

Data-Driven Programs Flourish

The Learning Resources Network (LERN), the leading association in continuing and community education programming surveyed members to determine overall performance of lifelong learning units. Our results determined that in the past year:

- 30 percent reported an increase in registrations
- 40 percent reported an equal number of registrations
- 30 percent reported a decrease in registrations

For the first time, programs reporting a decrease in registrations are stating that they are concerned about their future. Their parent organizations are requiring them to be self-sufficient because they will not be able to fund the lifelong learning unit. At the same time, the programs that are growing point to their ability to better analyze data and make good programming and marketing decisions as the reason they are flourishing.

Successful lifelong learning units are collecting more demographic data on students. Community education programs are collecting address and birth year, while continuing education programs primarily focused on offering continuing professional education programs are collecting address, birth year and business type (manufacturing, medical, service, etc.).

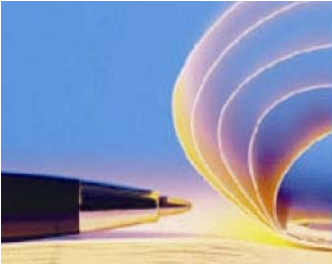
With this data they are determining their best customers so they know who to survey about programming and who to promote to more aggressively. They are also using the data to select carrier routes instead of zip codes to blanket mail to, as well as determining criteria for rental mailing lists.

Other critical data being collected are email addresses and the promotion method that caused the person to register. The email addresses are providing lifelong learning programs with another tool for promotion communication, while knowing the most successful promotion methods are guiding programs on where to spend and not spend promotion dollars.

Simply put, the successful programs are becoming more sophisticated and data driven. No longer are decisions made by gut, but instead back-up information is being generated to support decisions.

In order to collect and analyze this data, lifelong learning programs are much more dependent on their software systems. The system being used must be able to collect and sort the data so staff can do analysis. The software system must provide querying flexibility and be able to generate both extracts and reports. Lastly, the software system must be simple to use so everyone who

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needs information has the ability to do analysis.

Two reasons lifelong learning programs are migrating to Web-based software systems are for simplicity and getting better technical support. Normally the system used by the parent organization primarily supports the total organization with little focus on community or continuing education. Since lifelong learning units operate differently, they need a software system that is supported by the company that built the system and has technical support who can guide staff through the process of getting the system to generate the required information.

Lifelong learning programs will improve through the better gathering and analysis of data. Web-based software systems are providing programs with the technology to make the gathering and analysis easier, more efficient and most importantly – accurate.