

How to Create and Sell Courses Online

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Problem: you are a highly trained, skilled professional, but the academic job market is less than rosy.

Solution: the market for online, nonacademic courses is large and growing. For “academic entrepreneurs” willing to retool their courses, this market represents an opportunity to build an independent business or supplement income from teaching.

According to some estimates, by 2020 the worldwide market for self-paced online learning will be between [\\$27.1 billion](#) and [\\$47.9 billion](#). The trends driving this growth in the United States involve shifts in the ways that companies hire and train employees, as well as changing expectations about the role of educational institutions.

At the same time, technological changes mean that even nontech positions require some familiarity with skills such as coding and e-commerce. Writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, economist [James Bessen](#) points out, “New technologies frequently require specific new skills that schools don’t teach and labor markets don’t supply.”

Simply put, keeping their skills current has become another part of the job for most working professionals.

More and more people are turning to platforms such as [Lynda.com](#), [Skillshare](#), [Udemy](#) and others. Unlike degree or certificate programs, most of these courses don’t lead to formal certification. Instead, participants aim to close an immediate gap in their skill sets or to further a personal interest.

While online academic courses are increasingly common, this model can serve people who aren’t looking for academic credit. “Online education makes information and skills available to people who wouldn’t otherwise have access to them,” says Martha Menard, executive director of the [Crocker Institute](#), which focuses on health care and technology. She’s previously taught graduate-level courses online and is currently creating an online research literacy course for integrative health care providers.

If you’d like to leverage your teaching experience and subject matter expertise by teaching online courses beyond the academy, here is a series of steps to make that transition.

Identify your target market. If you’re used to teaching in an academic setting, your target market has been defined. In fact, they’re already enrolled at your institution.

When you teach outside that context, you have to think about how to engage an entirely different set of people. That means knowing not just what their interests are -- history buffs, nurses with Spanish-speaking patients -- but understanding their needs.

Your course should help each participant solve a problem, and the more you understand that problem, the better your solution can be. Does your course help a marketer brush up on the techniques for statistical analysis? Will your course give an entrepreneur a basic understanding of accounting principles?

Dan Fincke, a philosophy Ph.D. who teaches [independent online courses](#), advocates finding the connections between your academic specialization and people’s interests. For him, that has meant engaging with people who want to use philosophy for working through the ethical dilemmas of modern life.

As you identify a target market, remember that this is an educated guess. Expect to refine your target market over time and adjust your course content and setup accordingly.

Differentiation. There’s a lot of competition out there, so think carefully about what you offer that others don’t. Fincke describes this as the “Why should I pay when there’s stuff out there for free?” question. His answer is to give

class participants the sort of intensive intellectual engagement they'd get in a seminar class. For your courses, maybe it's your knack for creating snazzy videos. Or maybe you're really good at creating activities that walk people through a concept in a way that they retain the information.

The key here is that content alone won't be enough.

Design your course in a way that helps people in your target market solve their most pressing problems. If your class isn't engaging, working adults aren't likely to stick around. Period.

Likewise, if they're paying for your course, they're going to want a direct return on that investment. Understanding your target market's needs will help you set your offerings apart from someone's free YouTube channel.

Think, too, about the kind of format that would be most useful. If you're targeting working professionals, a 16-week syllabus probably won't be effective. Instead, create flexibility by breaking the material into smaller chunks or multiple courses. Fincke, for example, emphasizes flexibility and offers refunds when participants can't attend a virtual session.

Logistics. To create and sell courses online, you need three things: a website where clients can find you, some way of organizing and distributing course materials, and a way to accept payments.

Once you've created a website (options [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) or added an online store to your current site, play around with your site's software to see which options work best for the courses you plan to offer.

The cheapest way to do this is through downloadable, password-protected files accessed through your website. You can also make creative use of other free tools such as the Google suite and YouTube. Depending upon how you organize your courses, that might be enough, especially as you're just starting out.

Other options include sites like [Udemy](#), which offers free setup but requires revenue sharing. Sites such as [Teachable](#), [Pathwright](#) and the company I work for, [Avizr](#), charge a monthly or annual subscription fee for access to the software. Pathwright and [DigitalChalk](#) also have a pay-as-you-go model.

Options for accepting payments depend on how your website is set up, but most software platforms give you access to tools called plug-ins, which are additional pieces of code that you add to your site. You'll also need a payment processor, such as Stripe or PayPal.

In building her online courses, writing consultant [Daveena Tauber](#) notes that she's leaned heavily on the abundance of free, entry-level tools like Weebly.com and standard editing software, in addition to using paid sites like Lynda.com to build skills. "Academics are great learners who usually don't have access to venture capital or business loans," says Tauber. Bootstrapping a business by teaching yourself skills can really pay off, literally, by saving you start-up costs.

Pricing. When [setting a price](#), you want to balance your costs -- including your time and expertise -- with what the market will actually pay for your service. Fincke states that this requires recognizing that your time is actually valuable and that you can and should set a professional price.

Some online courses have a per-course fee, while others operate on a subscription basis. For Fincke, setting up a subscription button through PayPal was a way to make monetary exchange a less prominent part of the class dynamic. Be creative with your pricing model. Perhaps you offer a free introductory course and then charge for additional content. Maybe you offer a discount to previous participants who take additional courses. Giving away some of your materials, whether on your site or through a platform like YouTube, can be another way to increase interest in your paid offerings.

Think, too, about the level of investment you'll have in the course once it's up and running. Some classes are set up

as purely content delivery, while others have the sort of interactivity you'd expect from a more traditional class.

Self-Marketing Is Key

As important as it is to create engaging content, Tauber notes that “a great class with no marketing is a class without students.” If you're just starting out, creating a network of potential clients through effective marketing is crucial. Tauber [offers classes](#) through the Udemy platform and has seen her consulting business grow as a result. Students take her Udemy course and then contact her for additional help.

This is another area where knowing your target market will pay off, because you can meet them where they are -- on blogs, websites, forums or social media -- to build awareness of your courses. Marketers refer to this as a “funnel,” and your goal is to build awareness in as many relevant venues as possible, with the goal of bringing people back to your business. Fincke, for example, built his business through a robust social media presence, including active [blogging](#) and Facebook.

Once you start getting participants, reach out to them for feedback. Include a brief exit survey after each course. Make friends with Google Analytics to figure out how people are finding your site. If you get particularly good feedback, find a way to share that on your website, in a newsletter or through your social media channels. This sort of social proof can convince others that your course is a good investment of time and money.

These steps aren't necessarily quick and easy, but they're very doable for people with prior teaching experience and subject matter knowledge. It requires reimagining your courses -- and maybe yourself. But there's no reason why academic entrepreneurs shouldn't leverage their skills and expertise to take advantage of a growing market for nonacademic online courses.