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### Organizing Seminars and Conferences

***The Power of the Seminar*** - The popularity of conferences and seminars results from the distinct benefits they offer. Attendees pre-qualify themselves as prospects; if they weren't interested in the issue being discussed, they wouldn't come. You get to talk with them face to face, both formally during presentations and informally during breaks, meals, and receptions. As a speaker, you are automatically classified as an expert. Outside speakers can add credibility and drawing power. Because seminars can run from a few hours to several days, they can be adapted to a wide array of subject matter and contexts. In combination with outbound telemarketing, the offer of a quality seminar is an effective tool for multiplying the number of qualified prospects for your products and services.

Seminars can be of the following types:

- a half-day seminar on your products and services.
- a one-day or two-day conference, featuring multiple tracks and noted speakers, run by a professional conference organizer on highly technical issues, attracting participants from across the country.
- a series of half-day or one-day seminars offered at several locations across the country to teach the fundamentals of a specific application to those just beginning to work in that area.

Each of these programs will result in new business for the sponsor or for the speakers. Unlike most forms of marketing, you can sometimes charge for seminars, covering your marketing costs and even making a profit.

With these benefits come associated risks and costs, especially if you plan a large conference for which you will charge a fee. If it is a one-time event, a conference is a high-fixed-cost, low variable cost enterprise. The time speakers must invest to prepare remains constant regardless of audience size. Marketing costs are also usually fixed, consisting of a large mailing. This leaves the duplication of handouts as the major variable cost. A two-day conference can cost you a bundle if too few participants attend to defray the hotel charges. By forecasting your costs, you can easily run a breakeven analysis to calculate how many participants you need at a given price to recoup your costs. The fee from every additional attendee is almost all profit.

A small seminar, over a breakfast or at the end of the day, can be set up and run by one person if time is available over an extended period, but it is a method that lends itself more to an organization. A large conference requires many hours of preparation from many people. This differs from many of the other marketing techniques that can be done by a single individual.

## Conference & Seminar Organizer's Outline

*Outline of the specific tasks you must complete to run a conference* - Variables for setting one up include subject, length, timing, location/accommodations, mailing list, invitations or flyers, telemarketing decision, speakers, supporting materials, informal interaction time, and fee.

### I. Determine Goals & Target Audience

- A. Select general subject(s)
- B. Determine length (half day, one day, two days, multiple tracks)
- C. Brainstorm alternative venues & topics
- D. Review for feasibility
  - 1. Is it educational?
  - 2. Is it important?
  - 3. Will it provide solutions?
  - 4. Do we have the resources/knowledge to handle it?

### II. Determine Seminar Marketing Plan

- A. Mailing List/Logistics
- B. Advertising
- C. Website
- D. Outbound telemarketing
  - 1. Pre-mailing qualification & referral
  - 2. Post-mailing qualification, referral & registration
- E. Registration options

### III. Establish schedule

- A. Set date(s)
- B. Set completion dates for key tasks
- C. Monitor and revise periodically

### IV. Select speakers

- A. Brainstorm alternatives
  - 1. Internal
  - 2. External
    - a) Current users
    - b) Other experts
- B. Review for suitability
  - 1. Knowledge
  - 2. Drawing power of name
  - 3. Speaking ability

- C. Invite speakers
  - 1. Invite and confirm availability
  - 2. Invite fallback speakers, as needed

## V. Select site

- A. Review alternatives
  - 1. Internal
  - 2. Hotel
  - 3. Conference center
- B. Inspect site alternatives
  - 1. Meeting space
  - 2. Breakout space
  - 3. Socializing space
  - 4. Sleeping accommodations
  - 5. Food service
  - 6. Logistical support
    - a) Photocopying
    - b) Audiovisual equipment
    - c) Telephones
    - d) Message service
    - e) Rest rooms
  - 7. Financial terms
  - 8. Larger space for overcapacity
- C. Negotiate terms and reserve space

