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Client acquisition can be cultivated by offering a free seminar to those you already know and prospective business opportunities. To impress however, you must deliver the perfect seminar and be sure to develop a strategy to devote your time properly and help keep things running smoothly



How to make friends and influence people

Client acquisition can become a lot easier if you get prospects to come to you. Developing a successful seminar strategy can help. When you hear "seminars," maybe you think of mass mailings attracting a group of strangers to a hotel. Although about a dozen variations are out there, this article will concentrate on a conventional seminar open to clients, prospects and other guests held in a local hotel.

In choosing the topic, there are two good rules to consider. This activity should consume the least amount of the adviser's time, less than 1 per cent. Your objective should be to select a topic that attracts the largest group of qualified prospects, identify a market niche and choose a specifically targeted topic.

The second rule applies more to the general public; choose a topic they would otherwise have to pay for to get information. In the US, popular seminar topics include identity theft, retirement planning, business owner topics and women and investing seminars.

In the US, advisers are heavily regulated on what they can present to an audience. Seminars are often produced and pre-approved by their firm or a money manager.

If an adviser writes his own seminar, he must go through a lengthy approval process including slides, handouts, mailing pieces and so on.

■ **Attracting the audience, 80 per cent of your time**

During the past few months, you may have cultivated prospects with mailings, leads from advertisements, referrals and other sources. Screen these leads for suitability and add to your invitation list.

The key factor is that you have been in contact with them or they

have contacted you previously. You can consider them live prospects, so invite clients and encourage them to bring guests.

Mail invitations should be sent out, ideally professionally printed wedding-style invitations on hard card stock. Address the envelopes by hand and use postage stamps, not a mailing machine as extra touches like this help your invitation to stand out. The text on the invitation asks the recipient to call your phone number.

Some invitees will call to respond to your invitation without prompting. If rules permit, make a follow-up call to the people who received an invitation and did not respond within a week of the mailing, two to three weeks before the event.

As you mailed to people with whom you already have a relationship, current clients and active prospects, politely ask if they plan to attend and encourage them to bring guests, you will need the names and details for the attendance list.

You now should have a list of people who said yes to attending the seminar. A large percentage will not show up so take a few steps to bring the odds into your favour.

Are you serving food and offering a choice of entrees and should it be chicken or salmon?

Call each respondent about a week before and ask: "We are doing a count for the caterer - do you prefer chicken or salmon?"

Psychologically, the client deepens his commitment when he responds. He mentally sees one empty place at a table with food going to waste if he does not attend.

The day before the seminar, place a reminder call. In the US, three factors influence a person's last-minute decision to attend or not

attend: travel, the length of the seminar and parking availability.

The reminder addresses three points. First, where are you coming from? You explain how to get there and how much time to allow. Then the length of seminar, so you explain the time it will start and when you will be done. Finally parking, so highlight the availability in the area around the seminar.

■ **Logistics before the event**

Proper staffing is a key issue as you want to be able to mingle with the guests. Arrange for proper staffing for the registration table. If you are serving food, work through the logistics.

Consider the types of signs so when a person enters the building, they will be able to find your meeting room. Choose a location that adds to your prestige, in the US, cultural organisations sometimes rent out meeting space.

Often a museum is centrally located and has parking, so is a good idea. Schools may also rent out lecture halls for evening meetings.

It is important to consider the scale of the room. If you are expecting 20 people to attend, a room seating 24 people looks better than a room accommodating 100. Check the audio visual equipment well in advance.

■ **Logistics at the event**

Your objective is to get contact information from every attendee - this is ideally done by everyone filling out a registration card. This is an opportunity to gather information. In the US, a good incentive to complete a registration card is to incorporate a prize draw, perhaps you could give a couple of books on investing as prizes.

The registration card gives you the opportunity to ask about other subjects where the person might have an interest, which can be done in a tick box format. You or your firm may already have a standardised response card available.

Contacting attendees afterwards may be governed by regulations so you may need their permission. Add a box to opt in or opt out may be a good addition to the registration card. It is crucial to remember to ask for their e-mail address.

■ **You are on stage**

Greet each attendee warmly when he arrives. If you feature an additional speaker such as a portfolio manager, walk them around the room and introduce them to attendees.

When you start the programme,

remember your objective is for the audience to do business with you soon - it is you they should remember. You have to be the Master of Ceremonies and introduce the programme. If you feature another speaker, follow them and summarise key points. Make sure you moderate the questions and answers period. As people leave, thank each person for attending and swap cards with people who are very interested.

How will they remember you? Your handouts should have adequate contact information for you and your firm.

■ **Follow-up, 15 per cent of your time**

The objective of follow-up is to schedule as many appointments as possible. In the US, this process begins the next day, when you are fresh in their mind. Remember triage on the TV series M*A*S*H.?

Divide attendees into three categories:

■ **Really interested; asked questions and swapped cards,**
■ **Somewhat interested; provided interests on registration cards,**
■ **Not interested; probably ticked the "Do not contact me" box on the registration card.**

Follow-up the the first two categories, they indicated they want to hear from you.

You now have four objectives. Ideally, you schedule an appointment. If not then perhaps they will share some information such as a list of their investments for a portfolio review.

Also, will they tell you about specific areas of interest or investment objectives?

Finally, if they will not share any of the above information, should they be invited to your next seminar? You may have an opportunity with the no shows still.

Talk to them and express regret they could not attend. Mention highlights of what was addressed. Would they like to meet personally? Or be invited to the next seminar?

Thank you notes to attendees and especially to clients who brought guests is a good, courteous touch. Planning a series of seminars can be a good client acquisition tool. The key is investing considerable effort into attracting the audience, meeting the attendees and following up shortly afterwards.

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