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Special Thanks to the Industry Partners Who Made the 2015 Q4 Edition Possible



Message from the Chair

By Claudia Zacharias, MBA, CAE



One of my colleagues attended the ICE Exchange for the first time this year, and she was so impressed by the open sharing and collegiality of all attendees. This is something I also appreciate about the ICE community, and I wonder if we might take it a step further. Would some of our more seasoned professionals considering mentoring some of those who are newer to the field?

What Is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a relationship between two people that is established with a mutually understood purpose. One party in the relationship is the mentor. Typically, the mentor has some wisdom or experience that he or she is willing to share. The second party, the mentee, is interested in the mentor's insights and guidance. Although mentoring is not a new concept, it has increased in popularity in recent years. Many organizations have formal mentoring programs, and some professional groups offer mentor-mentee matching services as well.

I have served as a mentor in three different settings. When I worked at the American Nurses Credentialing Center, I served as a mentor to new members of management, which was an explicitly stated portion of my job description. As a member of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), I participated in a mentoring arrangement in which the matches and terms of the mentoring arrangement were determined solely by the individual mentor-mentee pairs. I also have served as a mentor to young women through a Baltimore-based professional women's group, Network 2000 (N2K). The yearlong N2K mentoring program is highly structured and includes supplemental educational sessions for groups of mentees on various topics of interest, such as networking and work-life balance.

Through these varied experiences, I have developed lessons for current or prospective mentors to increase the likelihood of success for themselves and their mentees.

Expectations

Before a mentoring relationship begins, the participants should have a conversation to ensure they have compatible expectations. Questions for discussion should include:

- How often will communication take place?
- In what forms will the communication take place?
- Are certain times of day, week or month preferable?
- Who will be responsible for scheduling the meetings?
- Are non-scheduled communications welcomed?
- Are there introductions to people or groups that the mentee is interested in and that the mentor is willing to make?

- What are the top two or three things the mentor believes he or she can offer to the mentee?
- What are the top two or three areas where the mentee would like assistance?
- At what intervals will progress be assessed?
- What will “success” look like?
- How long will the relationship last?

In many cases, a written agreement is helpful.

It’s Not About You

When invited to be a mentor, it’s easy to get a bit puffed up. The implicit message is: “You have it all figured out. I want to learn to do things the way you did.” This may or may not be appropriate. A mentee may need to reach the same place by a different route, or her or she may want to end up at a different destination altogether. He or she might have more or less of a career-centric focus, more or fewer family obligations, or different values. An effective mentor will recognize this and will listen more than talk.

I first experienced this when I was assigned a mentee who had no aspirations for upward mobility. Even though she was only in her early 30s, she considered her new junior management role to be the pinnacle of her career and hoped to stay in that position until she retired. I had some difficulty relating to this, but after I probed her a bit, I ultimately realized she was just wired differently than I am. The relationship was still successful because we focused on how she could be most effective in her current job. Though I invited her to consider the possibility that one day she might want to advance to a role with more responsibility, I had to resist the temptation to focus on positioning her to do that.

Don’t Shy Away from the Tough Conversations

A mentee might need coaching about personal hygiene, social skills or nervous habits. If a mentor isn’t going to help the mentee grow, who will? Sometimes this involves giving feedback that could be painful to receive.

I once had a mentee who wanted to improve his social skills. What worked best for him was specific direction: “If you can’t resolve a disagreement within two emails, have a face-to-face conversation with the person,” or “Don’t wait in people’s doorways to talk to them while they are on the phone.” Finding the balance between “so gentle as to be overly vague” and “so harsh as to be unkind” is an art. But once trust between the mentee and mentor has been established, it’s time to embrace the fact that growth often involves pain.

Have Fun

Mentoring can be rigorous. It’s important to design the relationship to include lighthearted interactions, too. I often like to meet my mentees for breakfast and devote some time to casual conversation. This leads to enhanced mutual trust and gives each of us insights into each other.

A concept that resonates with me is “reverse mentoring.” This is when the mentee has something to teach the mentor. I seek out reverse mentoring and often ask my mentees about situations involving younger members of my staff, social media or other areas where they have some expertise. This reinforces my respect for and confidence in them — and I learn a lot, too! Finally, I encourage all mentor-mentee pairs to celebrate every success. Often the mentor is the only one who knows a mentee is working on a specific skill and is the only one who can share the mentee’s joy in noticing growth.

What are some of your experiences with mentoring? How could we encourage mentoring among members of the ICE community? I’d love to hear from you. Email me anytime at claudia@bocusa.org.

