

Setting the Standard: An Introduction to Content Distribution



Table of contents

Introduction.....	2
Tips for content development.....	3
eLearning standards primer.....	4
Distribution options.....	5
1. Packaged files.....	5
2. Direct delivery.....	6
3. Content marketplaces.....	7
4. Centralized distribution.....	8
Putting it into practice.....	9
Successful models.....	9
Wrapping it up.....	10

Why is eLearning content distribution important?

Whether you build custom learning and training solutions or publish commercial off-the-shelf content, you invest a lot of time and energy creating courses. And chances are, you don't spend all your time creating content just to let it sit on your servers.

You want to deliver that content in a way that's compatible with multiple systems, manageable for admins, and easy for learners to access. In other words, content distribution is just as important as actually creating that content. But with various options for managing and delivering your courses, what's the right solution for you and your client base?

The good news is there are more options when it comes to packaging and sharing eLearning content than you may realize. Of course, there are a few considerations to keep in mind when selecting any distribution method. For instance, your delivery solution might depend solely on your client's system requirements. And how will you manage updates, track licensing, support users, and report on usage?

Regardless if you're new to eLearning content delivery or are simply frustrated with your current setup, this eBook is perfect if you:

- create and sell off-the-shelf content,
- are a training company, or
- design custom eLearning content to customers as a service to a larger product offering.

Key takeaways

In this eBook, we'll:

- provide directions and methods for helping you efficiently distribute content,
- explore options for distributing and selling content, and
- explain the various eLearning standards to help you select the right one for your courses.

Tweet this

Content distribution is just as important as actually creating your #eLearning courses.



Tips for content development

Keep the following in mind as you create and package your courses. Your learners and clients will thank you—and you will thank you, too.

Intent

What is the purpose of the content, and does your course collect data to validate it? Focus on **objectives** that achieve learning goals, and make sure they are measured within the content and can also support your client's overall priorities.

Compatibility

What format/standards will your courses need to support? **Standards** such as SCORM and xAPI can help ensure your content not only plays in your client's LMS, but can also determine what data is captured. And your clients will likely tell you exactly which standard they require. So, be sure you know the spec requirements before you start designing content.

Accessibility

Where and how is your content consumed? Create courses that conform to a user's needs and the device he or she is using. For example, make sure to use **responsive design** when creating courses that are most often taken on mobile devices.

Bookmarking

As a learner progresses through your content, set bookmarks periodically. Then, when the learner returns, be sure to **save learner progress** and give them the opportunity to return to where they left off. The SCORM standard supports setting bookmarks (via `cmi5.location`), so no excuses not to use them.

Exit options

How learners leave your course can be crucial when it comes to recording data from that session, as that is the time when data is stored. If a learner exits in an unexpected way (Read: kills the window running the session), it's not only a poor learner experience, but you run the risk of losing data. So your best bet is removing the guesswork by making it really easy for learners to exit your course. An exit button works great and is especially useful if you expect your content to run in an iFrame setup.

Reporting

At a bare minimum, make sure your content sets a completion status. You are likely going to want to collect much more data (see Intent), but your clients and their LMSs should at least be able to handle recording "Complete." So, your course will need to be able to report that completion status to your LMS and will probably go as far as tracking score, duration, and pass/ fail. And if you want to really dig into interactions (question and answer level details), here are the **4 things every SCORM course should do** to best handle interactions.

Source: **The Top 5 Things Every Piece of SCORM Content Should Do at Runtime**

eLearning standards primer

Imagine you're hanging a picture that requires inserting a few nails into a wall. You could use a screwdriver or wrench to pound those nails into the wall, but a hammer is a much more efficient tool. Even though you have several tools to choose from, it's important to use the right tool that fits the job. And the same principle applies when it comes to eLearning standards. You have options, and it's worth understanding each one well enough to know which option is right for your course.

