

Delivering Marriage and Relationship Education Services on the Web

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Online education is surging, with about four million students in the United States taking at least one online course in 2007. Advances in internet technologies during the past few years have made it technically feasible to deliver high-quality, highly engaging and high-impact online education. Additionally, about ninety percent of adults aged twenty to thirty report having broadband internet access at home—and the internet is firmly established as the preferred vehicle for information seeking, entertainment and social connecting within this demographic. Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) can capitalize on this trend in order to locate, educate and captivate the current generation.

Traditionally, marriage education classes are held in a dedicated room located in a community organization. This strategy requires MRE participants to gather regularly (typically weekly) on an evening or weekend; it may encourage a commitment to attend and the presence of peers may be beneficial to program effectiveness. This service delivery strategy can be challenged, however, by the convenience of the location, participant schedules and the availability of a quality workshop leader. Thus, it makes sense for MRE providers to consider the internet as both a delivery mechanism for MRE and as a supplement to MRE services delivered in a class setting.

Delivering MRE Online

There are two models for online marriage education

that appear particularly promising—self-paced, bite-sized MRE and live-to-your-living room MRE.

Self-paced, bite-sized MRE

Experience in the field suggests that, on average, casual users of self-paced MRE (like those users who found the MRE activity via search engine advertising) will spend two minutes per activity. According to a recent study conducted by Power of Two, highly motivated users, such as those who have enrolled in the research study about self-paced MRE, will spend an average of nine minutes per visit. Nearly half of such users will return to the resource four or more times, with ten percent returning for more than fifteen visits.

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helpful. In addition, such activities encourage the end users to continue to think after completing the activity. Evaluation data also suggests that the quality of the interactive experience is critical to the efficacy of these materials. In other words, today's twenty to thirty year-olds are not captivated by glorified Power Point presentations – no matter how good the information is.

Live-to-your-living-room MRE

Advances in webinar and audio conferencing technologies during the past two years have made it possible to design instructor-led synchronous MRE courses. Such classes are taught by a live instructor using various combinations of phone conferencing and webinar technologies. The privacy and flexibility of such classes are often a draw for participants.

While the potential for this vehicle to deliver MRE is enormous, initial experiences by several providers have demonstrated that, as in the case of self-paced, bite-sized materials, the quality and level of interactivity in the experience is critical to maintaining

interest in such classes. Practitioners delivering MRE in this format may want to consider the following guidelines:

- Hire highly entertaining and engaging instructors.
- Conduct pre-registration and/or require deposits to encourage completion.
- Encourage small group sizes so time for questions and answers/practice of skills is possible.
- Use diverse media types.
- Conduct courses at a fast pace to hold participant attention.
- Offer technical support and/or pre-class tech sessions to minimize technical disruptions.

Supplementary MRE services

Internet-based resources can provide an engaging and cost-effective way to keep MRE participants connected to your program or to reinforce key curriculum lessons. For many organizations, the most efficient way to use the internet as a supplement to other MRE services is to create an auto-responder series that automatically sends e-mails to participants after they complete a workshop.

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generally easiest to set up via a web-based e-mail messaging service like Mailchimp, Constant Contact or i-Contact.

When selecting a provider for this purpose, you will need to decide if you want to use a service that requires “double-opt-in.” This means that people need to click a link in an e-mail to confirm they really want to be on your list. Double-opt-in services are an excellent way to protect your organization from Spam complaints. At the same time, many of your participants will not click the double-opt-in e-mail, making it impossible for you to contact them this way.

Make sure to obtain e-mail addresses for all people with whom your organization interacts. When collecting names for your e-mail list, ask your constituents if you can send them your newsletter and/or post-class resources. Whenever possible, have proof that someone gave you permission to e-mail them.

Make sure your e-mail campaign includes a variety of messages. For example, your e-mails might include:

- Links to articles.
- Post-class reflections from other past participants.
- Links to quizzes or games.
- Activities to practice at home.
- An invitation to join a Facebook Fan page or other social media place to connect to other past participants.
- Links to a home-made video message from the instructor posted on You-Tube.
- Copies of handouts from class.
- Reminders about things they learned in class.

When creating a supplemental e-mail campaign:

- Use engaging headers to each e-mail.
- Maintain a consistent template throughout.
- Provide entertaining examples.
- Include a reminder of why they are getting the e-mail and how to remove themselves from the list.

Online education has become a common resource for many, and MRE programs can capitalize on this current trend by providing services online. This can be done by offering an interactive, self-paced MRE program that provides an educational punch in a short amount of time. Another way to reach people via the internet is to use a combination of webinar and audio conferencing technologies; there are several strategies educators can implement to ensure that this outlet is successful. Finally, MRE programs can be a supplement to classes that were conducted face-to-face in a classroom.

Additional Resources

Organizations wishing to add self-paced, bite-sized MRE to their offerings are encouraged to leverage the Power of Two's library of free MRE materials. These are all simple to add to any website and are freely available. Contact info@po2.com for details.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Power of Two President Abigail Hirsch, PhD, for her contributions to this tip sheet. Dr. Hirsch holds a PhD in Clinical Psychology and helped to develop the original Power of Two marriage curriculum, workbook and on-line courses. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.