***Claudia Zacharias, MBA, CAE**, recently began her second term on the Board of Directors of the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE) as the newly elected chair for 2015-2016. She previously served for two years as the ICE Board’s secretary-treasurer. She earned a bachelor’s degree from Hood College and an MBA from Mt. St. Mary’s University, and achieved the American Society of Association Executives’ Certified Association Executive (CAE) designation. Since 2009, she has served as president and CEO of the Board of Certification/Accreditation (BOC). Five of BOC’s six certification programs have National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) accreditation and an application is being prepared to achieve accreditation for the sixth program. Her background includes executive positions at the American Nurses Credentialing Center, Leadership Maryland and the U.S. Naval Institute. She was selected as one of 16 “up-and-coming” association board members for the SmithBucklin Executive Leadership program’s inaugural class and was recently named to the O&P News 175, a list of “leading innovators in the field of orthotics and prosthetics.”*

Five of the Most Frequent Problem Areas with NCCA Applications

By Donald A. Balasa, JD, MBA, and James R. Fidler, PhD

This Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE) white paper is written to help certifying bodies preparing applications for accreditation by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) understand the requirements of the 2014 Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs (Standards). Five of the most frequent problems areas with applications for NCCA accreditation are discussed. Suggestions are made to clarify the requirements for compliance with the Standards. However, this white paper does not provide an authoritative interpretation of the Standards.

Problem Area 1: Volunteers or staff of a certification program (or its related entity¹) are involved inappropriately with both certification — and education or training — functions.

In response to some uncertainty about what a certification program can and cannot do in regard to training and education activities, the NCCA Standards address this issue in detail. The Standards do not forbid a certification program (or its related entity) from engaging in certain education or training functions. Note the following:

Standard 3: Appropriate separation must exist between certification and any education or training functions to avoid conflicts of interest and to protect the integrity of the certification program.

Essential Element B: If the certification organization or a related entity offers examination review courses or materials to prepare for the certification examination, or education/training that meets the eligibility requirements, it must meet the following requirements:

- The organization or related entity must not state or imply that the examination review courses and/or preparatory materials are the best or only means for preparing adequately for the certification examination.
- There must be no advantage given to candidates who participate in examination review courses or education/training that meets the eligibility requirements.
- The purchase of these courses and materials must be optional.
- The certification organization or related entity must not state or imply that its education or training programs are the only or preferred route to certification.

Commentary 3: The certification organization may offer sample items, a practice examination, and a bibliography of textbooks and other references to help candidates prepare for certification, but the practice examination cannot be required or endorsed as a preferred method of preparation for the certification exam.

However, the Standards state that individuals (volunteers or staff) having access to examination content cannot be involved in any substantive aspects of any education or training functions of the certification program (or its related entity).

Commentary 2: A certification board, its members, certification staff and volunteers who have access to examination content cannot be involved in the creation, accreditation, approval, endorsement or delivery of examination review courses, preparatory materials or training programs designed to prepare for the certification examination. Appropriate firewalls should be in place to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest ...

For example, it would be a violation of the Standards for an item writer or reviewer to also be an instructor of an examination review course, or an author of an examination review book. Similarly, having a staff member or a consultant be the facilitator for both the committee that reviews test forms for comparability and also for the committee that determines the content of an examination study guide is incompatible with the Standards. Assigning to the committee that evaluates test items the additional responsibility of teaching in a training program that satisfies the eligibility requirements for the certification examination is also contrary to Standard 3.

Commentary 2 does permit, in certain situations, an instructor in an academic program in the profession or occupation to write a limited number of test items for the examination:

Commentary 2: ... In certain situations, it may be appropriate for faculty from an educational program that leads to certification eligibility to participate in limited item writing ...

¹A “related entity” has a separate legal existence from the certification program but is governed by individuals who are also serving on the governing body of the certification program, or who have been appointed by, and/or can be removed by, the governing body of the certification program.



***Donald A. Balasa, JD, MBA**, has served as the executive director and house counsel of the American Association of Medical Assistants in Chicago since 1990. Previously, he served as a staff attorney for the American Dental Assistants Association. Balasa received both his baccalaureate and law degrees from Northwestern University, and he obtained his MBA in economics from the University of Chicago. He earned his Certified Association Executive (CAE) designation from the American Society of Association Executives in 1985. He has served on the National Commission for Certifying Agencies from 2007 to 2013, and as chair from 2010 to 2013.*

Microcredentials: Administrative Bane or Marketing Windfall?

By Judith Hale, PhD, CPT, CACP; Jim Kendzel, EdD, CAE; and John Schehl, MA, CAE, RRC, CACP

This article is a recap of the presentation the authors gave at the 2015 ICE Exchange.

Microcredentials are mini-certifications that assess the skills and knowledge required of a unique practice venue or a subset of tasks that make up a larger field of work. They are used to measure and promote career readiness and recognize mastery. Similar to regular certifications, microcredentials require an analysis of the work and the work environment, successful completion of an assessment, and maintenance. However, they can present challenges because they increase the demand for psychometric, administrative and marketing resources compared to offering a singular certification.

