

7 Entrepreneur Secrets *for Auditing Your Meetings Portfolio*

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pproximately 27 million working-age Americans are currently starting or running new businesses. What if you could replicate the secrets of their startup success within your own department or organization? Despite the cliché image of entrepreneurs who achieve great things simply flying by the seats of their pants, the most successful businesspeople approach their work with intentionality.

As education providers, we routinely inherit programs with unclear or undefined outcomes; we operate in an increasingly competitive professional development environment with fewer resources and budget-strapped attendees; and we consistently grapple with unrealistic revenue and attendance targets while forgetting to sunset programs past their prime.

When association professionals and industry partners truly engage their inner entrepreneurial spirits, they're able to facilitate learning audits that categorize, audit and optimize the programs that comprise their learning portfolios, resulting in a stronger brand, an elevated reputation and more loyal participation.

While as many definitions for the term learning audit exist as the number of professional development colleagues you ask, learning audits ultimately result in a systematic review of either a stand-alone program or an entire meetings portfolio to determine its strengths and weaknesses with the aim of guiding subsequent improvements.

Following are seven entrepreneurial secrets as originally imagined by Peter Economy in his Inc.com article, "7 Powerful Secrets of Thinking Like an Entrepreneur" with a learning strategist's interpretation of how they translate to the professional development environment.

Secret 1: Build a solid relationship bridge.

Business is all about relationships, and building strong relationships is a pathway to success in both business

and life. Identify key stakeholders (e.g., staff, board and volunteers) who are or who might potentially be affected by learning programs in your organization. Each will likely have a unique perspective/stake in the learning audit. Then develop a communication plan that answers the following four questions:

- How will we ensure different silo groups buy in to the need and benefit of this project?
- How will we ensure key stakeholders become a part of the process (e.g., create a taskforce)?
- What is our preferred process/procedure and frequency for check-ins/progress reporting?
- How will we promote/celebrate key milestones?

Finally, implement the communication plan and nurture it on an ongoing basis. The hard work doesn't stop here. Solid communication is needed at every stage throughout the audit process.

Secret 2: Slow down to lead.

Business is moving faster than ever, but great leadership means slowing down to take time to focus on doing the things that are most important to your success.



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Therefore, carefully delineate the three buckets that comprise your learning portfolio before moving forward:

- In-person programs (e.g., annual meetings, multi-day conferences, full/half-day programs);
- Digital/online programs (e.g., podcasts, webinars); and
- Other resources that educate members or have the potential to educate members (e.g., blogs, newsletters, websites, magazines).

In thinking about “other resources,” consider both the resources you currently use to intentionally teach/educate members and those you could leverage in this way.

Secret 3: Choose your mindset.

You’re the one who decides the path you will take both in life and in business, and you’re the one who can change it. Determine the scope of your learning audit: either big picture or detailed. A big picture audit identifies for each of your three buckets the overall mix (e.g., type of event, number per year, strategic organization alignment and key performance indicators), the trends (e.g., quality of content, speakers, learning and instructional design) and the relationship to your organization’s body of knowledge. Conversely, a detailed audit drills down to measure the attainment of established outcomes



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for each individual program, and illuminates recommended changes at the program level (e.g., logistics, content and speakers).

Secret 4: Know your business "health" metrics.

The most successful businesspeople know exactly what makes their organizations tick, and they keep a very close eye on the metrics—making timely corrections when necessary. A typical in-person audit might resemble unbiased third parties observing and taking photos throughout an event; scheduled face-to-face interviews with learners and speakers; or small focus groups or consensus workshops themed around a particular topic. Back at the office, paper audits might include programs assessed against an established rubric; aggregate program evaluations and trend identification; or responses to new survey questions when the necessary data is simply not available. Furthermore, an entire education portfolio might be evaluated to ensure program outcomes align with the organization's mission, vision and values statements or environmental scanning might be conducted to determine what previously unforeseen member needs are lurking right around the corner.

Secret 5: Be determined.

Being determined isn't just having the strength, fortitude and persistence to move forward against the odds, but it's also being strategically prepared for the battle. In this case, if the standard audit tools and processes aren't a good match for your organization you might consider alternative audit formats. For example, you may research-benchmark the

learning program based on a validated list of key learning factors; you may review the results of learning assessments (e.g., scenario-based decisions, case studies, simulations, realistic hands-on exercises and quizzes or tests); or you may develop and deploy improved smile sheets focused on learning outcomes. Will Thalheimer's book on performance-focused smile sheets is an excellent primer in improving your evaluation measurements and outcomes. Alternatively, you may engage the services of a trusted colleague or a reputable consultant in support of your efforts.

Secret 6: Resolve to succeed.

Know that you can succeed, and then put all of your energy into it. Once we resolve ourselves to achieving something, then nothing can stop us. And it starts with developing a report according to stakeholder needs, wants and comfort level—either written or verbal (or both). In crafting the report, carefully consider the length/duration, the language used and whether or not to include the raw data/findings. Then intentionally orient stakeholders to the report, allow time for stakeholder reflection, present the key findings and initiate opportunities for questions to be asked and answered.

Secret 7: Be prepared to swim upstream.

No one ever said that finding success in business or in life was going to be easy, and frankly, it's not. Often you'll find that you've got to swim upstream—against the current—to make great things happen. At this stage it's time to implement new ideas/recommendations and sunset underperforming/mature programs, products and services. ASAE offers a three-step workbook for selecting and sunsetting association programs, products and services. The steps include building a team, deciding what is important and creating an efficient method.

Getting started

Beginning your learning audit journey is easy. Consider the first two entrepreneurial secrets:

1. Build a solid relationship bridge; and
2. Slow down to lead.

Now grab a scrap sheet of paper and divide it into four quadrants. Label each of the four quadrants as follows (in any order):

- Stakeholders
- In-person programs
- Digital/online programs
- Others resources

Then brainstorm and record your responses to the following prompts in each respective quadrant:

- Stakeholders: Who are the key stakeholders (e.g., staff, board and volunteers) who are or who might potentially be affected by learning programs in your organization?
- In-person programs: What in-person programs comprise your meetings portfolio?
- Digital/online programs: What digital/online programs comprise your meetings portfolio?
- Other resources: What other resources that educate members or have the potential to educate members (e.g., blogs, newsletters, websites, magazines) comprise your meetings portfolio?

Before jumping into Secret 3, develop and implement a communication plan focused on buy-in, benefits, collaboration, progress reporting and celebration. Based upon the scope of your learning audit—either big picture or detailed—the complete project will likely take anywhere from 30 days to six months.

But your efforts will be rewarded. You'll walk away with a complete picture of your meeting mix. You'll begin to sunset underperforming/mature programs. You'll optimize programs with promise. Moreover, you'll develop a stronger brand, an elevated reputation and more loyal participation. You'll break out from the competition and improve learner outcomes. And your bottom line will soar. Who could ask for anything more?

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