

GO CHAMBER U!

More than just a rah-rah concept, learn how your chamber can become a regional training and education powerhouse!

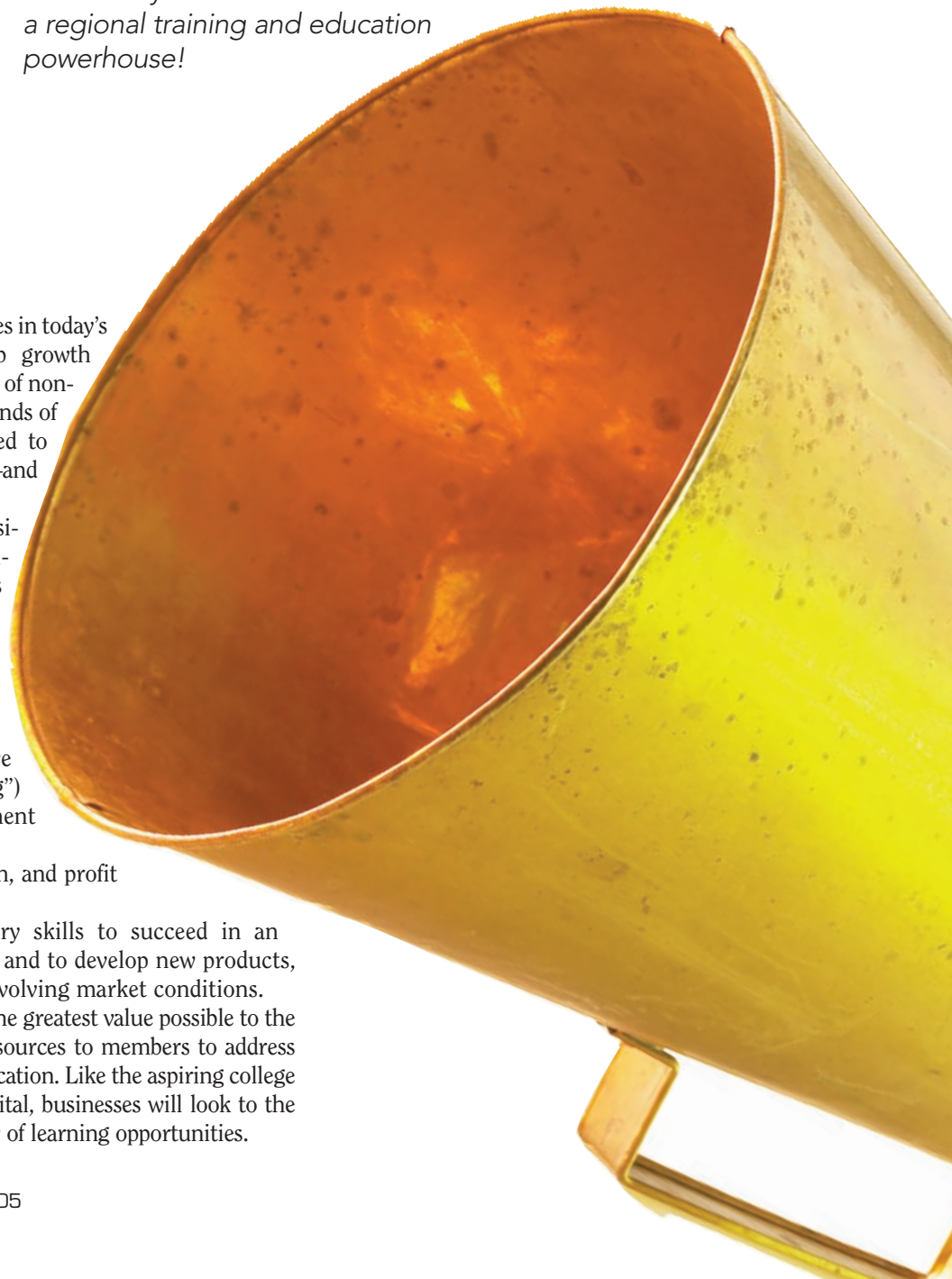
by Shawn Doyle and David Newman

Chambers face a variety of challenges in today's business landscape: membership growth and retention, developing sources of non-dues revenue, and offering new kinds of member value. Businesses increasingly need to see tangible reasons to join your chamber—and stay on board—year after year.