Sometimes confused with digital badges, a microcredential is given to people who successfully complete an assessment and other requirements associated with a larger field of work, while a digital badge is an icon that is digitally connected to a database that contains information about the recipient, the requirements met and the issuer of the microcredential. The badge is intended to be used to authenticate the credential. It can also be used for self-promotion, branding and co-marketing.

Different Classifications and Uses of Microcredentials

Microcredentials usually have a relationship with other microcredentials, but they can individually stand alone as well. For example, some are add-ons to a larger credential, usually to credential people in subspecialties. Other microcredentials stack like rungs on a ladder with no relationship to a larger certification. In this case, each operates as a prerequisite, requiring a demonstration of mastery before a person can aspire to the next level. Others are more like patchwork in which the microcredentials cluster around a domain or family of tasks with no particular hierarchy. People pursue the microcredentials within a domain or task family most relevant to their work or career aspirations. Finally, some are a combination; for example, after earning a series of related mini-credentials, people can level up and apply for higher level credentials.

Microcredentials are being used to promote career advancement while recognizing people who may only perform a subset of tasks or tasks that are unique to a practice setting. For example, a manufacturer may want to certify technicians who work for dealerships in which customers are in different industries such as mining, construction, ship building and the like. The manufacturer does a job study and determines master technicians must be knowledgeable of core technologies such as hydraulics, electronics, fuel systems and brakes. He or she also learns that a fewer number of technicians require competence in all of the technologies. Therefore, the manufacturer develops a series of microcredentials for each technology. The dealership decides how many people it requires to be competent in each one; once technicians have demonstrated mastery of a minimum number of core technologies, they can pursue other microcredentials tied to specific equipment, such as a backhoe or an off-road tractor. The number of microcredentials being developed is based on market demands. This approach is similar to the stacked patchwork model.

Microcredential Case Studies

The presentation at the 2015 ICE Exchange featured representatives from AHIMA, NRCA/RISE and TIfPI, as they shared their challenges of offering an agile yet valid credential against the administrative and marketing burden microcredentials present.

American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA)

The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) has 14 credentialing programs. Two of the 14 credentials are role certifications. The remaining 12 are specialty-type credentials that take a deeper dive into a domain or a competency that comprises one of the two role certifications. As with many professions, the health information management professional is being asked to become more specialized in specific areas of the profession and to have a deeper extent of knowledge in the competencies covered by the profession.

The continued focus on specialization as well as a need to validate increased competencies in given areas is driving AHIMA to develop microcertifications that can be considered subspecialties. First, AHIMA chose the add-on model for its microcredentials, as an individual first needs to demonstrate the overall general competencies of the profession before being eligible to pursue the competency covered in the microcredential.

For example, the AHIMA Certification for Coding Specialist (CCS) is the gold standard in the profession. It validates the individuals' competencies as a medical coder in both inpatient and outpatient health care systems. As AHIMA embarks on the development of microcertifications for medical coders working in oncology, cardiovascular and the like, candidates would first have to hold the general CCS certification.

National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA)

The National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA) is implementing a microcredential strategy to address the most severe workforce crisis in its 129-year history. The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) predicts a 20 percent increase in demand for construction industry workers by 2020. As a specialty craft trade, the roofing industry is already experiencing a severe shortage of skilled workers and is losing an estimated 10 to 20 percent of its \$30 billion market to unqualified, untrained, and uninsured or underinsured workers. This shortage is exasperated by shifting workforce demographics that include the oldest average worker age in the industry's history (exceeding 40), a nearly 100 percent increase over the last 10 years in Latino workers (now exceeding 53 percent of the workforce) while failing to meet their unique career needs, and a new generation raised with a de-emphasis on working in the craft trades. The crisis is further confounded by an explosion in new roof system technologies requiring higher skill levels. The lack of a clearly defined career path was identified as a significant contributor to the severity of the crisis and predicts a grim future. And therein lies the power of and opportunity in microcredentials.

NRCA developed its first microcredential in 2004 by collaborating with industry stakeholders to address a very different crisis: rooftop fires. The Certified Roofing Torch Applicator (CERTA) program has rendered frequent rooftop fires a distant industry memory through a very specialized safety training initiative adopted by building owners, insurance underwriters, roofing workers and contractors. In 2006, NRCA was contacted by fire marshal at that time for the city of Seattle who was considering adopting the CERTA program as a permit requirement in response to a significant shipyard fire started by an uncertified roofer. After explaining the program, he stated "I had no idea your guys were that professional." Everyone benefits, especially individual workers who achieve a higher degree of professionalism, recognition and employability provided through CERTA.

