

Should Your Course Be In-Person, Online, or Both?

With online courses growing, LERN is now being asked more and more how to determine whether a given course should be developed and offered in-person, online, or a hybrid of in-person and online. And a fourth option is to offer the subject or topic both in-person and online.

Over the next ten years, here's what we see overall for each option:

- 1. In person classes**, sometimes called face-to-face (F2F). For local audiences, still a big market and need, so in-person classes continue to be strong. For audiences that have to travel, some in-person events such as conferences and week-long training are very viable, while shorter seminars have declined significantly and been replaced by online events.
- 2. Online courses.** A huge growth rate is happening now, and will continue to happen for the next ten years. Even local audiences will want more online courses.
- 3. Hybrid, blended, or flipped courses.** You offer an in-person course, with about half the class meetings, and then participants go online in between meetings. We forecast every in-person class should become hybrid in the next ten years. This is an obvious 'duh' enhancement where online can add something of value to just about any subject or topic.
- 4. Both.** Some organizations are experimenting with offering the same subject or topic both as an in-person class, and also as an online course, giving the audience both options. Usually there are different teachers for each format. These organizations are reporting higher registrations and income. The different formats do not compete, but instead each attract different and more participants.

Here's a review of the factors and things for you to think about, plus a checklist to help you decide.

Factors to consider

A. Product Mix and Cancellation rates

One factor is your overall product mix in terms of the numbers you offer of in-person courses and online courses. Directly related to this is your cancellation rates and operating margins of your in-person courses versus online courses. If you have a lower cancellation rate in a particular format or subject

Checklist

1. Do I have an expert instructor whose expertise is distinctive and be appealing to people from a wide geographic area?
2. Are there hands-on and other skills that are best demonstrated in-person?
3. Is the audience more local than over a wide geographic area?
4. Is there an existing good market for the in-person offering?
5. Are the course costs high or instructor availability difficult in my local area?
6. Is the course topic hot and widely popular locally?
7. Is the course topic niched with a narrow audience?
8. Is the cost of an in-person class higher than for other in-person classes?
9. Can I offer the same topic both in-person and also online?
10. Do I have a successful in-person course that I think will get participants three years from now?



Scoring

You will still need to go with your best judgment even after you do the Checklist numbers for each format, but here's how to do the numerical scoring so you can compare your options.

- **In-Person** Count the times you answered “Yes” to these Questions: 2, 3, 4, 6
- **Online** Count the times you answered “Yes” to these Questions: 1, 5, 7, 8
- **Hybrid** If you answered yes to Q10, then work with the instructor to build online resources and features and then advertise the course as “web enhanced.” Your participants and teacher will love the combination, and the reduced travel time and costs.
- **Both:** If you answered yes to Q9, then offer the course both in-person and online. Generally, you roll out the in-person version first.

area, you want to offer more new courses there. If you have higher profitability as expressed in your Operating Margin for a particular format or subject area, you want to offer more new courses there.

B. Audience

The audience for the course is another factor to consider. People over 50 are now more receptive than ever to online courses, but there is still a sizeable percentage of older adults who are unfamiliar with online courses and reluctant to attend.

Younger adults and people in the workplace are far more receptive to online courses. One successful online programmer says that about 90% of people in her target audience are now receptive to online courses.

C. Online Market

For online courses that you build yourself, you need a fairly big market geographically and numbers-wise. If you can promote the course over a wide geographic area, or work with other Partner organizations to promote your course, you have a good shot. You also need a topic that will remain relevant for three years or more.

If you are promoting an online course that a third party develops and teaches, then you can offer that course with little or no cost and make money on even one registration.

D. The Online Back-Up

Stephanie Bowlin, an expert programmer from Richmond, Virginia, says online courses represent a major way to reduce your refunds for cancelled in-person classes. When you promote third party online courses, such as those provided by LERN, the courses are guaranteed to run. When one of your in-person classes is cancelled for lack of registrations, you can offer them an online course option, sometimes at a discount if you choose, and save both income and customers.

E. Your Institutional Setting

In-person and hybrid courses are being offered by programs in all institutional settings, including associations, recreation departments, public schools, colleges and universities. Online courses also have a role in all institutional settings, although your audience's perceptions and wants may determine whether your program offers many, or just a few, online courses.

F. Finances

Figure development costs and allocate them over a three year period. Figure out promotion costs and separately instructor costs. Estimate the number of participants you will get based on your average participants per class. Put a price or fee on it. Then estimate your operating margin. Do this for both formats and see which one is more profitable.