Closing the gap

2022 Online Learning Trends
This report is for anyone interested in creating, marketing, or selling online learning as a business. Whether you’re a creator just starting out, an entrepreneur looking for new opportunities, or part of a company looking to scale up, this report is for you.

See which trends set the most successful trailblazers apart—and how you can use their recipe for success to bring in more business and better engage students in 2022.
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The fabric of the knowledge economy has changed. Permanently.

The internet revolutionized two major aspects of the knowledge economy: the **quantity** and **accessibility** of information. No more academic gatekeepers or dusty old encyclopedias were required to learn something new—suddenly, anyone with an internet connection had a nearly unlimited amount of knowledge at their fingertips.

But what about the **quality** of those learning experiences? For a long time, learning online has always felt "lesser than" the experience of learning in person. Even just 10 years ago, online courses mostly felt underbaked, overpriced, and unengaging.

*In the last few years though, there has been another seismic shift in the knowledge economy.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has made online learning a necessity, which means many top creators (and platforms like Thinkific) have invested heavily in improving the quality of these learning experiences.

The result? The experience of online learning has finally matched—and in some cases, even surpassed—the experience of offline learning. And the demand from students worldwide is greater than ever.
Online learning is officially the “new normal”

In 2020, the knowledge economy experienced an unprecedented boom in growth.

66% of Americans have been more motivated to seek out online learning since the pandemic began.

But the growth of online learning during the pandemic was not a “flash in the pan” that only lasted for the year when everyone was locked down. (Although, yes, that might have been when sourdough starter courses peaked). Rather, this shift looks to be permanent with student demand continuing to grow into 2021 and 2022. Online learning is no longer the exception—it’s the expectation moving forward.

Why do people prefer online learning?

In a survey of 2,000 U.S. adults, here’s what portion of people listed these as top benefits.

- 43% Timing is more flexible
- 38% It’s more accessible
- 37% Can go at your own pace
Increasing demand across industries and geographies

In 2022, the opportunity for creators and companies looking to enter the knowledge economy continues to be sizable. Since the beginning of the pandemic, student demand for online learning has increased dramatically across all industries—from health and fitness to software and technology. For nearly every niche, there is a growing number of students looking to learn.

Change in student demand (2019-2021)

This demand goes beyond borders, too. The chart on the left shows how the number of course creators on Thinkific with multinational students has been increasing since 2017. This means the knowledge economy is becoming more globalized with each passing year—allowing you to more easily sell outside of your own backyard.

Creators with students on multiple continents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>7,792</td>
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<td>29,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
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</table>
More creators finding success in the knowledge economy

Online content creation is the most popular type of business that people aspire to launch (51%), beating out selling products online (49%), providing services online (49%) or in person (46%), and opening a brick and mortar store (39%). In fact, there are over 50 million people around the world who consider themselves to be “creators”—people who make content on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Twitch, or YouTube. And while these platforms make it easy to build an audience, monetization has always been a challenge for anyone outside of the top influencers.

The good news: This is not the case in the knowledge economy. When we look into Thinkific's platform data, we see more people succeeding in building revenue through online education, year over year. And with students seeking out more personalized and niche learning experiences, you can achieve success without needing 10,000+ followers on social media.
Learning from the best

A professional chef teaching students how to bake for business. A TikTok dancer who gives out hot Excel tips. A former celebrity fashion stylist coaching influencers on how to grow their brands. **These are the trailblazers of the knowledge economy**—the top creators who are changing the shape of online learning as we know it today.

But while more people are finding success in the knowledge economy than ever before, not everyone is finding the same level of success. For the trends in this report, we decided to take a closer look at **the top 20% of Thinkific creators** (based on number of enrollments per month) to uncover what exactly they’re doing differently.

- How do the top creators keep students engaged for longer?
- What is their secret to growing their business?
- Where do they focus their time?
- What takeaways can we learn from them?
Learning gets personal

Online courses are shifting away from the one-way communication that has traditionally dominated this industry. Students today are finding more value through interaction and connection with their teachers, peers, and communities.
Learning on the internet tends to be lonely. Unlike in a classroom, students online are expected to spend their time staring at the screen and absorbing information solo. There are no conversations, debates, or group assignments. You might be able to email a question to the course instructor, but even that might seem daunting if you've never chatted with them before.

