

The Recipient Experience

An in-depth guide for differentiating your program and delighting your members

Who is this guide for?

This guide is written for anyone in charge of a certification or learning (online or in person) program looking to streamline his or her processes while differentiating the program from the competition.

Introduction

You've probably read best practices guides on how to launch, streamline, or revitalize your certification, elearning, or online training program. For the most part, these guides cover the same important topics... Who are you marketing your program to and what do they stand to gain from it? How will you structure your content and what will you cover? How will you create, distribute, grade, and update the content for your program?

These are all great questions, and their importance can't be overstated. However there's one topic almost every best practices guide leaves out - it's what we call *the Recipient Experience*. That is the way someone who has signed up for your program feels as they complete the last step and receive their certificate or badge. Whether or not they feel a sense of accomplishment and pride has a lot to do with the effort you put into conveying the importance and prestige of your program.

Individuals invest non-trivial amounts of time (ranging from hours to years) preparing for some programs. Often times they also spend significant amounts of money (sometimes into the thousands) working towards finishing a program. It all culminates in one single moment when he or she finds out if all the hard work

paid off. Take a moment and ask yourself what that experience looks and feels like for those enrolled in your program. Would you be excited to find out you passed? Would you be likely to share your achievement with others? Would you feel like it was worth it?

We've worked with hundreds of organizations with online training or certification programs, and if you're like most of them, this wasn't even considered until after delivering the course content. That's a shame, because it's one of the most crucial moments of the entire process, and it's one of the easiest ways to differentiate your program and maximize your return on investment in the process.

The idea of investing time into the recipient experience is neither novel nor new. When students graduate from college or university, they and their families take part in an entire ceremony dedicated to completing their degree. Students dress in formal gowns, line up, and then get their name called and experience a moment in the limelight as they walk cross the stage to receive a diploma. Granted, your program might not cost thousands of dollars or take years to achieve, but that doesn't mean the moment isn't just as crucial. It's the culmination of an effort, an experience, and it deserves the same amount of attention you put into crafting the program itself.

You should have one simple goal in this scenario: to delight your recipient and provide them with a way to share their success. What are your students receiving right now? An automated email that tells them their course "has been completed"? Perhaps they get sent a piece of paper in the mail 4-6 weeks long after they have completed the program, and they've forgotten they were supposed to receive a certificate, and their name has a typo. Imagine spending weeknights after working a full day - for months - on your course work, only to receive a canned response or an unattractive paper certificate. You are not going to forward this email to anyone. You aren't going to hang your certificate on a wall. You are going to be less likely to become a promoter for the organization you did your training with. You are less likely to share your accomplishment with similar individuals in person or over social media.

It's not a delightful experience and it doesn't provide any ROI for your program.

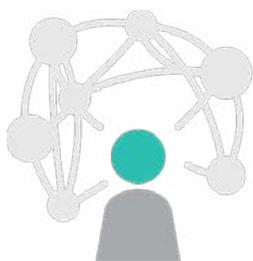
The Recipient Experience

This guide is going to focus on what we call the Recipient Experience. The culmination of your program where an individual gets to enjoy the moment when his or her hard work pays off and they receive their certificate or badge. From our experience working with a wide variety of organizations over the years, this is far and away the most overlooked part of their process. You know more about the training and demands of your industry than anyone else, but we can share what we focus on - the Recipient Experience.

Over the next few pages we will provide you with best practices in establishing a strong Recipient Experience along with practical things you and your organization can do to successfully implement it.

If you are limited by budget, human resources, or just plain, old time, don't worry - most organizations are in the same boat. The good news is that implementing a great Recipient Experience is not as difficult nor time consuming as you think it is, and there are lots of things you can do to incrementally improve your processes without spending a lot of time or money.

There are four core tenets of the Recipient Experience: Shareability, Timely Delivery, Verifiability, and Ease of Access.



Shareable



Timely Delivery



Verifiable



Always Available

Shareability

There is a lot of competition in the online learning, certification, executive education, and training spaces. Whether you're providing a free online course to learn a skill like social media marketing or whether you're issuing a prestigious professional certification, praise from happy students is the gold standard for referrals. Given the overlap between many personal and professionals makes this praise an excellent source for new certificate-seekers. Word of mouth and individual referrals have a much lower cost of acquisition when compared to paid advertising or paid lead generation. In short, you want to make it as easy as possible for people to download and share their certificate, as this can be an effective and inexpensive lead generation tool for your organization.

