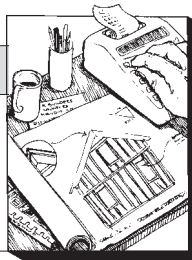


Boost Business With Seminars

by Leslie G. Levine



During the last several years, consumer seminars have become a popular way to market construction companies. Besides providing a quick education on anything from windows to creative financing, a well-produced seminar provides an effective way to raise your company profile.

Avoiding the temptation to sell can actually enhance your company's image and reputation. Your goals should be to introduce your company to the community and to emphasize the benefits of remodeling or custom building.

Be Prepared

You'll need to consider several issues as you plan your seminar. What do you want to cover? How long should the seminar be? How much depth should you go into? What if you don't have a show-room — where will you hold the seminar? Will participants pay a fee? How will you promote your seminar and to whom? These are just a few of the questions you'll want to ask yourself.

Seminar Topic

The topic will be what draws (or fails to draw) your audience. "How to Select a Contractor" and "Successful Ways to Come Out Ahead in Remodeling" are popular topics. More specific themes might include "Bathroom and Kitchen Design," "Creative Lighting," and "Financing a Remodel." The list is endless. Tailor your topic to your own areas of expertise so you can cover it confidently.

Regardless of the topic, resist the temptation to cover *everything*. You have only a finite period of time in which to conduct your seminar, so try not to overload your audience with too much data. Developing an outline will help you focus the topic and organize a program that

is succinct and logical, and it will help keep you from rambling on. Here's a generic outline that can be applied to almost any subject:

- I. Background (perhaps preceded by an anecdote illustrating the subject)
- II. Overview
- III. Problem
- IV. Solution
- V. Benefit
- VI. Action (How to get started)
- VII. Conclusion

Try to reinforce your points by using real-life examples and anecdotes.

Props

Using audio-visual elements such as slides or videos doesn't guarantee success, but used with skill and ease, they can add quality and interest to your seminar. The medium you select will depend on your topic and where the seminar will be held. Possibilities include transparencies using an overhead projector; 35mm slides and a slide projector; charts and graphs; flipcharts; posters; movies and videotapes; and samples of technology or materials (lighting, siding, etc.). Having samples that can be passed around helps involve the audience and lets them see the products up close. Whatever combination of visuals you select, keep them, along with the rest of the seminar, simple and to the point.

Planning the Agenda

Keep seminars short by providing some information in printed form. Then use the seminar time to hit the high points and answer questions. Hand out the papers at the beginning of the seminar and encourage the class to jot down notes and questions in the margins.

Your seminar's length will

depend partly upon what you want to include. You'll want time to introduce yourself, to talk about your topic, and to answer any questions. Questions can take up an inordinate amount of time, so to streamline this process, leave room on the registration form for questions and include time after the formal presentation for answering them.

Most seminars tend to run between 1½ to 2 hours, divided roughly in half between the presentation and the question period. (Your own time at the seminar site is likely to be double that if you count preparation and closing time.) Allow some time after the group Q&A for informal one-on-one questions; these often lead directly to future jobs.

When selecting the seminar date, check local events schedules (contact your local chamber of commerce for one) to make sure you're not in conflict with some other major event that would draw from your audience.

Know Your Audience

Your audience will likely be a mix of people with varying levels of interest in your topic. Some will be ardent do-it-yourselfers looking for pointers. Others may want to simply learn about the industry. Still others may be very close to selecting a contractor for a project they've been considering doing for years.

The makeup of your seminar audience will not always be the same. Mark Richardson, of Case Design/Remodeling in Bethesda, Md., breaks his typical class into three distinct groups. "Fifty percent are the kind of people who enjoy learning. They don't necessarily have a real or immediate need for remodeling," he says. "About 20 percent are professionals, such as real estate agents, remodeling contractors, and carpenters. The balance seems to be those whose remodeling needs are imminent."

Promotion and Registration

There are many ways to promote your seminar. Send a news release to the local media with pertinent information, including a program

summary, the date and time, and registration information. Or send a direct mail piece containing the same information to past clients, referrals, and anyone else who might be interested in attending.

Be sure to include on any promotional piece how to register for the seminar (and billing information if applicable). It's best to keep your registration method simple. You may, however, want to include a section that asks participants what they want to know about the subject matter, what other seminars they have attended, and what expectations they have for your seminar.

Curtain Time

On seminar day, be sure to review your notes and props, and check all audiovisual equipment. Bring an extra bulb for a projector if you're using one; Murphy's Law teaches us that something will probably not work.

This need not be catastrophic. Just plan for it by building alternatives into your program. For instance, if you plan to show a video and the VCR malfunctions, use the time to cover a point that the videotape would have demonstrated. Or use the time to address questions that would have otherwise gone unasked due to time constraints. Your main assets are your knowledge and an outline that highlights the main points of your topic so you can generate discussion.

Another item to remember is comfort. Make sure lighting and room temperature are adequate. Have refreshments on hand, even if it just means coffee, tea, and water.

Advice From the Pros

Ask your peers who have conducted seminars just what makes their programs successful. Richardson emphasizes the importance of good presentation skills. "Prepare a tight outline," he says, "and practice, practice, practice!" ■

Leslie Levine writes on construction and business topics from Rochester, N.Y.