"This is decidedly not how human brains are wired to learn."

Multiple studies show the best education experiences are often an exchange of ideas where students get to interact, put concepts into practice, ask questions, and learn in cohorts. They’re not just a series of video playlists that you ask students to watch one after the other in a vacuum.

Top creators have caught onto this idea in a big way. They’re beginning to tap into the power of communal learning to, not only better engage students, but also to create more long-term value for their courses.
How top creators are changing the game

Top creators are moving away from treating their courses like a series of static, never-changing pieces of content. Instead, they’re becoming more lively “town squares,” with ongoing discussions and education tailored around a common interest. Not only is this great for engagement in the moment, but it also gives students a reason to come back time and time again.

The magic word here is communities.

To bring people in with the right mindset, top creators are using live and scheduled lessons as a way to forge these relationships and build an ongoing sense of community. Students meet in smaller cohorts as they learn, which in turn helps to make them more likely to engage with each other and the rest of the community. The end goal? Create an environment where graduates want to stick around to mentor, moderate, and help others achieve success.
How Sidewalker Daily uses community and live learning to boost student engagement

Nina Zadeh knows a thing or two about the importance of community. As the co-founder of Sidewalker Daily, a community of 60,000+ creators and influencers, she says bringing people together was always part of their playbook. But she noticed in the last few years that students were looking for more ways to interact.

“We’re seeing a lot more interactive styles of learning. So, when we launched our signature Pitching To Brands Mastercourse, we did our best to ensure our course comes with a live cohort, coaching, and access to our community. You get that human element and interaction. It’s not just set it and forget it.”

Nina says they use a combination of courses, live programs, and community memberships to make their learning much more engaging for students. She says it’s what sets them apart—and keeps students accountable.

“I don’t want someone to buy my course because they got pumped when they found it and then just let it collect digital dust. The live and community elements actually help people get through the material, implement what they learn, and make moves. There’s accountability. You see other people doing the work, landing paid partnerships, jumping in to help each other, and motivating one another.”

But it’s not easy to start or scale up a community. Nina says they have to be very strategic about how they introduce new students, even at their current level. Her advice for new creators? Be strategic with how you introduce new members.

“For our live programs, what’s worked nicely is to not have a transient setting where anyone can just join at any time. We bring people in at certain times to give the group time to acclimatize and for everyone to get to know each other. You get to see those same faces and those same people, so you’re able to open up and build trust.”

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**Fun fact**
I grew up between Miami, the Bahamas, France, Dubai, and NYC, and speak four languages!
The takeaways

Just starting out?

Get personal with your course content.

It can be tempting to think of your students as anonymous individuals who are just paying to learn something from you. But the more you invest in getting to know them, building real relationships, and creating situations where they interact with others, the greater value they’ll place on the overall learning experience you provide.

Looking to scale?

Build a community, not an audience.

Don’t make the mistake of assuming that just because you have a passive list of students that you already have a community. To get active engagement, you’ll need to tap into your alumni network, encourage regular group discussions, and open up opportunities for students to build real connections. The goal is to create an engine of a community that is self-sustaining and gives students a reason to return beyond the course content itself. But to get there, you’re going to need to rev it up first.
The rise of multi-product learning

Online learning is becoming so much more than just online courses. Top creators are expanding their businesses to offer memberships, ebooks, physical products, one-on-one coaching, and more. So if you’ve just been focused on selling a single course this whole time, it might be time to rethink your approach.
Creators are thinking bigger than online courses

This is part of a broader shift that creators are making to diversify their revenue streams. It’s no longer about putting all your eggs in one basket (because what if a potential customer doesn’t like that particular basket?).

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The data shows us that 85% of top creators sell more than one product or service.

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Trend 2: The rise of multi-product learning
The key here is to give your audience the option to choose how they want to engage. Imagine you built a brand all around “how to train your ferret.” Someone who is at a low level of engagement may only want to download your free ebook (“10 Tips for Training Ferrets”). Someone who has been following you for a bit longer may be convinced to sign up for one of your paid courses (“The Ferret Training Supercourse”). And a true fan might want to pay for a one-on-one coaching with you (“Fix My Ferret”).