In the general business world, when business executives are asked what their top challenges are for 2005 and beyond, the answers include:

- *Leadership* – improving the leadership skills and abilities of their top executives, as well as developing the next generation of leaders.
- *Productivity* – everything from effective recruitment of top talent (“talenteering”) to the ongoing performance improvement of all staff in all functions.
- *Sales* – increasing sales, volume, margin, and profit to fuel growth.
- *Innovation* – developing the necessary skills to succeed in an environment of discontinuous change, and to develop new products, services, and processes under rapidly-evolving market conditions.

The chamber's challenge is clear; provide the greatest value possible to the members. So, how can chambers provide resources to members to address all four of these requirements? In a word, education. Like the aspiring college student looking to further their personal capital, businesses will look to the chamber if the chamber can offer a university of learning opportunities.



The chamber university model

There are many things a chamber university is—and isn't. A successful chamber university is analogous to a corporate university inside a *Fortune 500* corporation. If you are not familiar with that set-up, check *Figure 1* for a brief outline that distinguishes a training department from a corporate university. The chamber can become a regional learning and development powerhouse if it adopts the corporate university model, transplants that model to the heart of the chamber's offerings, and opens up this kind of value to all member businesses.

In our research, we found that at most chambers, about 30 percent of member businesses have their own in-house training department. For these organizations, a chamber university will act as a supplement and an on-demand resource when timing, cost, or distance prevents them from using their internal resources. The other 70 percent of chamber members have no training department. That's right: seven out of every ten of your members have no training capability whatsoever. The chamber university will virtually become their company training department. For these organizations, chamber membership moves from being a "nice to have" to being a "must have" to meet those business goals mentioned earlier.

If you offer a robust chamber university program at your chamber, you will also distance yourself from competing membership organizations. Potential members are always asking themselves "Why should I join *here*?" The standard answers aren't good enough anymore. There has to be some way to make your chamber distinctive and different.

We have learned that you must have the following in order to have a successful educational effort:

- It must be what the members want
 - It must be marketed heavily
 - It must be high-quality
 - It must be priced just right
 - It can't be a sales pitch dressed up as a seminar
- Remember those critical business topics from earlier: leadership, productivity, sales, and innovation. If your chamber can help organizations bridge some of these mission-critical business gaps, you will provide value beyond political activism, networking, and group insurance.

Topics, content, and faculty

How will you know what topics to offer at your chamber university? The first thing you should do is a member survey.

There are several electronic tools on the market which allow you to do the

survey online (<http://www.surveymonkey.com> and <http://www.zoomerang.com> are two of them).

Generally speaking, these surveys should be short and to the point: 10 questions or fewer. You can expect a response rate somewhere in the five to 15 percent range. Naturally, you have to ask the right questions in order to get the answers you are looking for. You not only want to ask questions about what programming they want—but also ask demographic questions about the size of their organization, number of employees and if they have a training department or not. Lastly, ask how many people they would send to each proposed seminar. This gives you lots of great data to review and use later for one-on-one follow-up and personalized invitations.

If your surveys come back like most of ours at Chamber Learning do, this is the order in which members will list their most-wanted topics: leadership, sales, and innovation. Every offering must somehow relate to your top-ranked subject areas. If you offer a topic which was not mentioned on the survey, people will not attend. Why should they? They asked for one thing and got another. Be sure to use snappy titles instead of pedestrian ones for your seminars. For example, if you have someone eminently qualified to teach Listening Skills for salespeople and executives, *don't* call the program "Listening Skills." Call it "The Power of Listening: How to Sell More and Lead Smarter." Remember the survey—members said they wanted Leadership and Sales topics—not Listening topics—so you've tied a great seminar into their wants and needs.