There are a number of ways individuals share their achievements. The most common are:

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is the largest professional social network, and for many, their one place to showcase professional achievements. Most certifications and course completions will get posted to LinkedIn if you provide the right share link. It's important to note that new changes to LinkedIn have made it more difficult to share with one click. This means you need to make the process as seamless as possible, and provide detailed instructions on how to add achievements to a profile.

Twitter

We've noticed Twitter, although for many considered a more personal social network, is one of the most popular places for people to share their achievement. The key is to make sure you make it easy to do with two clicks, and it shouldn't take them more than a few seconds. The first click should bring up the Twitter posting form, and the second click should be to Tweet the message. Yes, some people will want to tweak what's written, but it is up to you to make sure the default message is clear, concise, and ready to go to eliminate as much

friction as possible.



An Accredible certificate recipient, delighted with the experience of promptly receiving their certificate, shares the experience from their professional account. | source: Accredible

Embed Options: Website and Email Signatures

Many professionals have personal websites where they showcase their resumes, CVs, or other skillsets and domain knowledge. Being able to easily embed the digital certificate on their website, or link to it in their email signature, is hugely important. Professional email signatures get lots of visibility by colleagues and clients, and this is free visibility for your organization to exactly the people who you should want seeing your certification. In contrast to places like Twitter or Facebook where old posts are buried quickly, a personal website has a much longer lifespan, continuing to show your certification. Again, it's important to make sure that your embedded code or link follows good best practices:

Make sure the URL is permanent. The last thing you want to do is provide a URL that ends up being broken or taken down.

Ensure the certificate is mobile friendly. Now more than half of internet traffic occurs from mobile devices, so you want to make sure your design looks good even when it's on a phone or tablet.

Know that your online certificates are compatible with all major browsers. Since a lot of people are doing their work-related browsing from work devices, it's not uncommon for them to be using older or more dated versions of web browsers. Just because your certificate looks good on the latest version of Chrome doesn't mean it will look good on a two year old version of Internet Explorer.

Facebook

It's not as common for people to post work-related items to Facebook as it is LinkedIn, or even Twitter, but considering over 2 billion people are now on Facebook, it's good to provide the functionality. Much like Twitter, you want to make sure that the default share message is ready to go with the proper organization names, URLs, and other information.

Other Social Networks

The truth is various professional industries end up having their own unique sets of social networks. When you're providing sharing options, only supporting LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter won't suffice. Make sure to use a sharing widget that can offer a wider variety of sharing options depending on who the end user is. For example, a graphic designer may want to post his certificate to a different location than a teacher.

Print

Print is dead! Long live print! Sure, for many organizations the need for printed certificates is no longer a given. However, some organizations still want (or need, for compliance reasons) to provide physical copies, and that's important to remember. When you're choosing a digital issuing service, make sure you choose one that has the options for creating high-resolution designs that can be printed professionally or from home.

Wherever you encourage sharing, make sure to always give detailed, step-by-step instructions. Take time and put effort into crafting well thought out default messages to make sharing as frictionless as possible. Don't forget to show your support for your recipients by liking, commenting, or sharing their posts. It's a great way to show you care and it goes a long way in building rapport.

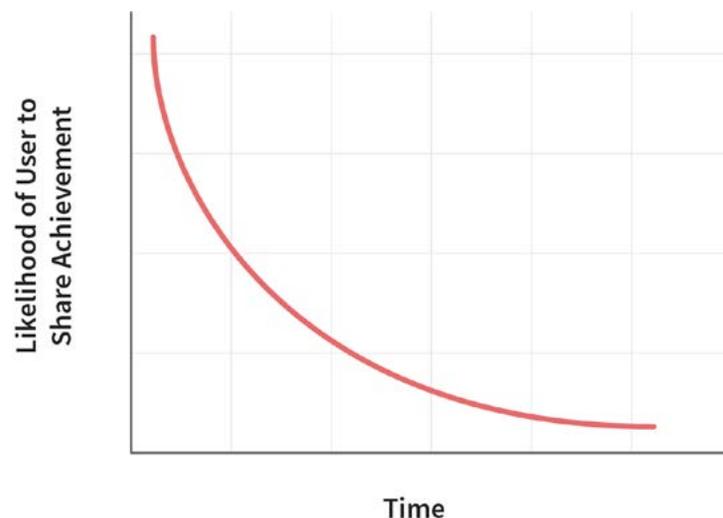
Timely Delivery

The most effective way to create a lasting good impression of your program is to reward participants immediately upon completion with recognition of their achievement. This does two things:

- *It provides a more seamless experience of your program and organization*
- *It maximizes the likelihood that he or she will share their achievement with others*

You want to reward people when they're still excited and when the accomplishment is still fresh in their minds. Most paper certificates won't get into the hands of the recipients for 4-6 weeks after completion, and that's assuming it's not lost or damaged in transit and there are no spelling or printing errors. By that time, individuals have either completely forgotten about the program, or have "moved on" and aren't nearly as excited to share their achievement.