**By offering multiple products or services, you can give your audience multiple entry points into your business.**

Beyond courses, the main products creators are focused on expanding into this year include memberships, communities, coaching, and digital downloads.
Trend 2: The rise of multi-product learning

How top creators are changing the game

Top creators aren’t just offering more learning products and services in 2022—they’re also packaging them in more sophisticated ways. In fact, they’re more than three times as likely to bundle their courses together and offer package deals with other learning materials. What does this tell us?

"Top creators aren’t creating wildly different products and services for the sole sake of diversification."

They’re creating complementary pieces of learning that students can purchase together. Whether this is a series of courses on a similar topic, a package that includes personalized coaching sessions, or even a membership that includes all of the above - creators are expanding.

Bundles are a tried-and-true way of upselling audiences on the next piece of relevant content you have in your knowledge arsenal. Which is great for business—this is how top creators are creating expansion revenue and increasing their average order value.
Why Latasha James created an ecosystem of learning products

Latasha James is host of the Freelance Friday Podcast and founder of the Online Business Launch Lab. But when she first entered the knowledge economy she had just one, single learning product to sell.

“I started with one evergreen course. Just some slides, some videos here and there. And it was really a repurposed talk on social media strategy that I had given. I reworked it and created this evergreen product.”

The course did better than she expected—she was getting positive feedback from students, and it was a nice supplement to her regular sources of income. But it wasn’t until 2019 when she introduced a downloadable Social Media Management Toolbox that things really started to take off for her business.

“When I introduced the toolbox, that was really like, ‘okay, this is what people are looking for.’ This is really resonating with people. So that’s where I started to strategize a little bit more about different formats that I could start offering.”

The template pack was a huge win for the social media managers in her audience. It caught on quickly, leading to her first ever five-figure month of revenue. But Latasha wasn’t done yet—she had another idea for how to expand her learning programs.

“I think people look for education in different ways. So I introduced my cohort-based courses, which are more of like a hybrid between a course and a group coaching program. They perform the best for us because people are really seeing such incredible value from them.”

The cohort-based courses were an even bigger hit, regularly drawing in hundreds of enrollments. Now, Latasha has created an entire ecosystem of learning products that her audience can tap into.

“It has completely revolutionized the business.

“With just the evergreen course, it was a small revenue stream. Now, we have consistent five-figure months, with sometimes double or quadruple what we made before. It has completely revolutionized the business.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Latasha James</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Online Business Launch Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launched</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<tr>
<td># of courses</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td># of students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revenue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fun fact</td>
<td>I am a huge music fan and grew up playing the drums!</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Trend 2: The rise of multi-product learning

The takeaways

Just starting out?

*Don’t split your focus too early.*

While it can be tempting to try to do everything all at once, you want to make sure you don’t bite off more than you can chew. Focus on making one amazing learning product or service first and then expand to related or more advanced topics once you know students are engaged and happy with the quality.

Looking to scale?

*Use bundles as a way to package and upsell complementary products.*

By packaging pieces of learning together, you can entice students to spend more time and money earlier on in the relationship. Think through different learning tracks you could offer, and what natural next steps students would want to take after finishing any one of your courses. This can be a great way to upsell higher-value services, such as coaching sessions, or nice-to-haves (that don’t cost you anything!) such as templates, ebooks, or other digital downloads.
Creators take control of their data

Underneath every creator is a goldmine of potential: audience data. Top creators have known for years how important this data can be, but in 2022 they are making it a priority. Rather than relying on third party platforms with “followers” or “fans,” creators are building a direct track to each member of their community.
Social media has become a means to an end

What is the value of a follower on Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram? In 2022, the answer unfortunately is not very much. Organic reach has declined steadily on social platforms over the past decade, forcing creators to pay to reach even the folks who have already expressed interest in their content.
Many creators have learned the hard way that keeping their audience on one particular social channel can be a dangerous game to play. You have little to no control over how the platform will serve up your content, and a single change in the algorithm or platform guidelines can tank your business overnight. And that’s not to mention the fact that it can be a heck of a challenge to monetize your social media audience at all (unless you’re a top influencer, of course).