## VI. Mail invitations

- A. Create invitation list
  - 1. Brainstorm alternatives with planning team
    - a) Internal
    - b) Purchased
      - (1) Determine fit
      - (2) Determine cost
    - c) Provided by speakers
  - 2. Set targets, filter & combine databases
- B. Determine registration sources
  - 1. mail
  - 2. fax
  - 3. web
  - 4. inbound phone center
  - 5. outbound telemarketing center

### C. Produce invitations

#### 1. Draft copy

- a) Describe theme
- b) Describe benefits
- c) Note who should attend
- d) Describe schedule and content
- e) Describe speakers
- f) Describe logistics
  - (1) Time
  - (2) Place
  - (3) Fee and payment
  - (4) Registration/response form, including qualification questions
  - (5) Accommodations
  - (6) Directions

#### 2. Design, print and mail invitations and confirmation packages

- a) Staged mail drops (as needed)
- b) Fax and e-mail versions for follow-up

### VII. Registration & confirmation

#### A. Monitor incoming registration

1. Ask qualification questions on all incoming telephone calls
2. Provide lists of registrants to sales reps weekly
3. Monitor registration for room capacity

#### B. Conduct outbound telemarketing

1. Ask qualification questions
2. Ask for referrals
3. Invitation ready to Fax or e-mail to referrals or if misplaced

#### C. Send Confirmation Packages

1. Include schedule, speakers bios, directions, mass transit, parking info
2. Sending options (mail, fax, e-mail)

#### D. Conduct outbound reminder calls

1. 24 to 48 hours prior to the event
2. Voicemail messages are OK

### VIII. Order refreshments/meals

#### A. Select caterer/provider

#### B. Select menu

#### C. Place order

IX. Rehearse speakers

- A. Schedule rehearsal
- B. Coach speakers
- C. Determine need and arrange for audiovisual equipment

X. Prepare materials

- A. Collect copies of speakers' exhibits
- B. Collect speakers' bios
- C. Collect white papers/article reprints
- D. Prepare title page and table of contents
- E. Duplicate and bind
- F. Prepare seminar evaluation form, including qualification questions

XI. Arrange and check seminar logistics

- A. Reception
- B. Registration
- C. Name tags
- D. Coat room
- E. Speaker introductions
- F. Writing materials for attendees
- G. Materials delivery
- H. Seating arrangement
- I. Water for speakers
- J. Podium and lighting for speakers
- K. Audiovisual equipment
- L. Heating and air conditioning
- M. Hosts and helpers from firm

XII. Conduct event

- A. Set up "Welcome Center" to speed up registration & seating
- B. Offer reward for turning in completed evaluation and qualification form

XIII. Post event follow-up

- A. Thank you letters to attendees
- B. Thank you letters to speakers
- C. Post-seminar telemarketing follow-up to harvest immediate prospects

**Optimizing Seminar Success** - The subject for a business conference must:

- *be educational*. People come to conferences to learn. Entertainment is a plus, but promotion of your business is acceptable only if it is heavily disguised. There has to be something worth learning.
- *be urgent*. There must be a need to know now. A conference on "New Genomic Tools" is not likely to draw as many people as one entitled "Speeding Your Drugs to Market". The term "urgent" here means that there is value to learning something now rather than later.
- *provide solutions*. The conference must offer attendees solutions or progress toward solutions, because people attend conferences in order to solve problems better.

You should test seminar content against these criteria. A brainstorming session with your staff can usually provide you with a good assortment of subjects to pick from that will ensure good attendance.