Through the CERTA experience, NRCA chose a credentialing strategy to address yet another construction industry problem. The recent growth of rooftop solar photovoltaic (PV) system installations throughout the U.S. also brought forth increasing reports of leakage, roof damage, breaches in warranties and numerous other roof-related problems directly attributable to these installations. Though another accredited solar PV certification exists in the marketplace, its focus is on electrical system design and installation and fails to address the unique skills required when integrating an electrical system and roof system. NRCA invested in developing the Certified Solar Roofing Professional (CSRP) credential, its first ISO 17024-compliant certification. Administered by Roof Integrated Solar Energy (RISE), an independent 501(c)(6) body, the CSRP is driving professionalism in the industry and increasing public confidence in the

roofing workforce. Roofing craftsmen and women now aspire to achieve their CSRP and once again, everyone wins.

These credentialing success stories provided NRCA the vision and opportunity to create new and very distinct microcredentials that offer the U.S. labor force with very promising career options. NRCA is endeavoring to develop a series of 19 new specialty microcredentials beginning with a basic entry-level body of knowledge — adopting a stacked patchwork microcredential model — that will culminate in some form of a mastery-level credential (to be determined). It is in the early stages of gathering data, collaborating with industry stakeholders, and training providers and curriculum developers. NRCA is moving forward with this investment, confident it will create a highly efficient and competent workforce solution well into the future.

The Institute for Performance Improvement (TifPI)

The Institute for Performance Improvement (TifPI) developed 17 microcredentials with digital badges for designers and developers of instructional solutions such as instructor-led training, serious learning games, simulations, asynchronous online training and more. There is no barrier to entry into the field, as anyone can claim to be an instructional designer developer, and there is no certification for practitioners. Nonetheless, business and industry spends millions of dollars annually for the development of instructional solutions for its workforce. A job study determined that practitioners tend to specialize, and employers tend to hire, based on specific learning solutions. Therefore, TifPI decided to create evidence-based microcredentials for specific learning solutions. The series resembles the patchwork model, as candidates can pursue one or more in any order. The goals are to provide practitioners through recognition for quality work and give employers a way to differentiate those with proven capability.

In the microcredentials, applicants answer a series of questions and submit artifacts demonstrating the standards supported by attestations of the accuracy of the claims. The application then goes through a double-blind review using a scoring rubric. To maintain the microcredential, applicants must complete a minimum number of continuing education hours or pursue another microcredential.

Microcredentialing Exercise

After hearing how AHIMA, NRCA and TifPI were using microcredentials, attendees were assigned to small groups to answer one of three questions. Team A was asked, “What do you see are the opportunities that microcredentials present?” The answers were that microcredentials can help certificants stay viable and up-to-date in their field; provide a stair-step career ladder; and afford possible new revenue sources for associations.

Team B was asked, “What do you see is a possible impact on the business model, whether it is revenue-based or mission-based?” The answers were that microcredentials may motivate candidates, making them mission-based. Even though existing career pathways may not be cost effective, new paths cannot be forced on practitioners, and the association must do a market assessment to predict success.

Team C was asked, “What do you see are the challenges that microcredentials present?” The answers were that microcredentials must not negatively impact existing certifications; applicants must see microcredentials as a way to enlarge the pie not just slice the pie into smaller pieces; and there has to be a value proposition so they cannot be just about revenue.

To conclude the session, attendees were given the following guidelines and takeaways regarding microcredentialing:

- Be clear about the problem you want to solve or the opportunity you want to leverage.
- Decide what your promise is to the public and certificants.
- Scope the domains into meaningful and logical chunks.
- Consider the shelf-life of the domains.
- Decide on the relationship you want between the micros and a larger certification, if any.
- Do a SWOT analysis on each model you are considering.
- Be realistic about the administrative and technology requirements.

The following resources have more information on microcredentials and digital badges.

- ICE 2015 Digital Badging Report. www.credentialingexcellence.org.
- Gander, S., “Foundations of Digital Badges and Micro-Credentials”, Springer, New York (<http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319154244>).
- Digital Promise: Accelerating Innovation in Education; Developing a System of Micro-credentials: Supporting Deeper Learning in the Classroom.
- S. Gander. (2014, Dec. 10) *Public Promise of Certification* [web blog retrieved from <http://performancepi.blogspot.com>]\ 2014_12_01_archive.html.
- S. Gander. <http://performancepi.blogspot.com/2015/05/elementary-my-dear-microcredential.html>.
- S. Gander. <http://performancepi.blogspot.com/2015/04/on-publishing-and-presenting.html>.
- S. Gander. <http://certificationnetworkgroup.org/meet/cng-meeting-march-18-2015/>



Judith A. Hale, Ph.D., CPT, CACP, CEO is a prolific writer and well-known consultant in the field of performance improvement at The Institute for Performance Improvement, L3C. She has worked in the public and private sectors across all industries for more than 25 years, specializing in performance improvement, certification, evaluation and sustaining change. She is the author of the award winning “Performance-Based Certification, 2nd ED”; the “Performance Consultant’s Fieldbook, 2nd ED”; “Performance-Based Evaluation, Performance-Based Management, Outsourcing Training and Development”; “The Training Manager’s Competencies,”; “Workbook and Guidelines for Designing Good Fair Test”; and co-author of the award winning “School Improvement Specialists Field Guide.”