So what are creators doing about it? They’re no longer treating social media as a place to bottle up their audiences. Instead, they’re using things like Facebook groups and TikTok followers as a jumping off point. Social media is still a great place to build a following or pay to advertise your products in 2022, but to get the most out of your audience, you need to migrate them onto a platform where you can own the relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do top creators attract students to their courses?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Traffic</td>
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<tr>
<td>List of Leads</td>
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<td>Word of Mouth</td>
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<td>Built-in Audience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affiliate Marketing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Marketplace</td>
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How top creators are changing the game

Top creators are leading the charge when it comes to owning audience data. These creators are **4x more likely to import users from another platform or email list.** They’re in control of these relationships and already have a list of names and email addresses they can market to whenever they release a new product or service. But audience data goes beyond email addresses, too.

"**Top creators are significantly more likely to track student engagement and collect student feedback and reviews.**"

This is another way to put data into action—with a direct line of communication to customers, you’re able to create a feedback loop. Figure out what your audience likes, what they don’t like, and how engaged they are. Then, use that information to improve the quality of your learning experiences for future students.
How “Miss Excel” turns TikTok followers into paying customers

On June 7, 2020, Kat Norton made her first TikTok videos under the handle @miss_excel to teach people how to use Excel. It might sound like dry subject matter, but Kat used creative humor and some killer dance moves to make the videos a viral sensation. Within three weeks, she had over 100,000 followers.

“At that point, I was really just in pure shock that it went viral. I’m like, what can I do with this next?”

While being famous on TikTok was great, Kat knew that it wasn’t the best place for her to reach (or teach) her audience. She saw a lot more opportunity by getting her closest fans to follow her off the platform.

“I’m always looking for opportunities to provide greater knowledge to people, right? So for me, there’s only so much I can get across on social media in my 15 second videos. The real opportunity for me to help people is to get them in longer courses.”

Kat had a hunch that courses would be a better fit, and easier to monetize as well. But unless she wanted to individually DM each fan on TikTok, she had no easy way of communicating with her followers. So she decided to bridge the gap between her social media and the new courses she created.

Having those lead gen opportunities in your funnels that will grow your mailing list for you is definitely key.

“I’ll create free webinars. And that’s where I’m really able to get people from my social media to take the next step. Having those lead gen opportunities in your funnels that will grow your mailing list for you is definitely key.”

Now, Kat uses free content to help build up her mailing list and drive people towards her paid courses. And while she has over 750,000 followers on TikTok today—it’s only by moving her audience off the platform that she’s been able to achieve financial freedom.

“Out of every aspect of my business, course sales have by far been the most lucrative avenue. It has been hands down the best way to monetize my particular audience.”

Name
Kat Norton

Business
Miss Excel

Launched
2020

# of courses
10

# of students
10,000

Fun fact
I just bought my dream home in Sedona, AZ!
The takeaways

Just starting out?  

Start looking for ways to own your relationship with your audience.

While it can be super cool to tell people you have 200,000+ followers on TikTok, those followers are also stuck on that platform. Start thinking of social media as a place to grow your following, but not your audience. Instead, look to regularly move your fans to a channel you “own” and can more easily monetize—like an email list, website, or platform like Thinkific.

Looking to scale?  

Use audience insights to build long-term relationships and improve engagement.

Your audience data is truly a goldmine, and you should tap into it to regularly improve your content and make it more successful. Surveys, reviews, and analytics can all help you create a better learning experience—and help you bring in more business.
The end of the hard sell

Creators in the knowledge economy have traditionally used “hard sales” tactics to bring in business. But this year, top creators are exploring more savvy ways to pull in potential customers. Free lessons, pre-orders, in-course upsells, and lower-cost monthly subscriptions are opening up a whole new world of opportunity.
Blurring the lines between “free” and “paid”

You’re probably already familiar with the “hard sell” landing page for an online course. Something about the course topic or the creator catches your eye. You read 10,000+ words all about how the lessons in the course will help you. You see the testimonials from other students who have gone through the program. And then, when you finally manage to scroll all the way to the bottom of the page, you get hit with the higher-than-you-expected pricing.