CAVEAT: Compatibility with a client system universally applies. If a client's LMS requires a specific standard, you'll need to share your course in that standard. Don't worry! There are options for how to achieve this without compromising your content. So while compatibility needs to be considered, it shouldn't dictate your content design.

SCORM 1.2

This is the most universal and basic of the eLearning standards. Almost every commercial LMS and authoring tool supports SCORM 1.2—which captures completion, score, duration, satisfaction, and basic—but-limited interaction data (e.g. question/answer details).

SCORM 2004

There are actually three versions of SCORM 2004 (2nd, 3rd, and 4th Editions). SCORM 2004 3rd Edition is the most commonly supported. Along with the data collected by SCORM 1.2, SCORM 2004 is best to use if you have a lot of interaction data. It also supports sequencing and navigation for more sophisticated course design. Adoption by LMSs and authoring tools varies.

Due to how the content communicates with the LMS player via the SCORM API, all versions of SCORM require and expect the content to reside on the LMS domain or server.

AICC

AICC supports cross-domain inherently, meaning you can host content on your servers if you prefer. Data collected mirrors SCORM 1.2. This standard, however, is now defunct and tools that support AICC are not as prevalent.

xAPI

xAPI, or Experience API, provides flexibility when it comes to what data you decide to track. The options are virtually limitless. Support by LMSs and authoring tools varies wildly, from the amount of support, to how it has been implemented. To fully realize the benefits of using xAPI in your content, developers are required.

cmi5

As a companion to xAPI, cmi5 is designed for using xAPI in the context of launched activities. It provides the flexibility of collecting a wide variety of data while handling the interactions between content and an LMS or launching platform. Adoption is low across authoring tools and LMSs.

LTI

LTI, or Learning Tools Interoperability, is most widely seen in the EdTech space with limited adoption by corporate LMSs. Data shared back to the launching LMS is limited to score (in almost every case).

Option 1: Packaged files



One of the most traditional routes for creating and distributing eLearning content is using an authoring tool that allows you to easily package and publish your course in the preferred standard(s). The output is often a .zip file that includes all of the course assets packaged up for you to share with your client, which they can now import and assign through their LMS. In this scenario, you're basically handing clients "everything," or self-contained files that will live on their servers.

While this turnkey solution is a quick and easy way to deliver the content to your client, there are a few downsides to consider when going this route.

Over usage

Because your content is housed on your client's system, you don't have any way of knowing how many people are actually using your content or for how long. That means you risk losing out on revenue from adding more seats or renewing expired subscriptions.

Dated content

Prepackaged files don't include content updates, so you run the risk that your courses are not always up-to-date or accurate. This can be especially important for compliance or regulatory training, as industry-specific rules and processes are routinely updated.

Intellectual property issues

Once you hand over the content, you risk someone copying, stealing, or using it after licensing has expired. *(You also risk lost income. See: Over usage)*

Limited insights

Because you can't access where your content is hosted, you don't have a full understanding of how people are using your content or the ability to report on course usage. As a result, you don't know how learners are interacting with and performing with your courses.

Administrative burdens

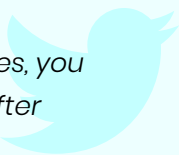
Keep in mind that any time you update your course, you will need to deliver a new file to your customer, who in turn will need to re-upload and reassign in their LMS. Those steps can add up quickly for both you and the LMS admin.

Incompatibility

Handing course files to each of your clients means that you also need to make sure your content can be played across a variety of LMSs. One client might have an LMS that only supports SCORM 1.2, while another uses an AICC-only LMS. You will need to be able to create course packages that meet each client's unique requirements, which may mean maintaining several different file types and standards.

Tweet this

Once you hand over #eLearning content files, you risk someone copying, stealing, or using it after licensing has expired.



Packaged file distribution is best for:

- Courses that can be easily packaged and don't require frequent updates
- When IP protection is not crucial
- When subscription management is not critical



Option 2: Direct delivery

Some content providers, particularly training companies, deliver training directly to learners via their own website or portal. These can run the gamut from a sophisticated, custom-developed platform to a basic WordPress site.