**Length** - Next you must decide on the conference's length. You can determine length by asking yourself the following questions:

- a) ***How much time and support do I have to set it up?*** A two-day conference requires much more work than a half day seminar. You must adjust the length to the level of effort you can put into setting it up.
- b) ***How much content do I have to offer?*** There is simply not enough material for a lengthy conference on some subjects.
- c) ***Is my audience willing to pay?*** A two-day conference gets expensive, and most firms expect to be paid for them. The audience, in turn, is faced with not just a fee but a substantial opportunity cost in time invested away from other duties. A longer conference must therefore deal with a particularly weighty, urgent, or complicated subject. Generally you must also have a longer mailing list to find people with budgets and schedules that will allow them to attend.
- d) ***How many speakers can I attract?*** Many conferences use only one speaker, but the speaker had better be good. Using three or four speakers a day diversifies your risk. Some of the time the audience will be listening to some exceptional speakers, even if not all are of equal quality.
- e) ***How geographically scattered is my market?*** Few people will drive more than an hour to attend a half day seminar. Assuming a 1 percent response rate to your invitations (an optimistic target, unless outbound telemarketing is utilized), you will need to invite two hundred prospective buyers of your services to attract a twenty-person audience. Identifying so many prospects within a one hour travel time is easy in some businesses but impossible in others, even when more than one person is invited from the same organization. The wider the geographic area you need to draw people from, the longer your conference will have to be to justify longer travel times. Alternatively, you need to repeat your half day seminar in several locations to meet the travel time criterion.

**Timing** - Timing will also affect attendance. Most are scheduled to avoid summer vacations and end-of-the-year holidays. Longer conferences tend to be scheduled for either the beginning or end of the week, allowing participants to travel on the weekend and perhaps enjoy a short vacation at the city where the conference is being held. In the suburbs, short seminars should run in the late afternoon, allowing attendees to leave work a little early and avoid rush-hour traffic. Center-city seminars often fare better over breakfast or lunch, allowing attendees to leave before rush-hour. If charging a fee, don't schedule late in the year, as most travel budgets are already used up.

**Location** - Possible locations for your seminar or conference include your own offices, a hotel, a corporate or privately operated conference center, or space borrowed or leased from another organization. If your office has adequate meeting space and is close to the market you are trying to reach, holding the conference there provides you the opportunity to show the place off and introduce other members of the firm. The location serves as a subtle advertisement for your firm.

Hotels and conference centers offer logistical support unavailable at many offices for conferences of a day or more, including full audiovisual support, eating space separate from meeting space, and almost enough telephones for everyone to use during breaks. Most hotels will provide meeting spaces free if you guarantee a minimum number of room rentals. Room rates are negotiable if you expect a large number of participants. More importantly, you will want to negotiate the cost of meals and break-time refreshments. This is because participants pay for rooms themselves, while you pay for meals and refreshments either out of conference fees or out of your own budget. Talk to several hotels, see the space they plan to give you, look at rooms, taste the food, check out logistical support such as photocopying and audiovisual equipment, request rates, and ask for references from others who have held meetings there. You will then be in a position to negotiate with several hotels to get the mix of service and cost that suits your needs.

**Seminar Marketing** - Most seminars are marketed by direct mail. The longer the seminar and the more you plan to charge for it, the longer the list will have to be to identify an adequate number of candidates. A breakfast or evening seminar can get by with a much shorter list.

Seminar attendance can be increased dramatically through effective telemarketing. Scripts and training are the key, and only qualified professionals that can represent you effectively should be used. Telemarketing should be coordinated with mail drops, timed so the prospect has the invitation on their desk no more than a week. Outbound scripts should include topic and product interest and referral questions. Interviewees can also be asked if they would post invitations on bulletin boards, or e-mail the announcement to their colleagues. An e-mail version should be available to facilitate this.

You should also consider having the seminar announcement and registration form on your website. We don't recommend advertising in journals, due to the high cost and

relatively low coverage.