The format of a chamber university-style seminar should be full-day. A six-hour timeframe of 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. is attractive to many busy businesspeople. Not a one-hour veiled sales pitch, and not even a two-hour mini-seminar. Why? These kinds of "quickie" seminars can have a low perceived value.

Another format chambers should be wary of is the nationally franchised coaching or training company wanting to present "2-step marketing." This is giving away the sizzle to sell the expensive steak of a 10-week development program or other high-priced coaching, consulting, or training services. Companies like this use chambers as direct business development platforms, and this is in 180-degree opposition to our model of what a good chamber university is all about—content, content, content. Your chamber university seminars need to stand on their own as valuable content that's immediately applicable to real-world business improvement.

Figure 1

TRAINING DEPARTMENT
Patchwork of courses available as needed
Ad hoc scheduling
Revolving door of consultants/trainers
Reactive to perceived needs
Focus on one-time events
CORPORATE UNIVERSITY
Structured program designed in tiers
Programs scheduled well in advance
Proven in-house faculty of experts
Proactive to develop competencies
Focus on long-term development process

Businesses are eager to support programs that provide support in return. Recognizing this, in 2004, the Greater Omaha (NE) Chamber of Commerce created “Chamber Academy—*taking care of business*,” a comprehensive training component that provides undeniable member value.

The program’s weekly seminars cover topics catering to employees at every level within the chamber’s 3,400 member businesses. Participating companies benefit in one of two ways: marketing their products and services by sharing their expertise as presenters, or connecting their employees to new contacts while providing them with the necessary tools to increase job performance. In providing exceptional value to members, the chamber has also created a source of non-dues revenue with the Chamber Academy. This furthers the organization’s day-to-day operations, and therefore its mission to increase business, investment, and employment in Greater Omaha.

In its first year, the program saw phenomenal success. In 2004, 1,800 individuals participated in one of 49 seminars offered. The majority of participants who responded to the satisfaction survey each week found the specific Academy program they attended to be very helpful (70%)

and excellent overall (67%). The vast majority (99%) of participants specified plans to attend again.

Though the program’s presenters are not paid, they still jump at the chance to be selected, as the opportunity brings promotion of their companies. Their seminars are not sales presentations, but many speakers have noted that they have received follow-up inquiries and business as a result of their Academy participation. These presenters and their companies are also recognized on the chamber’s website and in a number of promotional publications. Demand for this opportunity has been so strong that the chamber maintains a waiting list of potential presenters.

The Chamber Academy served as an essential tool to chamber members, particularly for small businesses, whose structures often do not support a training program or department. By providing a high-quality product at a low cost, the Chamber Academy is a model of success—bringing in an average attendance of 37 participants each week, far exceeding the stated goal of 30 participants.

Source: Greater Omaha (NE) Chamber of Commerce

Faculty selection is another challenge. Far too many chambers open the floodgates to anyone they can find to deliver a program, including people who have never delivered a full-day seminar or people who are surprisingly unqualified. All it takes is one poorly delivered program, one consultant who is too pushy or “sales-y,” or one presenter who is just not inspiring on the platform, and your chamber university initiative could be finished. Being a member of your chamber should not automatically qualify someone as a presenter.

When an unqualified person presents, not only will you hear about it from dissatisfied members who were in the session, you’ll hear about it from board members and other chamber members who’ve heard about the debacle through the grapevine. News of this kind travels incredibly fast and can destroy your chamber university initiative that you’ve worked so hard to promote and build. For all intents and purposes, you cannot afford *one* poor program or *one* poor presenter.

Make sure your faculty is proven. Check references. Ask for videotapes or audiotapes of their programs. Read their books or, if they haven’t written books, identify what gives them the expertise to present to your members. Talk to other chamber executives or corporate members who may have seen them speak or train.

