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by [Margot Carmichael Lester](#), Staples® Contributing Writer

When you're up to your eyeballs focused on keeping your business running, professional development may seem like a luxury. And even though you learn so much on a daily basis just by doing what you do, continuing your entrepreneur education by taking classes and participating in Webinars helps you work smarter and gain competitive advantage.

It's not only important, says Mary Beth Huffman, a certified [SCORE Mentor](#) and principal with [IMPACT Marketing and Public Relations](#) in Carpentersville, IL. It's vital for small business owners to invest in educational development. If nothing else, it's a way to stay in the know and ahead of your competition who is either too busy or overwhelmed to manage the time to invest in their business and knowledge, or who are too burnt out to care anymore.

Chris Rither, a serial entrepreneur from Hawaii who is currently an assistant professor at Myongji University in Korea, agrees that you need to find the time to continue your entrepreneurial learning. Setting priorities is key to success, especially in business, he says. I often had to let certain jobs go or delegate to others in order to stay informed and on top of my field. Pick educational events that strengthen your business in the long run. Keeping the right time horizon in sight helps you recognize that performance may be affected in the present, but increased in the future.

Online vs. Offline Education

If your schedule is too crunched or unpredictable, online opportunities may be most useful. Many industry trade groups offer on-demand Webinars and learn-at-your-own-pace courses so you can master new topics and skills without having to leave your laptop. Another source is [edX](#), which offers a wide range of classes and MOOCs (massive open online courses) from top universities at no charge.

That said, while online learning is super convenient, in-person education is still popular. The opportunity to engage with thought leaders in areas that are cutting edge is a nice way to keep my knowledge fresh, says David Reischer, a New York-based attorney and the COO/founder of [LegalAdvice.com](#). Like many professionals, he's required to attend official continuing entrepreneur education courses to remain licensed on top of whatever business or technical skills he wants to develop.

Some online businesses, such as [Constant Contact](#), even host free offline events to help small business owners stay up to date on trends in marketing and other subjects.

Key Learning: Look for workshops and classes for small business owners at your Chamber of Commerce or a nearby university or community college. Also reach out to your vendors and other companies to work with small businesses, as many of them host online and offline events that can help you stay up to date on relevant trends. Be sure to check in with your state-level professional organization and national board to verify continuing education requirements, and schedule them before taking on other learning opportunities.

Know Your Options

[Bonny Clayton](#), a Web developer in Pitman, NJ, uses a mix of online and in-person opportunities to sharpen her skills. In my industry especially, but really in any industry, it's important for small business professionals to learn perpetually and stay on top of trends, she says. In the past year, I have attended a marketing and mindset intensive 3-day workshop, a half-day workshop and a seminar on branding, and about 30 or so Webinars some free featuring various social media platform training. For quick instruction to fix an immediate issue or answer a burning question, I turn to online instructional videos, usually on YouTube.

Key Learning: There are a number of free and fee-based options for building your technical and coding skills. Clayton is a member of [LearnIT Anytime](#) and [WP101](#), at-your-own-pace learning Web sites. [Code School](#) is another popular learning platform that offers individual and team accounts at different price points. Industry conferences and local events provide opportunities to meet and learn in real life.

A Holistic Approach

Where else can you learn about excellent entrepreneurial education opportunities? Heres a short list of additional resources:

Continuing education must be part of a holistic approach to the way you keep your skills fresh, Reischer says. Its understandable that its difficult to find time to do it, but you are not doing yourself or your clients any favors by focusing on tasks that are important today at the expense of learning that can make you a better practitioner in the long run.