There is an inverse relationship between the amount of time that passes and the likelihood of someone sharing or recommending the course to another individual, which means lower word-of-mouth marketing and fewer program referrals.



The inverse relationship between the time it takes to receive a credential and the likelihood that the recipient will share their experience | source: Accredible

Here are some things you can do to ensure timely delivery of your certificates or badges.

Cut down on the time it takes to send their certificate

This seems obvious, but you would be surprised how long it takes some organizations to get a batch of credentials created and sent off to their intended recipients. Often, they will wait for a large batch - either to reduce costs, or to prevent frequently repeating the same task.

Steps for identifying where to improve

1. *Sit down and map out, in detail, the process your organization goes through from the time you know who has completed your course until the time a certificate is sent out. These can be things like, downloading a spreadsheet of exam results, scanning sheets of attendees from a seminar, or emailing a printer.*
2. *Identify the longest time gaps within that process and rank them from longest to shortest.*
3. *For the longest steps, see if there are small adjustments you can make to cut down on delivery time.*
4. *Try and see if there are ways to automate a process or completely remove a step by implementing tools or software.*

Consider switching away from paper

There is a case to be made for physical, paper certificates. High quality, printed certificates can invoke a feeling of quality and value, however, you will pay a premium in both the time and money it takes to go with paper. For higher stakes credentials where these cost of these certificates is baked in, the cost is not a typically a major factor because it's already covered. For most programs, especially free online courses, eating \$10 or more per person to print and mail a certificate (that may never be displayed or worse, thrown away) can be prohibitive. Irregardless of price, there's no escaping the time it takes to print, package, and ship the certificates.

8 Hours - Monthly Workload w/ Traditional Certificates

Reduction in staff time spent creating, maintaining, and reporting on certificates. Actual results from an Accredible client.

| source: Accredible

0.5 Hours - Monthly Workload w/Digital

93.75% Reduction

Adopt digital certificates or badges

The best option for issuing in a timely manner is through digital certificates or digital badges. Both provide a way to quickly, and sometimes instantly, issue a certificate of achievement in a way that's an order of magnitude cheaper than paper certificates (and as you'll read, has significantly greater value). Some organizations decide to issue digital certificates and badges instead of paper, and others issue them as an additional bonus. It's up to you to determine how much value is coming from your paper certificates. Consider surveying a representative sample of your members or students asking what they did with their paper certificate, or if they would be likely to adopt digital.

Streamline or automate the delivery mechanism

There are plenty of ways to automate this process by using tools like Zapier, or by selecting LMSs that have built in integrations to platforms like Accredible. Regardless of how, the timely delivery of your certificate or badge is an immediate reward your recipient will receive at the height of their excitement in completing the course. The short period between the completion time and certificate issuing also means they are exponentially more likely to share their achievement. Not only is this better for the program, but it can save your employee's hours of time.

There are many ways you can increase your technical automation ranging from low-er-tech to complex:

Leverage plugins

Many training programs or courses rely on an LMS (Learning Management System - software that makes it easy to create and deliver online courses) to handle enrolment and access to learning materials. Being able to deliver this content online, at any time, is an enormous time-saver, and you are able to automate tasks like course completion notifications. Often, LMS software will have other plugins that will allow you to handle other pieces of your workflow, like feedback surveys, or issuing digital certificates. This is a great way to handle all of your workflow in one place.

Explore workflow apps

If no specific solution exists for your desired automation, try IFTTT (If This, Then That) or Zapier - tools that work like glue between two pieces of software. They work with existing software like Google Drive, Dropbox, and some LMS or CRM systems to automate repetitive tasks like adding an email attachment (report of exam grades) to a shared folder, or automatically saving things in a spreadsheet (students who have completed a course to a mailing list). Maybe you would collect the results once a week before mailing completion certificates because you didn't want to waste time collecting them every day. You could automate that process and have the results as soon as they happen.

Consider custom integrations

If you have a complex certification system, have lots of data in a lot of places, or you just have a unique technical integration, look for platforms with an available API (an accessible language for your course software to communicate with) to leverage.

Verifiability

The person who completed your course spent a lot of time and energy to become certified or credible, and they did that for a reason. They want to be able to show other people - typically their peers, existing employer, or future employers - that they have legitimately learned something new. The only way your certificate is valid to them is if a third party can quickly and easily verify the credential is real. If it isn't secure, then they can't trust the credential, and that means they can't trust your organization nor your members.

