

# Teach Classes & Win Customers

**F**or the past 11 years, I've offered informational seminars to the general public on a variety of residential construction and remodeling topics.

**by Mike Guertin**

Seminars are an important

component of my marketing strategy. The classes introduce me to potential clients; they, in turn, learn who I am, what I do, and how I do it. Because I get to know them long before they're ready to get bids, I am often the only one they call when they're ready to start their project.

During a seminar, I learn enough about the attendees to perform a kind of quick prequalification. If someone later approaches me about a project, I already have a fairly good idea of whether the potential client and I will be a good fit.

Using free or low-cost informational seminars for marketing isn't a new idea. By checking your local newspaper, you may notice that a variety of professionals, from picture framers to financial planning consultants, use this marketing strategy. Such seminars may seem hokey, but I've found them very effective.

## Working With a Sponsor

To offer a successful seminar, it's helpful to work with a sponsor. I've had great success partnering with local organizations that offer noncredit classes.

One private organization in my area, for example, prints a bimonthly course catalog, which it distributes at convenience stores, restaurants, and public building foyers. The classes cover a wide range of topics — ballroom dancing, canoeing, cooking Indian food, and tie-dying T-shirts. Some of these are one-night courses, while others meet for several evenings over a period of a few weeks.

Community colleges and universities often offer short noncredit enrichment

courses which are open to the general public. Many town recreation departments also offer classes, and the topics aren't usually limited to physical recreation; for example, they might include interests like photography and gardening. One advantage of working with a rec department program is that it allows you to target the city or town where you want more work.

I've found that all of these groups are hungry for teachers. They usually provide classroom space and coordinate student registration, which saves you a lot of work. These groups charge students for the classes and often pay you for teaching. People who pay for seminars are highly motivated to learn. They are more likely to attend and attach more value to the course content than they would if the seminar were free.

Keep in mind that these arrangements will not allow you to present an infomercial or turn the class into a sales call.

## Lumberyards and Real Estate Brokers

Other possible seminar sponsors include building-materials suppliers and real estate brokers. If you team up with another business this way, the event can turn into a win-win situation for both of you.

Most building-materials suppliers regularly run newspaper and radio ads with the help of co-op money from manufacturers. These ads are a great opportunity to get the word out about a seminar. Lumberyards typically schedule seminars at their facilities after business hours. Either you or the supplier can handle registering students; just make sure it's a coordinated effort.

To entice a sponsor, explain what's in it for them. For example, a real estate broker might be interested in sponsoring a class called "Selecting Land for Your Custom Home," which would attract students interested in buying a

Offering classes in your community  
can be an effective way to attract  
remodeling leads

piece of land, and perhaps selling an existing home. One advantage of real estate offices: They often include large meeting rooms.

A building materials yard might be interested in a seminar called "Vinyl Siding that Pleases the Eye." The supplier would have the opportunity to display product samples around the showroom. Provide the sponsor with a chance to give a sales pitch, either at the beginning of the seminar or after a break. The sponsor will probably have a representative available during a class break to answer questions.

### Focusing the Topic

Choose your seminar topic carefully. Select a topic you know well and that is related to the type of work you want to generate. Don't talk about home additions if your business focuses on maintenance and repair.

A vague, general topic is harder to present than a more focused topic. Choosing an attention-grabbing title will help draw an audience. Which presentation would you rather attend: "Home Remodeling," or "Avoiding the Home Remodeling Money Pit"? Nearly any topic can sound more appealing when it's announced with a catchy title. Follow the title with a compelling description that tells the students how they will benefit from attending.

For example, this course description is a yawn: "The class will cover ways to prepare your home for a remodeling project, how to save money, and how to hire a contractor and architect." Instead, use vivid language to grab people's attention: "With a little planning, you can prevent your home remodeling project from turning into a horror story. Find out 12 steps you can take to minimize disruption to your lifestyle during remodeling. Learn how to stretch your remodeling dollars without cutting quality. Discover the hidden costs of remodeling, and how you can limit them. Take control

of your remodeling project before it takes charge of you." You don't need to puff up what you're going to talk about; just present it in a positive light.

### Getting the Word Out

The best time to schedule a seminar is between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m., Monday through Thursday. Try to avoid scheduling a seminar during school holidays or anytime during the summer. I've had the best turnouts in September, October, and January through May.

In order to attract a crowd to your presentation, you need to market your marketing. Using paid newspaper ads to announce your seminar undermines the idea of low-cost marketing. Instead, look for sources of free advertising to promote your presentation.

**Newspaper events listings.** Many newspapers have a free community bulletin board that lists upcoming events.

**Press releases.** A simple press release can increase the chance that a newspaper will cover your presentation. A compelling seminar title can often catch an editor's attention.

### Planning the Presentation

The seminar doesn't have to be scripted, but you'll need to do some planning. When you write the class description, you should, at a minimum, have prepared an outline to ensure that you accurately describe the course.

