Distance Learning Up Close
By John Riley

How does a nonprofit organization create a robust, growing campus of on-line programs when development costs are out of sight and members are reluctant to pay even a modest sum for on-line training?

If you are thinking, "well, you can't," then you are not far from the truth. SOA finds itself struggling to balance the sentiment to "get continuing education (CE) into cyberspace" where it is available to all at any time against the reality that this goal is both expensive and time-consuming and does not always result in a high level of utilization by the membership.

There are ten programs currently on the SOA Virtual Campus. Most were created from live sessions at major meetings, which made them relatively inexpensive to produce. These have provided us with our own experience study as to whether members would be interested in paying for on-line programs on a "retail" basis. For the most part, they have not. In the last six months since seven programs were added to the Campus, we have had less than fifty paying customers; the return on investment has been awful. It should be noted that the free program on "Tailoring Products for the Bancassurance Market" has done very well with over 200 people signing up for that within the same time span.

With apologies for elevating the financial side of things, the point must be made that money remains an excellent barometer for all things CE. Nonprofits make a mistake if they expect on-line training to play by the same rules as live meetings and seminars. Absent some organization-wide commitment to sacrifice resources to it come what may, on-line programming cannot flourish without using some creativity in how it is funded and without targeting the right audience.

The SOA has recently released two voluntary distance learning subscriptions for pension actuaries and candidates involved in the Professional Development program. In both cases, all the programs on the Virtual Campus are provided to the subscriber as part of the fee along with several audio tapes. Early response to these programs has been very good, most likely due to the fact that both groups face a continuing education requirement.

In theses cases, distance learning has a powerful appeal. The subscriptions provide credits (or units) more conveniently and at a far less cost than attendance at "live" events. Given the variety of audio tapes available, it also lets individuals fashion a very specific, relevant course of study. SOA CE is investigating the possibility of creating a program to assist actuaries who must meet the qualification requirements for signing prescribed statements of actuarial opinion. Distance learning might be a good option here for the six hours per year of individual study.

So, like many dotcom organizations who championed it, the bloom is off the computer-based training rose, but all is not lost. The fact that you can sit down at your computer

and get credible continuing education at the touch of a finger means that distance learning is here to stay. If and when the SOA mandates a continuing education requirement for all of its members, it will most certainly become an extremely important delivery method.

Until then, I would love to chat about its virtues at one of our "live" programs. See you then!