Going this route means learners are coming to your platform to access training rather than bringing your content into their system. Because the content is served from your platform, you control the content, learner experience and visibility into usage. This also allows you to serve a user population that might not have an LMS or other means to access training. Of course, there are a few things to consider when it comes to delivering content directly to learners from your platform.

Technical resources and requirements

Don't forget, you have to build and maintain the platform. And like all web-based systems, closed platforms require admin support not only for end users, but also for the system itself. Remember, the more support you have to provide, the less time you can spend creating content. You're also responsible for creating a secure login for each learner.

Accessibility

Learners are directed away from internal tools and systems. Some learners may not be able to access your portal depending on their locations or security settings and may have to learn another interface and maintain separate login credentials. Single sign-on (SSO) or other authentication methods are highly recommended. Otherwise, prepare for the inevitable reset password requests.

Disconnected data

Requiring end users to access content from your platform can be a roadblock for clients who have their own LMSs. Using a third-party platform that's disconnected from a client's learning ecosystem means they have limited control and insights than if all their tools existed in the same space.

Limited reporting

Even though you can access reporting, your customers may lose visibility into key data surrounding both content and performance. And let's be real, most organizations want this information—otherwise, what's the point if they can't tell if the training is working and impacting their learners?

Tweet this

When #eLearning is served from your platform, you control the content and visibility into usage.



Direct delivery is best for:

- Dynamically generated content that can't be packaged
- Learner experiences that are best served in a controlled environment
- Reaching customers who don't have an LMS



Option 3: Content marketplaces



Rather than distribute eLearning content directly to clients, some content publishers use marketplace resellers or content aggregators to promote and sell their courses.

This option can be especially helpful if you don't have the time or resources to sell content directly to your prospective customers or build out an ecommerce model. And partnering with well-known resellers can help build your brand, visibility, and reach.

While distributing your courses through a content marketplace removes some of the work around marketing and administration, it does introduce some things to consider.

Reduced margins

In exchange for putting your courses in front of a larger audience and handling the administrative tasks such as billing and collecting, content aggregators take a portion of sales revenue every time someone buys your content through their platform. The trade-off might work just fine for you, but it is worth considering. *(Tip: Before settling on a reseller, be sure to ask about the percentage it takes from each sale.)*

Positioning

While aggregators can help increase visibility across a wider audience, you might find your courses presented alongside your competitors' titles that also use that marketplace. This can be especially true for content that focuses on common topics or areas of focus, such as popular software or workplace compliance training.

Decreased visibility

When someone buys your content from a reseller, you may not have any insight into how learners are interacting with your courses. Reports and insights will vary by aggregator.

Pushing course updates

Every time a course needs an update, you must make those changes on your end, repackage and upload the course—and then hope they not only quickly update the content on their platform, but also notify current users that there's an updated version. Some marketplaces have excellent processes to manage updates, so be sure to ask if your content is updated frequently.

Tweet this

Marketplace resellers are helpful if you don't have the time or resources to sell #eLearning content directly to your prospective customers.



Content marketplaces are best for:

- Building a customer base
- Offloading the administrative work of selling and delivering courses

Option 4: Centralized distribution



Often referred to as a content distribution solution (CDS) or Content as a Service (CaaS), you host your courses and share access to your customers via links or proxy files that they manage in their LMS. This method makes it easier to maintain versioning, protect your IP, control licensing and access, and manage usage terms. You also gain visibility into how your content is being used because you have all of the reporting and usage data—even when it's shared with third-party LMSs.

Options here might be to use an LCMS platform or a CDS service like **Content Controller** or **SCORM Cloud Dispatch**, or simply using AICC. Of course, there are a few factors to take into account when going this route.