Typically, a presentation will last between 1½ and 2½ hours. Plan a 10- or 15-minute break in the middle and have simple refreshments available, if possible. Leave time at the end for questions, and plan to hang around afterward to give advice about individual projects.

Until you've done a few presentations, it's hard to know how much information you'll need for the allotted time. If you try to cover too much material, you'll feel rushed,

## Estimating and Budgeting Your New Home

By  
**Michael R. Gue**  
401-884-6129  
Rhode Island Contractor Registration #150377

## Avoiding the Home Remodeling Money Pit

By  
**Michael R. Guertin, Inc.**  
401-884-6129  
Rhode Island Contractor Registration #150377

while if you don't have enough, the seminar will seem weak.

To give myself flexibility, I usually prepare two types of material: primary and supplementary information. The primary information contains all of the essentials. I write detailed notes on the supplementary material and distribute these notes as a handout.

If I only have enough time to discuss the primary material, the students can still read the secondary information in the handout. If there's time left after I'm through with the primary material, I discuss the information in the handouts.

If you have some audio-visual equipment, or can borrow some, I recommend that you show your outline on screen. A Microsoft PowerPoint presentation with an LCD projector is great, but a simple overhead projector with typed notes is fine. Even handwritten notes on a large newsprint tablet will help to keep you on track and help the audience to know where you are and where you're going.

## Presentation Time

An informational seminar should provide useful, unbiased information, not a sales pitch. Stick to the topic; this is not a time to talk about yourself or your business.

I always start by having students fill out a sign-in sheet with names and addresses, so I can add their names to my newsletter mailing list.

Begin the presentation with a very brief description of who you are and what you're going to talk about. Your introduction should focus on the audience, not you: "Welcome, I'm Mike. I've been finishing basements for clients for eight years. I'm going to show you several ways to make your finished basement drier and brighter, and how to make creative use of the space you have."

Start with an ice-breaker to loosen people up. Go around the room and ask participants to give their names and a description of their remodeling project. In the case of couples, ask one person to introduce their project, and then ask the other member of the couple if the description is accurate. You'll inevitably

get some Newlywed Game responses.

I like to let people ask questions while I'm presenting, but I try to avoid getting off track or bogged down by the details of individual projects. Often, I'll invite participants to see me after the seminar with their questions, so I don't lose everyone else's attention.

Print copies of your handout material — your outline and any supplementary information — on your letterhead stationery. Leave plenty of white space on the pages for students to take their own notes. Distribute your handouts in a folder along with your business card and maybe a simple brochure. Be careful, though, not to overdo the blatant marketing. I've had students save these handouts for years and then call me to look at their project.

A few tips I've learned the hard way:

- Don't disparage other contractors; no good comes of it.
- Talk only about subjects you know well; students will see through you otherwise.
- Don't just lecture; let people participate with questions and comments.
- Use examples from your experience, provided they're relevant.
- Use humor if you're comfortable with it; if not, steer clear.
- Check the clock from time to time, and don't run late; people have other places to go.
- Dress neatly but casually. Don't wear warm clothes; you'll probably be warm from nervousness.
- Watch your language, especially if you work with a rough crew.
- Look at the audience while you talk, and make eye contact. Don't be afraid to glance at your notes, but don't read a script.

Teaching a seminar for the first time can be nerve wracking. If you're nervous, you may feel more confident team-teaching with someone you work with. Or you could partner with an architect, K&B designer, or lighting consultant and do two short mini-seminars in one evening.

**Evaluations.** I usually provide an evaluation sheet, so that students can

rate my presentation for topic choice, content, and presenter performance. The easiest-to-use forms include boxes that can be checked, on a scale of 1 to 5.

I leave space on the form for comments and topic suggestions. These feedback forms help improve future seminars and sometimes provide good topic ideas. Even if you are disappointed with your seminar, chances are the audience will think it was great.

## Bearing Fruit

Just the fact that you are offering a seminar usually raises your qualifications in the minds of potential clients, because you're immediately perceived as an expert in your field. There's no need to "sell" people during the presentation — in fact, I think the more low-key you are, the more likely attendees will seek you out afterward.

I usually end my presentations by offering each participant one hour of free consulting time. I explain that although I try to cover a topic completely in the class, each project is unique. In a one-on-one setting, I can understand their projects better and provide more specific information. These one-on-one sessions are where marketing meets sales.

When my friend Rick Arnold and I gave our first seminar, 12 people showed up. Almost immediately after that seminar, we got three jobs from attendees, and several more projects over the years can be traced back to that first seminar.

I still present four or five seminars a year, even though the courses generate more leads than I need. Having a surplus of leads allows me to pick the best clients and the most interesting projects. Since I began using seminars as my primary marketing tool, 90% of my clients either attended a seminar or were referred by someone who did.



*Mike Guertin is a builder and remodeler in East Greenwich, R.I.*