Womp, womp.
This model of locking everything away behind a single paid checkout is changing, though. To get more leads in the door, creators are moving towards offering more free downloads, courses, and live events in 2022. It’s that classic “try before you buy” approach that gives students a chance to see the quality of your learning experience before they drop in their credit card details. (And gives creators a chance to bring in more leads.)

But that’s not the only way we’re seeing the barriers break down between “free” and “paid.” The knowledge economy as a whole is shifting towards a future where pricing is integrated into the learning itself. Rather than charge students once at the beginning of the relationship, top creators are shaking things up—and finding more success in the process.
How top creators are changing the game

On the whole, top creators are getting more experimental and flexible with their pricing. When we look into Thinkific platform data, we see the most successful creators are 2X more likely to offer subscription pricing and 1.4X more likely to upsell additional learning content.

Subscriptions have been a growing trend for a few years now. Creators have discovered just how powerful predictable, monthly revenue can be via platforms like Patreon. Now, top creators in the knowledge economy are using this same method to bring in more students by lowering the initial cost for access. (Because what would you rather pay—$500 for a course you’re not sure you’ll like, or $50 for a month at a time?) Monthly subscriptions shift the focus away from the “hard sell”—and more towards delivering quality content students can interact with over a longer period of time.
As a creator, the name of the game in 2022 is to bring as many leads into your orbit as possible. To avoid the “hard sell,” top creators are using more flexible pricing options and a greater number of tactics.

That’s why nearly 45% of top creators were using at least four different sales tactics (e.g. live events or free courses) compared to just 23% of everyone else.

“More than 40% of top creators use at least four different sales tactics”
How Chef Schonberg uses a $25 subscription to stir up big business

Chef Amanda Schonberg owns and operates an award-winning bakery in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. But unlike other pastry chefs, she’s always had a taste for the business side of baking. That’s why she started Baking for Business, a place to help other food entrepreneurs grow their brands.

But rather than charge piecemeal for every piece of online learning, she wanted to try something different.

“I’ve been one of those people that have taken $2,000 courses. And it makes you think: is this really worth it? What am I going to get? How is this going to help me? I wanted to lower the cost barrier.”

Chef Schonberg decided to group all of her content together and package it into one entrepreneur community program. The all-access pass includes 20+ business classes, downloadable templates, and live coaching calls. And here’s the kicker: it only costs $25 per month.

The lower monthly price point has paid off big time. Over the last year, her subscribers have quadrupled. Even better, she says she’s able to spend less time selling and more time focusing on delivering value to her audience.

“Predictability to me is one of the safest features of all. You’re not always having to worry about launching. You know how sales are gonna be because you know, on average, how many members you have. So for me, that’s why the membership model is just always a little easier.”

Chef Schonberg says she keeps subscribers engaged using a number of different tactics.

“We have monthly contests, which is really great for retention. And another thing I like to do is what’s called future pacing. That’s when I email you and tell you what’s coming up, so you always have something to look forward to.”

For new creators just starting out, Chef Schonberg says the subscription model can be a real game-changer. Her advice? Just make sure you’re delivering the goods.

“Show up and give value. Once you open up your membership, treat five people the same way you would treat 500. That’s one of the biggest things.”
The takeaways

Just starting out?

*Offer free courses and downloadables to get students interested.*

To avoid the “hard sell” to people who aren’t familiar with your brand or the quality of your content, start out by producing some “samplers” folks can try out for free—either free lessons at the start of a course or a standalone mini-course. You can put this content out on platforms like YouTube to build your social audience, or promote them with an email gate to build up a list of leads and sell your course content.

Looking to scale?

*Start experimenting with subscriptions and upsells.*

Top creators are using subscription pricing to build more predictable, recurring monthly revenue. By charging less upfront, you’ll be able to attract a wider audience of paying customers. Then, you can implement upsells on additional courses and content to dial up the level of your success.
The big takeaways
Putting this data into action

The knowledge economy has changed a lot over the last few years. Everything from the type of content that students are demanding to the way creators are packaging the learning has shifted. So if you’re still creating online courses the same way you were five years ago—you might be majorly missing the mark.

