

MANAGEMENT

Tactical checkoffs for mounting the productive training session.

Managing Successful Seminars

By Karen Di Prima

Professional services firms often utilize educational seminars for business development. These forums provide the host firm with the ability to showcase the expertise of their principals, in a controlled setting whereby they orchestrate the format and venue, select the topics, and invite a (in effect) captive audience. If the topics, location, timing and audience are well matched, it is a win-win for both the hosts and guests. Although there are no guarantees, through years of trial and error we have developed a few key ingredients we find critical when planning events. Just check them off as you put the meeting together:

Know Your Audience

Successful seminars begin long before you book the facility or print the invitations. The first step is to determine your audience and then to plan the seminar around *their needs*.

How do you find out what the audience wants? Just ask. Try distributing a survey to a sample of your intended audience, in a questionnaire format, soliciting opinion on best time of day, topic, location, and other details.

Cull the results and then build the seminar around the expressed wishes of the audience. For example, physicians might prefer an early evening event, whereby business people may appreciate a breakfast meeting that gets them back to the office by 10:00 a.m. Allow your audience to guide your planning and you are more likely to be successful.

Set Objectives

Set your goals in advance. An overarching and constant objective is to "bring work in the door," but success can be measured in other ways, such as

- Size of group: How many attendees are optimal? What is the subject matter in relationship to the audience? Will participants be comfortable asking questions in front of a large group? Is it preferable to have 12 CFOs in the audience or 200 human resources professionals? Could you increase attendance if spouses are encouraged?
- Reaction of audience: Can you tell if the topics were on target? Do you expect questions via phone calls?
- Business generation: Did you receive any new work as a result of the event?
- Can you estimate the dollar amount of good will, positive public relations and visibility generated?

Present Valuable Content

The most important aspect of educational seminars is the caliber of the speakers and the materials presented. Without substance, you will disappoint the audience, and leave a lasting negative impression. These are other important elements:

- Shorter is better (20 minutes each, with a 5 minute Q&A)
- Use Power Point — audiences respond better to visual aids than talking heads.
- Rehearse speakers; at least do a run-through in advance. This improves their confidence and makes for a smoother presentation.
- Use real-life examples and scenarios to make points. Audiences will identify.

Follow Through and Follow Up

These are the most neglected aspects of seminar planning, but they can make the difference between success and failure.

Follow Through

About a week or so prior to your event, send an email confirmation reminder to the registrants. If the registration numbers are not optimal, or if key individuals have not responded, we recommend

- a) A follow up email to your entire list with "Still Time to Register" in the subject line, followed by the event details, and
- b) Placing phone calls to extend personal invitations.

If phone calls are necessary, make sure that the speakers themselves place the calls. This personal touch works well, and reflects how important the guest is to the event organizers.

Make sure your speakers review the guest list prior to the event to familiarize themselves with the names and company affiliation of the attendees. Brief them in advance about any VIPs expected, or tidbits of information they may want to have on hand to use as conversation-starters. *Without fail*, make sure they are aware if any of their clients are registered.

Instruct your speakers to arrive early, and come prepared with extra business cards. Encourage them to circulate among the guests before their presentations — this will help increase their comfort level with the audience. Also, this practice actually engages the listeners and results in an improved response to the speaker.

Follow Up

Post the materials on your website, with captions that describe the event in terms of "successful," "well-attended," or "well-received." Give the speaker's names and reiterate their expertise with the subject area(s). Upload a PDF of the materials on your website or possibly post just the first page or a Table of Contents and ask visitors to send a personal email request for the materials.

Send thank-you letters to the attendees and "sorry you could not attend" letters with the materials to the no-shows. These letters can be prepared according to a standard template and formatted so they are ready to mail within a day of the event.

A few days after the event, assemble the speakers and others involved in the planning for a "post-mortem" session, to discuss all aspects of the seminar with a view to improving next time.

Conclude

Educational seminars that highlight a firm's expertise can produce many benefits. Structured correctly, these forums can bring positive visibility, generate new business from existing clients through cross marketing of services, provide value-added elements that aid in client retention, and can also produce business by exposure to new audiences.

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