Pricing, positioning, and promotion

When it comes to pricing your chamber university seminars, it’s critical to price them right. We’ve seen a large suburban chamber struggle to fill 10 seats for a 90-minute session at \$25 a person in their “small business seminar” series. Meanwhile, another chamber with a membership of 1,600 sells out over 20 seats to each full-day program at \$119 per person.

Pricing is about perceived value. If you sell learning for \$25, it’s worth \$25. For some businesspeople, that’s not worth leaving the office for. If you charge \$119 or \$149 for a full-day, the value

rises—and the bottom-line truth is that professional seminar companies offer programs on similar topics for between \$199 and \$399. So, members can easily compare apples to apples and see that their chamber membership is giving them yet another cost-saving advantage.

Position the chamber university as a win-win value-add to membership. In fact, one way to increase non-dues revenue is to add a new membership level—Platinum or Executive Membership—which includes an entire year of your chamber university seminars at a significant discount. Perhaps add \$600 to your basic membership price, and throw in 10 seminar seats per year, which represents a savings of 50 percent or more.

When promoting the chamber university, you must not be shy. Unleash both barrels of your marketing shotgun—and do it frequently. Use your member newsletter, website, calendar, flyer packs, email blasts, fax notices, and postcards. Make sure your membership and marketing staff are promoting the seminars heavily in person at networking events, large meetings, and in casual conversation. In the marketing of each seminar, heavily promote the topic and make sure to highlight the qualifications of the facilitator. Some people will attend for the topic and some may be fans of the facilitator.

Many chambers underutilize their university as a member recruiting and retention tool. For recruiting, you have to fill the seats with people who have expressed an interest in the chamber but have not joined yet. For retention, you have to seed your early seminars with Board members and high-profile member companies, so they become the evangelists and advocates for the value of the seminars. Above all, of course, the seminars have to be outstanding in both content and delivery.

We have also found that this kind of initiative can get some solid local press coverage—so make sure to contact your local media outlets (print, radio, TV, etc.) to share the news of your

new chamber university, highlight your upcoming programs, feature participating businesses, participating presenters, and member organizations who have sent people and can give you on-air or in-print testimonials of how wonderful and valuable the chamber university programs are. Remember also to promote each seminar in local business listings, calendars, websites, and so on. Never stop looking for new ways to promote your chamber university as a whole, and each individual program you present.

Overcoming resistance from within

One of the biggest obstacles you will face, the moment you announce your intention to roll out a chamber university, will be from within. Specifically, some trainers, consultants, coaches, and others will feel threatened by this initiative and see it as direct competition that will take food off their table. In their view, the chamber has just swooped down and taken a chunk of their potential business and set up shop as a competing training and development resource.

Of course, the way to defuse this source of resistance is to point out that what the chamber has actually done is to elevate the value of their work, given them a podium from which to reach out to members and member businesses, and, essentially, taken the very public step of endorsing the value of training and development as a critical business function. You could also point out to these folks that you have *not* hired any trainers and plan to use members and member companies as panelists, speakers, trainers, and seminar leaders. You need these members now more than

SNAPSHOT: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Resistance from within will take many forms—some based on reality, some based on ego, and some based purely on misunderstanding. In one case, a local university asked the chamber to stop using the program label “chamber university” because they felt it was misleading, and that university credit was implied in that title. That chamber’s director of marketing calmed the irate university official down and pointed out, with extreme diplomacy and tact, that as far as she knew, there was no copyright or trademark on the word “university.”



Source: ChamberLearning

ever before. Trainers, coaches, consultants, and experts who can lead seminars will become your new best friends.

Using these strategies, your chamber can start to differentiate itself by offering bottom-line business-building value through your own chamber university initiative. If done right, your chamber will stand head and shoulders above the crowd as you transform into a regional training and education powerhouse. ☐

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