**The Invitation** - Because the quality of your invitation or flyer greatly influences attendance, it deserves special attention. For a one- or two-day conference, the flyer should include seven things:

- **The conference theme** - The reader should be able to determine almost instantaneously what the conference is about. The wording should be as compelling as possible. The title *What is the Competition Doing?* will entice more people to read the flyer than will *Competition Intelligence*.
- **A concise description stressing benefits** - Don't leave it to the readers to figure out what they will get out of attending. Tell them up front:  
*A two-day conference on the latest developments in competitive intelligence.*  
*You will learn:*
  - a) *New methods for determining competitors' pricing.*
  - b) *Little-known sources of information on competitor profitability.*
  - c) *Ways to check the reliability of industry "gossip".*

This example may seem a hard sell to some. Professional conference operators usually employ a hard sell and make a profit by doing so. If you tone down your flyer, be sure you don't obscure the benefits in the process.

- **A description of who should attend** - This inclusive list indicates who the conference is designed for and allows the reader to say, "This is meant for me!"

Who Should Attend: Strategic Planners, Marketers, Competitor Analysts,  
Business Managers, Strategy Consultants

- **A review of the schedule and content** - In this portion, list what will occur: From the morning through the afternoon of each day, noting speakers and subjects followed by two or three bullets stressing the benefits of each:

Day One:

9:00 - 10:15 a.m. - Determining What You Really Need to Know: Dr. George Jones

1. Setting Priorities in Information Gathering
2. Avoiding Information Gaps
3. How to Respond to "It Might Be Nice to Know..."
4. ...and so on.

- **A concise speaker description.** Include credentials, background and experience.

- *Logistics of time, place, fee, payment, registration, and accommodations.* This should include directions to the site, if not included with confirmation letters.
- *A sign-up sheet.* This can be a tear sheet or a response card to fax or mail in. Make sure to ask qualifying questions, including seminar topic interest, and product interest and timing.

A noted speaker, of course, deserves top billing. If you have one, re-sequence your material accordingly. Invitations to short seminars will be less elaborate but should include most of the same information.

***The speakers*** - People who organize seminars for the first time often see themselves or others in their firm as primary speakers. You can often do better by including outsiders and sometimes by using them exclusively. Doing this will make the seminar seem less self-serving, which frequently results in higher attendance. Prospective customers will shun a seminar if they sense they may be submitted to an hour-long advertisement.

One-day seminars for key lab managers can feature a big-name, outside speaker who will draw. Sales reps can sit in the audience where they can discuss the seminar and develop relationships. Among the outside speakers you can choose are current users, representatives of companies in businesses that sell to the same clientele that you do, and experts. Experts include academics and a wide array of other specialists who don't compete with you.

When selecting a speaker or speakers for a seminar, you will want to consider:

1. *Drawing power.* Some names attract more attendees than others. A client with stature in his industry will often attract his competitors, who are probably good prospective clients for you.
2. *Availability.* One of the most onerous tasks in organizing a conference or seminar is lining up speakers. This needs to be done early in the process, because everything else hinges on it.
3. *Knowledge.* The speaker must know the subject matter. Firms that use only their own employees as speakers often can do so because they are presenting highly technical material that is little understood by outsiders.
4. *Speaking ability.* The quality of the speaking will determine the success of the seminar. Don't subject your audience to the expert bore. Rehearse the speakers.
5. *Balance.* If you have several speakers, make sure they present different points of view. Otherwise you will get a me-too presentation.
6. *Price.* Most firms want to avoid paying speakers, other than for travel expenses.

If you do decide to speak yourself or to use others in your firm as speakers exclusively, you must stress the content and benefits in your flyer. The more people understand about what they will learn, the less they are likely to fear an advertisement. **Remember that**

**people attend a seminar to learn, not to be sold!**

***A chance to talk*** - People attend seminars and conferences not only to hear the speakers but also to talk to their peers at other companies. They want to compare notes, commiserate, look for jobs, and relax with others who understand their problems. These periods of informal interaction also offer you the best opportunities for building relationships and generating leads. Arrangements for this activity deserve careful attention. You need to block appropriate time for it-before a breakfast or dinner seminar, after an afternoon seminar, and at several convenient times during a conference.