Fancy designs, watermarks, and foil or wax seals used to be enough to keep forged certificates a rare occurrence. With the rise of tools like Photoshop, the barrier to faking credentials is extremely low. And if you think people don't often lie about credentials, you're very wrong.

Digital issuing of credentials offers some relief to these problems. Now most providers of digital certificates or badges boast bank-level encryption, so in order to produce a fake, the perpetrator would need to hack into highly secure servers to manipulate data or issue fraudulent credentials.

There are three key best practices to ensure credential verification goes smoothly.

Make sure all the information and data is correct and up to date

This seems minor, but misspelled recipient or organization names immediately make people suspicious (rightly so) about certificates. That's one of the main benefits of issuing digital certificates - the ability to immediately edit information if needed. Additionally, make sure that you clearly define dates for certificate expiration (if they do expire) and if needed, revoke certificates if someone is no longer certified.

Make sure the organization hosting the credential is secure

Many digital credential platforms have great security, just make sure that your certificates are securely hosted and will be available for years to come. For

example, credentials we host at Accredible are securely hosted with bank-level encryption for at least 10 years (and the blockchain makes them un-hackable). At a quick glance of the certificate, a third party should know a digital certificate is up to date and valid.

Leverage new security technology whenever possible

There are new advancements in security and encryption technology happening all the time. Accredible recently enabled blockchain credentialing which you can read about here. In short, it's an un-hackable method of issuing credentials that a third party can verify with confidence in one click. Stay on top of these advancements to ensure your organization is safe from the myriad of hacking attempts.

Ease of Access

If you don't have an online delivery mechanism, then this problem is more straightforward, though there isn't much you can do to help with it. How likely is it that your students will end up remembering where they placed their certificate if they needed to reference it? Chances are if it wasn't thrown away, it's sitting under a pile of papers or in a binder of other documents. Printed certificates may be a nice touch when they are received, but they are difficult to retrieve, the information is not easily shareable, and if I asked you to produce proof of your certification, you would have to travel home and find it. Digitally issuing credentials allows the recipient to share and verify this information much easier than traditional delivery methods.

If you are issuing some kind of digital certificate or badge, it's imperative your members or students can quickly and easily access them online. Here are some best practices to follow:

Remove Sign In Walls or Accounts for Users

People don't like having to create a new account every time they use a service. By forcing your users to create an account and sign in, you're only adding barriers to them getting to and sharing their digital certificate. A login might be more secure for repeated visits, but there are other methods to increase security, and the burden of creating an account is often not viewed as worthwhile from the recipient's perspective. Forcing them to sign in or create an account to simply verify someone is credible is an unnecessary barrier. Additionally, avoid long and complicated URLs for your certificates and badges.

Make it Easier for Third Party Verifiers

It is of significant importance that third party viewers (friends, professional colleagues, clients) and verifiers (recruiters, employers) can see the digital version of your student's certificate or badge. Having these third parties request permission or create an account to see details of your course offering, and the marker of success is simply too much friction for a viewer to overcome to look at a certificate.

Conclusion

You spent a lot of time, energy, and money meticulously planning your program. Don't let up at the finish line. You should put the same amount of thought into your Recipient Experience. By simply fine-tuning your process and focusing on shareability, timely delivery, verifiability, and ease of access, your program will reap the benefits. When implemented properly, a smooth Recipient Experience will differentiate you from your competition, yield higher post-program engagement, increase visibility, generate more referrals, reduce costs, and save your organization time. For your recipients, it'll be a smoother, more delightful experience and maximize the value they get your of your program.

To recap:



Shareable



Timely Delivery



Verifiable



Always Available

1. *Shareable certificates and badges provide better brand exposure, increased engagement, and maximize student referrals.*
2. *Timely delivery means that people are more likely to share their experience with others when they're most excited.*
3. *Verifiable credentials are the only credentials worth anything. When a third party can verify your students really earned their certificate, you provide real, tangible value while protecting the reputation of your brand.*
4. *Easy accessibility is crucial to making it simple for individuals and third party verifiers to get to their digital credentials, so remove any unnecessary sign in screens.*

Next Steps

If you're interested in improving or implementing a better Recipient Experience for your program, you can sign up for an Accredible account for free and get started today. We offer a plethora of integrations with popular LMSs, support drag-and-drop spreadsheet uploading, and also have a Zapier partnership making it easy to automate the issuing process, whatever your current process. We'd be happy to also give you a demo to help you get started.