengthen relationships with existing members while also introducing non-members to your organization's value!

## How to Improve Your CE Programs

### 1. Offer Flexible Learning Across Formats

Members have different schedules, learning preferences, and professional demands. That's why the benefits of CE are often greater when it's offered in multiple formats.

Smedley (2010) explains that flexible learning approaches (like e-learning) can expand access by giving organizations and members more control over the time and place. This can make knowledge and qualifications easier to pursue, especially for busy professionals.

For instance, live webinars support real-time interaction, while on-demand courses allow members to learn when it works for them. Hybrid options, on the other hand, can extend access to those who can't attend in person, while mobile-friendly delivery supports professionals balancing work, travel, personal responsibilities, and compliance deadlines.

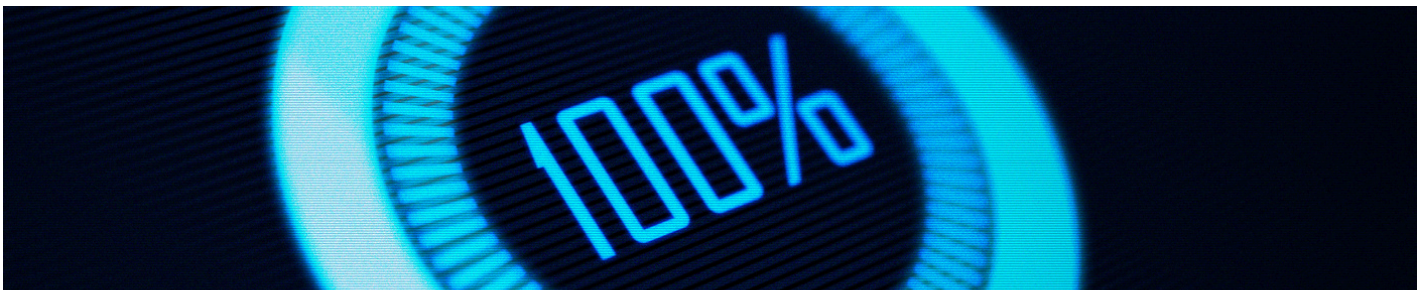
Flexible formats can also help organizations get more value out of their existing content. For example, a live webinar can become an on-demand course, and a conference session handout can become part of a learning library.

This approach extends the life of existing materials, creates more ways for members and non-members to engage, and supports non-dues revenue without requiring every course to be built from scratch.

### 2. Support Completion With the Right Tools

A strong CE experience should help members move through a course with clarity and confidence. That means organizations should think beyond simply posting content online: courses should be intuitive, accessible, and structured. This way, members understand what to do next.

Tools like progress indicators, reminders, certificates, and clear course pathways can help reduce confusion and encourage completion. In addition, interactive elements, including knowledge checks and discussion opportunities, can also support engagement without overwhelming learners. Cakir and Akyazi (2021) found that high levels of interaction can help sustain attention, improve motivation, increase satisfaction, and support learning performance.



### 3. Let Data Shape Your Catalog

Your CE catalog should evolve as members' needs change. Data can help organizations identify opportunities, understand what's working, and make better decisions about which courses to keep, refresh, expand, or retire.

The University of Pennsylvania (2022) explains that organizations can become more proactive in identifying opportunities by using valid data. Panigrahi (2024) also notes that data analytics can help educators understand what's working and what isn't, which supports more informed decision-making.

For example, a course with low completion may need a clearer structure, a shorter format, or better positioning. A popular webinar could be leveraged into becoming a series of courses, a resource bundle, or part of a learning path. When organizations use data this way, their CE catalogs can become more responsive, relevant, and aligned with what members are willing to spend their valuable time and money on.



### Where the Right Technology Helps

As programs grow, organizations often have to manage high-volume registrations, payments, course access, attendance, certificates, member records, reporting, and technical support. Unfortunately, when these functions span across multiple systems, staff typically face additional manual work, and members can sometimes feel the disconnect.

This is where a natively all-in-one platform can help. By consolidating learning management, association management, customer relationship management, events, automation, reporting, eCommerce, and member portals into a single system, organizations can keep both their data and processes aligned. Teams can also take advantage of workflow automation, completion tracking, payment processing, and real-time reporting to reduce repetitive tasks.

With this seamless setup, organizations don't have to rebuild the same process for every course, webinar, or certificate program, so long as the core workflows are in place. This makes it easier to add new offerings, serve larger audiences, and manage more learning activities without duplicating the same level of manual work each time.

## Conclusion

In today's uncertain markets, members need to know that a membership is worth their investment. CE gives organizations a way to make that value clear by supporting accessible learning and boosting professional growth. And for organizations, it offers a revenue stream independent of dues; after all, many organizations allow non-members to take their courses, too!

CE should be considered a key player when drafting a membership strategy. At the end of the day, when your courses reflect your members' needs and the learning experience is easy to navigate, CE can be a strong motivator for members to keep coming back, year over year.



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