Jim Kendzel, MPH, CAE, currently serves as the vice president of certification with the American Health Information Management Association. Kendzel oversees the largest certification organization serving the health information management profession with almost 100,000 certifications issued. He has over 30 years of leadership experience in the areas of national and international standards, product and personnel certifications, and education and training programs. Kendzel has served on various standards committees impacting public health and conformity assessment both a national and international level.

He received his master's degree in public health from the University of Michigan and is a Certified Association Executive.



John Schehl, MA, CAE, RRC, CACP, is the executive director of Roof Integrated Solar Energy (RISE) Inc. He has been active in the roofing industry since 1972, including 17 years serving as education staff for the National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA). He holds a master's degree in instructional design, human resource development; is a Certified Association Executive; a Registered Roof Consultant and an Authorized OSHA outreach trainer. He serves on the Certification and Accreditation Governance Committee (CAGC) of the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI); as the current chair of the Workforce Safety and Development working committee of the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA); co-chair of Association Forum's

certification Special Interest Group (SIG); staff liaison to NRCA's International Strategies Committee, Rooftop PV committee and Workforce Solutions committee. He also is a founding practice leader with The Institute for Performance Improvement (TifPI).

Re-Defining the Value of Certification: A Case Study in Making Our Message Matter

By Morgean Hirt

When a reasonably successful, recognized certification program finds its candidate volume stagnating, how does it reinvigorate its messaging? How does it determine what to change about its message? This is the situation the Association of Clinical Research Professionals (ACRP) found itself in a little over a year ago.

At ACRP, our three-designation program was well-respected, self-sustaining and had a consistent volume of candidates for each of the programs. We had loyal certificants who proudly wore their 20-year anniversary pins and, when we talked to prospective candidates, they all said, "Oh, yes, I know all about your certification program," but we weren't seeing the same participation rates. We had a well-executed marketing plan that included print advertising with frequent email blasts promoting our testing windows and application deadlines, but we knew something was missing. We had to figure out what that was and how to convince our marketing team to change its approach.

Enter the *marketing audit*. The purpose of a marketing audit is to have an independent third party:

- identify strengths and weaknesses;
- identify opportunities you may be missing;
- identify challenges so you can address them;
- insert some quality assurance and quality improvement measures into your program (just as we do with other areas, such as test development); and
- help you communicate better and more efficiently with all your stakeholders.

While there is no “silver bullet” in marketing, a marketing audit can help you evaluate what you are doing and set a benchmark from which your program can build.

When beginning the marketing audit process, you want to clearly identify your objectives. Determine who is going to conduct the audit, what is prompting you to do it now and what you hope to achieve by doing it. At ACRP, we selected an outside consultant with expertise in both certification and marketing. We felt that it was important that the auditor understand that getting someone to invest in the certification process is not the same as getting someone to invest in a webinar. Even though we felt we knew what we should change, we needed an outside voice to get our marketing team and our board on the same page. We felt this would also help at budget time and would create better buy-in from our whole team.

A marketing audit is typically conducted with three phases:

1. Information gathering and research
2. Analysis
3. Recommendations

In Phase 1, you will have the opportunity to provide your auditor information and examples of what you do now. Expect to provide things such as your strategic plan and marketing plan (if you have one); information on who your stakeholders are; trends in your applicants or certificants (demographics, candidate volumes); examples of print ads, emails, postcards, Web pages, etc.; and any survey data you may have. What you should not do is create new materials just for the audit. It is important to go through the process openly and honestly.

Phase 2 is the analysis phase, which is really the most important. This is the opportunity for your marketing audit team to review all your materials and get an impression about your marketing and communications program. There are not specific standards that are used to measure your program. Rather, it is an overview evaluation against who your stakeholders are, what you say to them and how you reach them, and where improvements could be made. How do your position and your credentials compared to how the market sees them? Where can your program draw distinctions? What kind of employer support is there for your designations? Do employers and certificants share the same points of perceived value?