Investment

You'll need to purchase a reliable platform to not only deliver content, but also one that generates and sends good data for tracking and analytics. While using a CDS platform might introduce additional expense upfront, reducing the costs for administrative burdens to maintain your content, securing your IP, and the ability to enforce licensing to protect your revenue stream may far outweigh that expense.

Extra time

As with introducing any new software, this method requires some effort to set up and learn.

Use the solution that best fits your needs

Capabilities and compatibility options here vary dramatically. LCMSs excel when it comes to content creation and versioning, and while AICC helps you protect IP, it doesn't address access controls. Content Controller handles updates, license controls, and analytics, but doesn't have built-in creation tools. So make sure whatever option you select meets your needs.

Tweet this

It's easier to maintain versioning, protect your IP, control licensing and access, and manage usage terms when using an #eLearning content distribution solution.



Content as a Service is best for:

- Providers that serve clients with their own LMS or delivery platform
- High-stakes, frequently updated courses
- IP protection
- Subscription-based licensing



Putting it into practice

We see many content providers use a combination of delivery methods to reach a larger audience and address the unique requirements for each type of customer. Here are a few success stories to use for inspiration. In each case, a centralized content distribution solution is used to keep the content housed in a single location while sharing access to the variety of LMSs and outlets.

Keeping up with content updates across multiple delivery outlets

The SANS Institute provides information security courseware to professionals directly through their own training platform and to organizations to assign to employees in their own LMS. Content Controller helps SANS easily handle content updates in one place and gives them flexibility to deliver their training through multiple channels.

"[Content Controller] helps us understand and protect our content and its usage, and allows the frequent and consistent updates required by our industry and customers."



[Read more](#)

Increased distribution without the headaches

Intelleyzy wanted to grow the customer base for their computer software skills training library by partnering with content marketplaces, but were concerned about how they would be able to maintain their courses outside of their system. Rustici Cross Domain lets Intelleyzy host and serve their content to client LMSs and marketplaces, all from a single location.

"We didn't realize the gravity of how Rustici Cross Domain would transform how we operated from a business perspective with our clients overnight."



[Read more](#)

Supporting third-party LMSs while protecting IP

As a global training provider for NGOs around the world, Humentum serves a wide range of customers that use a variety of learning tools. With SCORM Cloud Dispatch, they can deliver courses to their clients in the standard they need, without giving up control of the content.

"SCORM Cloud Dispatch enables us to maintain control of our intellectual property while allowing our members to make independent decisions about the LMS that best suits their needs."



[Read more](#)

Wrapping it up

Let's face it. Chances are that you will see the need to employ each of the methods we've covered. For customers that already have an LMS, you'll want to deliver courses that are compatible with their systems. In cases where customers don't have an LMS, you'll need to consider offering a delivery option, whether it's a simple delivery platform or through a content marketplace. Or you may find that your training is best served from your proprietary system. It's important to identify what is most important to you and your customers.

Having a strategy in place to address the complexities that come with serving your courses across multiple systems is critical. If you are concerned about protecting your assets, controlling access, managing versions, and reporting, a centralized distribution model is worth considering.

If you're not sure which path is the best for you, you're not alone. We help content creators with this very problem every day. Our **content distribution solutions** like Content Controller, SCORM Cloud Dispatch and Rustici Cross Domain help solve many of the challenges our clients face when it comes to distributing and managing content across multiple systems.

There is no "one size fits all" solution as there are multiple ways to manage your eLearning distribution. Sometimes it's easiest to simply talk through your project and needs—and we're happy to help you find the right path toward your ideal solution.

About us

Rustici Software helps companies in the eLearning space work well together. As the world's leading eLearning standards experts, we provide the tools and knowledge to help companies convert, distribute and play eLearning content. Since 2002, we have assisted hundreds of LMSs, authoring tools, content providers and organizations conform to specifications like SCORM, the Experience API (xAPI), cmi5 and AICC. We continually strive to improve and evolve the standards and have actively supported development in partnership with ADL, IMS Global, and other industry organizations.

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