

When the Business of Certification Falts

Lenora G. Knapp, PhD and James Kendzel, MPH, SPHR

Have the volumes of your formerly successful certification program reached a plateau or begun to decline? Even worse, has your program failed to ever live up to expectations?

These are the symptoms of an ailing credential. Here's what you must do to diagnose the problem and identify a solution.

Making the Diagnosis

Accurate analysis is key to finding the right cure for your ailing certification program. You should perform market research to gain insights into customers' perceptions of your program and supplement this research with a thorough examination of the trends affecting the industry and their implications for your program.

When a healthy program takes a turn for the worse, often the cause is one or more of the following:

- saturation of the most viable market segments;
- demographic changes in the market;
- contraction of the profession/occupation;
- a change in the nature of the occupation/profession itself, such that the credential has become passé;
- strong competition; or
- a decline in the perceived value of the credential.

If your program has never lived up to expectations, the problem may be that:

- The program was launched without the benefit of thorough market research and competitive analyses.
- The sponsoring organization failed to take heed of the information collected.
- The program either lacked a cohesive marketing strategy or had a marketing plan that was poorly conceptualized.

Determining the Prognosis

Once the diagnosis is complete, it's time for the prognosis. Evaluate the degree to which you can control the root causes of the problem and brainstorm about what you can do (realistically) to mitigate these factors. For example, although you would have no control over demographic changes in your candidate population, it is possible that you might lessen the negative impact of these changes by developing new markets for the certification.

Armed with a diagnosis and prognosis, you are now ready to explore a course of action. Three options are available.

1. Reincarnating your program into something new and better. Sometimes the disconnect between what the certification program offers and what the market needs is so substantial that only a major transformation can save the program. Such a transformation typically includes:

- modifying the eligibility requirements (e.g., creating an alternate eligibility pathway for a new market);
- restructuring the credentialing process (e.g., moving from a single- to a multi-level certification scheme);
- overhauling the content of the assessments (e.g., replacing a knowledge-based examination with a competency-based assessment);
- repositioning the program (e.g., partnering with a prestigious university to offer a cobranded credential); or
- reformulating the program's mission and philosophy (e.g., providing candidates with an intensive self-study curriculum or other educational/training aides).

Reincarnating a certification program is an intensive effort requiring considerable planning and substantial resources. Thus, before you move forward, you should be confident that the proposed changes will substantially increase the value of the credential, better enable the program to fulfill unmet customer needs, or position the program to compete more effectively.

You also should carefully weigh whether the magnitude of the expected increase in volumes will justify the level of effort required to transform the program.

2. Resuscitating your program. If a major transformation is not the solution, there are some less dramatic steps you can take to revive your program.

- *Increase the value of the credential.* Perhaps the most effective means is to enhance the visibility, recognition, and/or prestige of the credential (often by enlisting the support of key value drivers, such as employers). Providing ancillary programs and services for certificants, such as online communities or exclusive

events, also creates value and has the added advantage of helping you to build relationships with your customers. (See Part 2 in this article series, "Staying Successful in the Business of Certification," for more ideas on value creation.)

- *Develop a strategic marketing plan.* Certification program sponsors are guilty of two sins when it comes to marketing: reducing the marketing function to "telling and selling" and forgoing strategy formulation for tactical implementation. Consequently, there often is no cohesive strategy driving marketing efforts and resources are not used to their best advantage. So, take the time to create a strategic marketing plan that outlines precisely how you will provide value to customers and establish meaningful, enduring relationships them (which is the real goal of marketing).
- *Allocate more resources to marketing.* The budget for marketing a certification program is often only a small fraction of that for developing, administering, and scoring the certification assessments. Yet marketing – not psychometrics – will be the deciding factor in the success of your program. Consider what you could do to better balance the resources devoted to marketing and assessments. You may find that using alternative approaches to examination development will free up more funds for marketing. Or perhaps sponsorships from industry partners can supplement your marketing budget.
- *Identify new markets.* Are there are other markets that need what you have to offer? For example, some professional associations have found that industry partners are a strong market. And many certifiers have begun looking to international markets to sustain or enhance their growth. (For more on this topic, see our article, "Can We Talk?" in the forthcoming April 2008 issue of *Associations Now*.)

3. Pulling the plug. Is euthanasia the answer for your credential? The *2007 Knapp Certification Industry Scan* found that 30 percent of certifiers have discontinued a credential or are currently considering doing so.

When deciding whether to pull the plug, consider the following questions:

- Do the resources expended justify the number of individuals served – or the benefits to the individuals participating in the program, the association, the industry, or the public?
- Are there reasons to continue the program despite its low volumes?
- If you discontinue the credential, what could you do with the resources formerly devoted to it?
- What is the worst-case scenario if you discontinue the credential? If you keep it?

If you do pull the plug, afterward you may find some consolation in repurposing the assets of the program. Consider whether the program can be sold or licensed to another organization or whether the components can be used in new contexts. For

example, can you sell the certification examinations to academic institutions or training providers for use as outcomes assessments? Can you convert the self-study curriculum and question pool into an assessment-based certificate program?

Even when discontinuing the credential is the logical solution, resolving to do so is not easy. It is fraught with emotion for all involved – board, staff, and certificants. So before making the decision, thoroughly assess the status of your credential and evaluate all your options. If you make this evaluation process transparent to stakeholders and keep them informed along the way, you will lay the foundation for a successful termination.