Recommendations for a path forward come as part of Phase 3. Once the analysis is completed, it is time to figure out what changes are needed and to prioritize them. This can create new marketing plans, determine tactics and help build a case for a budget. We identified three main priorities for our program:

- Strengthening our messaging around the value of certification (instead of deadlines and processes)
- Increasing our communication channels by strengthening our social media presence and large industry media
- Diversifying our target audience — with three different programs, we needed a message that resonated with each segment individually (not to mention targeting employers and other stakeholder differently, as well)

Because most of the recommendations were around messaging, the suggestions we received included ideas on how to tackle that goal. We needed to gain more understanding about what motivated applicants to become certified and move away from deadlines and process. This also included adding some human interest, putting a “face” on our certification program and telling a story.

The audit pointed out that we already had some data that would allow us to define the value of certification for our audiences. As part of our overall quality improvement, we surveyed our candidates and certificants, asking a wide range of questions from “How easy was the application process?” to “Who paid your application fee?” to “What is your primary reason for getting certified or maintaining your certification?” These data provided us with a great starting point in that message development. We used the ICE Value of Certification Toolkit as a starting place to help us build those surveys.

The auditors also recommended that we build a message portfolio with themes and messages that could be used in a variety of different communication channels. We had to create a portfolio for each stakeholder group, with some universal messages that could cross audiences.

While going through an audit can seem threatening and daunting, our team found it invigorating. The results gave us an opportunity to brainstorm ideas and come up with new strategies to approach our audience. Building a message portfolio and implementing the new strategies was the fun part.

Since we had data to work with, we drafted some themes directly related to why each group might find certification valuable. We then used a captive audience to get reactions to our draft messages. When our three exam committees met face-to-face in our offices, we carved out one hour over a working lunch to get their reactions to our draft messages. This gave us what we needed to hone what we wanted to say.

In order to help us tell the certification story, we enlisted more volunteers. We brought in a professional photographer for two hours and took high-quality photographs. We then provided volunteers with a number of prompts, stemming from the core messages we had developed, to generate quotes about the value of our program from our actual certificants. This resulted in about 15 key quotes and photos that we could use in a variety of different mediums. We identified three certificants who were passionate about the program and hired a videographer for half a day. He filmed each volunteer as they answered questions asked by staff off camera. We edited the tape ourselves, using iMovie, to create an 18-minute video and a two-and-a-half-minute video of our certificants talking about why they valued our certification. This has been provided to chapters of our affiliated membership association.

We then turned toward social media. Using the quotes and photos, we launched an essay contest. We asked certificants to tell us why they felt our certification made a difference. We had a variety of prizes and ran the contest through Facebook using a platform called Wishpond. Our board selected the top three winners through a blind review, and we asked Facebook users to vote for the “People’s Choice” of essays. Winning essays were turned into direct mail letters used to interest candidates in initial certification. Quotes and snippets from the essays were used on social media with photos or in other marketing materials.

We also engaged people on social media with “Trivia Tuesday” using retired exam questions. We posted one and asked people to share the answer. The next day, we posted the correct answer, a rationale and the reference citation. The posting routinely get 100 or more comments as well as many likes and shares.

We used data that we were already collecting through surveys to create a series of infographics that communicated salary differential, ways employers support certification, why people chose to become certified and percentages of certificants who refer their colleagues to us. They are used on social media and in marketing materials and emails.

By stepping away from certification process requirements, dates and deadlines, we engaged our candidates and certificants in a conversation about what certification meant to them and why others should consider it. We used separate messages for each of our audiences with quotes and photos from actual certificants who were “just like them.” In our first communication cycle with the new approach, our email open rates increased 26 percent, email click rates increased 51 percent and our unsubscribe rates decreased 14 percent. Our program with a declining volume has seen two consecutive cycles of a gradual increase in candidates, and our smallest program by volume (fewer than 100) saw a 30 percent increase in candidates.

Being willing to open yourself and your program up to third-party input and new set of eyes to identify opportunities and acknowledge challenges has the potential to not only to freshen up your communications but to reinvigorate your whole program. Letting your biggest fans speak for you, directly to their peers, can be better than any message you could have paid for.



Morgean Hirt is the director of certification for the Association of Clinical Research Professionals (ACRP). She brings over 20 years of nonprofit experience in personnel certification and accreditation across a variety of professions. Hirt provides strategic leadership and technical expertise in developing and implementing credentialing programs, focusing on test development, establishing governance structures, policy and standards development, program audits, strategic planning and accreditation. She has led a number of organizations through establishing industry standards for emerging professions. Prior to joining ACRP, Hirt spent 10 years as president and CEO of Certified Fund Raising Executives International Credentialing Board and was responsible for establishing international support across six continents for a unified standard of fundraising practice.