You will need space that encourages interaction. That means open space out of traffic flow where people can stand and talk to each other without interruption. Comfortable sitting space in small clusters helps too.

During this time you and others from your firm should play host, circulating to make sure you meet everyone, making introductions, and absorbing those at the fringes of the conversations into the center. Above all, you should get others to talk.

They have had a chance to hear you during the presentation. Now it is your turn to listen and learn. Learn names, learn personal interests, and learn business responsibilities and concerns. This information will allow you to follow up later with a personal note to each individual.

Have a few stock questions to get others talking, like, "What is your specific interest in coming to this conference?" or "What do you think of the seminar so far?" Also, have questions that will draw out the silent individuals in a group. If one individual dominates the discussion with his reason for attending, wait for a pause and say, "That's interesting." Turn to someone else and say, "Did you come for the same reasons or different ones?" Using your networking skills, you should be listening for ways you can help those you talk with. An obligation to call a participant with information he is looking for creates a means of keeping the relationship alive later. Create a list of these obligations for use after the conference.

The opportunity to establish a relationship with your audience is one of the primary benefits of running a seminar or conference. The chance to do so is largely restricted to informal interaction periods. Work hard during these periods and you greatly increase your chances of obtaining business later.

***Money*** - Few firms charge for seminars running less than a full day. A multi-track or two-day conference, however, can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to put on. Because of the substantial educational benefits they provide, attendees are willing to pay for them, and most, though not all, firms charge a fee. You should consider doing so.

The more your conference looks like one run by a trade association or other third-party conference operator, the more you can charge attendees. This usually means several presenters from a variety of organizations, high quality audiovisual materials, a binder

full of training materials, and good quality conferencing space. Individuals with unusually strong credentials as experts and trainers do present alone for two days and charge, but they are in the minority. For prevailing fee structures, review fliers for conferences that you receive by mail. Typical costs run between \$600 and \$1,200 dollars per attendee for two-day programs. Charging a fee can enhance the credibility of your seminar. It shows that people will pay to hear what you say and is an indicator that you intend to educate, not advertise.

***Something to take home*** - For-profit conferences universally provide participants with printed material summarizing what they have learned. If your event is free, you must decide whether to do so. Materials you can use for this purpose include copies of exhibits used by speakers, white papers or reprints of articles on the subject, and speaker bios. A high quality package of materials adds to the professional appearance of a seminar and gives those who attend something they can save with your name on it.

***Post-Seminar Follow-up*** - Within a week of a conference's completion you should follow up with letters to everyone you have met, thanking them for attending. If you have promised some one information, you can put it in the letter, or, if appropriate, call. As in all forms of marketing, follow-up has a major impact on lead generation and separates the serious marketer from the casual one.

Attendees should be contacted after the seminar by a centralized telemarketing effort or one closely managed with Field Sales. Immediate prospects for your services are quickly forwarded to Field Sales, and Field Sales should receive a list of those with longer term buying plans. There should be managed followup of prospects who express product interest every six months

***Conclusion*** - Conferences and seminars demand more of those who sponsor them than many other forms of marketing. They are expensive, complex, and deadline-oriented. Hundreds of tasks must be completed on time. You can postpone a cold call or a mailing. But once a date is established, you cannot postpone a conference.

These concerns must be weighed against the power of the conference. It is a marketing activity that can pay its own way in fees. You establish yourself as an expert. You do so, in most cases, without having to compete for attention and you have a strong opportunity to develop personal relationships you can build upon later.

Coupled with outbound telemarketing you can qualify thousands of new prospects for your products and services many times faster than any other method. Seminars and conferences will remain one of the most powerful tools for marketing professional products and services.

*Note: Some information was drawn from "Rain Making, The Professional's Guide to Attracting New Clients", by Ford Harding. Adams Media Corp. 800-872-5627.*

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