

Holding Successful Seminars

Seminars are an excellent way to build credibility, cement client relationships and find new customers.

Used effectively they can be far more cost and time effective than personal visits.

Like any successful business activity the best seminars are well planned with clearly defined outcomes. Your purpose could be to:

- Build or strengthen relationships with existing customers;
- Establish cross-selling opportunities;
- Educate people about what you do and how you do it;
- Demonstrate your expertise to new prospects;
- Build your image in your target market, or
- Gain access to someone else's customers.

All are legitimate reasons hold a seminar.

Once you have determined your purpose, you need a systematic approach to running a successful event.

It starts with deciding who to invite. If your seminar is being held in conjunction with other businesses or an association this might be pre-determined but where possible I like to have a mix of existing customers and new prospects. Existing customers are usually committed and they tend to improve the audience dynamic and sell you to new prospects.

Always ask yourself who has customers you would like to reach.

I have had a lot of success with trade associations and non-competing businesses serving a similar market.

Setting the time and venue is largely dependent on your target audience. Business people seem to attend breakfast, lunch and late afternoon/early evening sessions more readily than other times.

In my experience the ideal duration seems to be about 90 minutes plus socialising for a business event. Maximise personal contact time by providing coffee or a drink before and after.

The location you choose also sends an important message. Upmarket venues say you are successful but may say you are expensive. The local football club probably won't impress your business customers and may stop them from accepting. Think about your invitees and where they will feel comfortable.

Why will people come to your seminar?

What's in it for them? Topics can be based on legislative change, product promotions, advertising campaigns, or even lifecycle. People are much more likely to attend if the topic relates to their own personal or business circumstances.



Once you have decided on a topic you still have to make it interesting enough for people to attend.

You need an attention getting title.

Creating titles is like writing newspaper headlines. They need to immediately capture the invitee's attention. Using 'how to' is always strong because it suggests that attendees will leave with new information. For example, 'How to Navigate Your Way Through the GST' is stronger than just saying 'Goods and Services Tax'.

Prospective attendees can be invited by telephone, letter, web site, through alliances, or by newspaper or radio advertisements.

Invitations should be sent out at least five weeks before the event.

Not everyone you invite will attend. Send out more invitations than you need and it is a good idea to have a standby list in case you get more refusals than expected. Assume a maximum response of 40%-60% from people you already deal with, and 15% - 30% from others.

Invitations must include details about the topic with some benefits of attendance; the time, day and date; and how and where to RSVP (about 10 days before the seminar date). Invitees who do not respond should be followed up by telephone.

Make sure the invitation reflects your image and builds your credibility.

To maximise your response, create a response script for staff taking calls. The staff members nominated to accept replies should be briefed so they can answer questions such as information about the speaker, nearby parking, expected finish time and so on.

All replies should be recorded for use as a registration checklist on the day.

Nametags help people to meet each other and help you to identify attendees and remember names. Take some spares for any unexpected attendees.

Your catering standard will depend on the image you want to create and your budget. If possible, keep it simple but of good quality. For an evening seminar a selection of canapés with beer, wine and soft drinks and/or tea and coffee is usually enough.

Any handouts should be included in a seminar kit designed as an information/promotional tool. They should have enough information so that attendees do not need to make their own notes and the speaker should mention this at the start of the presentation. Kits provide a perfect opportunity to promote additional products or services and can include an assessment form to provide you with feedback on how interesting, beneficial and relevant the attendees regarded the seminar.

Locate the registration table as near as possible to the entrance and use signage if the seminar is being held at a large venue such as a hotel.

Your decision about whether to present yourself or get an outside presenter should be based on:

- Your objectives
- The level of expertise required
- The credibility an outside speaker may give you

If you are the presenter define most important things attendees should learn from this presentation; how do you want people to feel at the end; and what action want them to take as a result of this presentation. And, make sure you know your material!

After the event update the lists of attendees by adding last minute substitutes, mark acceptances who did not attend, and send thank you cards to invitees, speakers and anyone else who contributed to the success of the event, and follow-up all attendees within three working days.