Content Marketing: Your Best Weapon for Building Brand Awareness

By Natalie Judd

In today's world of noisy media channels and emerging devices, traditional marketing strategies often fall short of the intended audiences. This makes it increasingly challenging to build brand awareness, increase engagement, drive leads and make sales. Progressive marketers understand this dilemma and are leading the way with content marketing.

What is Content Marketing?

According to the Content Marketing Institute, content marketing is defined as a “strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.”

At its core, content marketing is not new. Companies have been sharing information through a variety of media long before it became a business buzzword. However, the difference now is the amount of content, the number of channels and the integration of content within your customer-centric experience.

Content marketing is one of the most powerful marketing tools that a certification organization can use. Certification organizations have copious amounts of unique content and, if done well, content marketing can expand the program's influence, position the program as a thought leader and attract more certificants. Plus, with organizations becoming more focused on the customer experience, organizations that position themselves as an industry resource will be winners.

The “2016 B2B Content Marketing Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends” report produced by the Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs summed up marketers' goals for content marketing:

- Lead generation: 85 percent
- Sales: 84 percent

- Lead nurturing: 78 percent
- Brand awareness: 77 percent
- Engagement: 76 percent
- Customer retention/loyalty: 74 percent
- Customer evangelism/creating brand advocates: 61 percent
- Upsell/cross-sell: 58 percent

Looking at these numbers, this type of marketing can be a large source of revenue. Content marketing strategies must offer consistently valuable and relevant content and follow a disciplined strategic process. Yet the same report suggests that only 32 percent of organizations have a documented content marketing strategy.



How Do You Start to Develop a Content Marketing Strategy?

The optimal word here is strategy. In launching any new endeavor, planning is key. Creating a content strategy that is right for your business takes time to develop. But once it is up and running, that careful planning will pay off. Here are some basic steps to follow:

Plan with the end in mind. When starting, gather core members of your marketing team. Identify your business and communication goals. What do you want to accomplish? Use your internal customer data, Web and social metrics, or other sources of information to help inform the plan. List key differentiators or your program and the things your organization is best at providing. Also identify what's working, what's not working and any customer/audience listening that has been done that will help with this plan. List the competitors and then list your resources for the content strategy.

Identify your audiences. Use the listening data, audience data and metrics that you gathered in the first step to identify your audience. Determine the following: Who are we currently talking to? Who are you trying to reach? Do you have a previous relationship with them? How are we reaching them? What is the persona for each group?

To help flesh out some of these questions, your organization can set up listening posts. Some of the sources for audience listening include:

- One-on-one conversations – make the most of informal interactions and have an internal process for gathering data from your team
- Search of keywords using tools like Google Trends
- Web analytics
- Social media listening – search multiple hashtags
- Surveys – do small surveys often
- Ask yourself “What can I do to get to know my customers better?”

Using audience personas is a great way to come face-to-face with your core audiences. With personas, organizations can be more strategic in catering to each audience, internalize the customer it’s trying to attract and relate to them as human beings. It is recommended that you create three to five personas to represent your audience; this number is big enough to cover the majority of your customers yet small enough to still be specific. There are many online resources and templates to help create persona. Many of these templates include similar basic information; make sure to give your personas names and keep these “people” front and center in the process.

- Who is the target persona?
- What is their current role?
- What do they value?
- What are their challenges?
- What are their needs gaps?
- Where are they in your sales funnel?

Create your story. Use the research you’ve done so far to create a story that’s unique to your brand, service or company. This is the most important step of all. If you don’t have something of value to say, why should anyone listen? Providing quality information keeps potential customers returning, witnessing your capabilities and associating warmly with your brand. Highlight the qualities that make your organization unique and then customize these messages to meet the various audiences. When developing your story, ask yourself: What is the beginning, middle and end to your story? What style of writing best matches your audience and your organization? Do your messages/story have an emotional trigger?

Select your channel mix. There are myriad channels to choose, so follow the first rule of thumb: Your organization doesn't need to own every channel. Pick a few channels that resonate with your audience and put them to work for you. Any channel you pick will require constant care and feeding, so select wisely. Also think about how to create links between channels steering customers where you want them to go. Write down the channel strategy on a content map so you can better see your channel utilization and how to build synergies between channels. Use channels that allow for conversation, and get ready to converse. Remember, this requires artful conversation, not announcements.

Measure. Measurement should be done on an ongoing basis. It is key for understanding what to keep and what to change. Some core questions to ask: What's working and what isn't? What do we need to do differently to make it work next time? Is our approach achieving our business goals? Is it saving us time/money? Is it helping to make our members/certificants happier? Not every channel is easily measurable. Just because your efforts aren't measurable doesn't mean they're ineffective. Remember: Brand awareness is not immediately measurable but can pay dividends down the road.