1. Find your niche in the knowledge economy
You don’t need to have a huge following on social media in order to be successful in the knowledge economy. There’s more opportunity today than ever before—and we’re seeing top creators succeed with smaller but more engaged audiences. The key thing? Make sure you’re delivering on the content your particular audience cares the most about.

2. Create a community around your course
Don’t just build a course that students will want to consume once and then never come back to. Instead, top creators are finding success by building communities around their courses with live lessons and weekly conversations that keep students engaged long after they complete the initial learning content.

3. Bundle multiple learning products together
Give your audience a variety of different ways to engage with your brand, depending on how deep they want to go. The goal is to build an onion of learning content—with more basic or accessible content (such as downloadable ebooks) serving as your outer layer, and more advanced or high-value content (such as one-on-one coaching) towards the core.
Take control of your audience relationships
Start looking for opportunities to transition your audience off “open” platforms like social media and onto platforms where you can “own” the relationship. Top creators have a direct connection point to each member of their audience so they can easily promote new learning products and collect feedback.

Make the switch to value-based pricing
Rather than asking students to pay steep upfront fees, top creators are switching to subscription-based pricing where students pay lower monthly fees for as long as they’re seeing value in the content. This gives you more predictable revenue and a reason to invest in the ongoing quality of your courses.

Keep in mind though: while the data shows this advice works for most top creators, at the end of the day it’s the quality and effort that you put in that will determine your own success. If you feel ready to create your own course—get started free with Thinkific today.
Methodology

To collect data for this report, the team at Thinkific conducted 10 expert interviews (guided by our research team, who interviews hundreds of customers a year) and developed a series of hypotheses around the question of what makes the best performers different from the rest.

We then put those ideas to the test and analyzed three different datasets for this report:

A - Thinkific customer survey on product needs (Oct 2021 | n = 350, 90% confidence)
B - Thinkific user data, >50,000 users (data analysis conducted February 2022)
C - An online survey of 2,000 U.S. adults was commissioned by Thinkific and conducted by market research company OnePoll, in accordance with the Market Research Society’s code of conduct. Data was collected between December 14, 2021 and December 17, 2021. All participants are paid an amount depending on the length and complexity of the survey. This survey was overseen and edited by the OnePoll research team, who are members of the MRS and have corporate membership to ESOMAR and AAPOR.

For datasets “A” and “B,” we broke users into two big buckets: “The Best” and “The Rest.” This was measured by the top 20% and bottom 80% of average enrollments per month. We then compared these groups in the different ways that they use the product or run their businesses.
Forward-Looking Statements

This report includes forward-looking statements and forward-looking information within the meaning of applicable Canadian securities laws ("forward-looking statements"). Often, but not always, forward-looking information can be identified by the use of words such as "plans", "is expected", "expects", "scheduled", "intends", "contemplates", "anticipates", "adoption rates", "believes", "proposes" or variations (including negative and grammatical variations) of such words and phrases, or state that certain actions, events or results "may", "could", "would", "might" or "will" be taken, occur or be achieved.

Forward-looking statements in this report include statements regarding industry trends; growing demand for online learning, growth in our industry; addressable markets for our solutions; capturing market share; advances in and expansion of our offered platform service and the anticipated benefits of Thinkific Payments and Thinkific Communities and their features for the Company's customers. Such statements and information are based on the current expectations of Thinkific's management, and are based on assumptions and subject to risks and uncertainties. Although Thinkific's management believes that the assumptions underlying these statements and information are reasonable, they may prove to be incorrect. A number of risks, uncertainties and other factors may cause actual results to differ materially from the forward-looking statements contained in this report, including, among other factors, the risk factors described in additional detail under "Risk Factors" in our most recent Annual Information Form, and in our other filings with the Canadian securities regulatory authorities, all of which are available under our profile on SEDAR at www.sedar.com. Except as required by applicable securities laws, forward-looking statements and information speak only as of the date on which they are made and Thinkific undertakes no obligation to publicly update or revise any forward-looking statement or information, whether as a result of new information, future events or otherwise.