When consumers have myriad choices to find the information they seek, the ability to provide valuable, relevant content is what separates brand royalty from the forgotten. With a solid content marketing strategy, you can instill a sense of immediacy and engagement with your organization that will get your audiences thinking "I want to associate myself with this." Just like the other components of your certification program, the content marketing strategy needs to be steeped in quality, consistency and relevancy. If you can provide a solid source of content that is valuable to your audiences, you've taken a big step toward your business goals



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The Journey to Becoming an NCCA-Accredited Program

By Amin Saiar, Ph.D.

The benefits to obtaining and maintaining accreditation with the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCAA) are many, but the requirements are many, too. The NCCA Standards are the requirements that determine whether an applicant program obtains accreditation with the NCCA. The standards cover a variety of topics relevant to certification program management, including psychometrics, governance, examinee eligibility, recertification and security of exam content. Seeking NCCA accreditation is an ongoing commitment to meeting or

exceeding the standards. There is much information, narrative and documentation that goes into completing a successful application. Likewise, there is a lot of work that goes into running a quality certification program. It is a major resource commitment, especially for organizations with a “small but mighty” staff and a very measured approach to budgeting.

A few collaborators (Janice Moore of SeaCrest Consulting and Chuck and Becky Stiggins of the Collegiate Strength and Conditioning Coaches Association) and I gave a presentation at the ICE Exchange in October on this very topic. In the session, we offered the Collegiate Strength and Conditioning Coaches association (CSCCa) as a case study in which an existing certification program successfully implemented a number of modifications and process improvements in order to meet the NCCA Standards and obtain accreditation with the NCCA for the first time in February 2014.

Offering a single certification is less to monitor, but sometimes more to worry about.

The CSCCa offers a single certification to strength and conditioning coaches who design and administer exercise training programs to college and professional athletes to improve athletic performance. With only one certification, the organization devotes all its efforts toward that program. One potential downside is that the fluctuations in the number of examinees per year can have a more noticeable impact on revenue. Since its founding, the demand for the Strength and Conditioning Coach Certified (SCCC) has steadily grown with increased recognition among practitioners and an increase in the number of coaches in the field. Similarly, external regulations may have a more noticeable effect on programs with single-certification organizations. In an effort to level the playing field among collegiate athletic programs, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recently enacted a rule limiting the number of full-time strength and conditioning coaches a school can employ. This rule was met with mixed reactions, with some stating that it will limit employment opportunities for many qualified coaches. It is unclear yet what effect this ruling may have on the number of aspiring coaches who apply for certification, but it is a frequent topic of discussion among certificants. With so much riding on one credential, it is no surprise that many established certifying agencies are looking to expand their portfolio of credentials.

Smaller certifying agencies have their own unique set of challenges.

So, what makes the process particularly challenging for smaller certifying bodies? You guessed it: limited budgets and resources. This restriction forces a certification body to be especially practical in its approach to the management of its programs. In response, the CSCCa staff takes a very active approach toward all aspects of the process, which is borne not only out of a need to minimize expenses, but also a desire to stay connected to day-to-day decisions. There is never a good reason to abandon frugality. Each decision affecting the program should be made with a sense of pragmatism and with an eye toward achieving the goals for the certification program.

Practical examinations are exciting and informative, but also challenging to design and administer.

A candidate for the SCCC credential must pass both a written and practical examination. The written exam consists of 135 multiple-choice items, and will soon be administered via multiple administration windows at computer-based testing sites. The practical examination, however, is administered once per year at the CSCCa's annual conference, and requires candidates to demonstrate the hands-on skills and abilities necessary for the strength and conditioning coach job role. Like many other certifying bodies, the CSCCa relies on volunteer contributions from certification holders and other content experts. During the most recent administration, over 130 volunteers (credential holders who have worked in the industry for 12-plus years) provided their time and expertise to judge the performance of SCCC candidates using a standardized scoring rubric. This level of involvement from credential holders is a dream come true for many certification program managers. Sadly, initiatives to introduce processes that can elevate the validity of a testing program, such as a practical examination, are often limited by budgets and available resources. CSCCa's experience shows that this does not always have to be the case.

We called it a journey, because it isn't a destination.

Every five years, an NCCA-accredited certifying body is expected to submit a complete application to the NCCA for each of its programs, which will be reviewed by the commission "de novo." Furthermore, each program is expected to provide an annual report to the NCCA that documents that routine monitoring is underway. While it is easy to defer examination maintenance activities to the last minute, obtaining accreditation status represents a commitment to ongoing compliance. To this end, documentation and planning are paramount. As the CSCCa continues with its ongoing efforts to improve their certification program and maintain accreditation, my co-presenters and I encourage you to do the same and avoid the frustrations and headaches associated with procrastination. We don't wish that on anyone.

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