

Making A Seminar Happen

The business of seminars and conferences is a challenging one. In my career as a meeting planner and promoter, I have had the opportunity to work the full spectrum of small (20-25 people) to very large (2500+ people), from "in-house" programs to public seminars to annual conferences, both "open to the public" and association annual meetings/conventions. By far, the greatest challenge lies with the public event.

The target market is so much more diversified and changeable. With a corporate "in-house" seminar, there is a captive audience (sometimes much harder to please because it's not a matter of the audience wanting to be there). With the association annual event, there is at least a specific audience with a strong interest in attending. So in planning a public event, the work begins with a choice of topic and target market - deciding on feasibility first. If you are beginning a business of planning and promoting seminars, study the market carefully - find out who is doing similar seminars in your area or in a similar market. Obtain their brochures (subscribe to one or more business magazines and you'll get lots of mailings on business related seminars).

Study the brochures - what are they selling? For how much? what does the fee include? who are the speakers? And then, if you can, check out the hotel on the day of the seminar. Did it actually run? How many people attended? What were their comments as they stood in the halls during coffee breaks?

The larger nationwide seminar promoters send out millions of brochures, selling twenty seminar dates around the country (looks impressive and saves on separate printings for each city) for an average return of 1 to 2 percent. Can you afford those kinds of direct mail costs?

The more targeted your market, the higher the return on direct mail soliciting. Still, you will need to provide a stimulating topic, known or highly credentialed speakers and reasonable prices to get people to attend. The more personal your topic, the more personal contact will be required to enroll people in the seminar.

Personal growth seminars, especially the intensive weekends which often range in price from \$250 to \$400 and up, require one to one sales situations. In this case, person to person is more effective than telephone sales for the actual enrollment. Telemarketing is good for qualifying leads and free evening seminars are also good for introducing people to the concepts of personal growth.

Business seminars are more easily sold by direct mail. Although once again, if you are dealing in a higher ticket item, one to one sales and telemarketing are important to increasing your enrollment.

So, you've decided on a topic and target audience. It's six months out from the seminar date - there's a lot to be done NOW! Don't make the mistake of thinking you can do it all in a month or two. Last year, I coordinated the annual Woman to Woman Conference (over 2500 attendees with 200 workshops). We started in September of '83 to plan and prepare for the October '84 conference. The larger the event, the more advance work is required.

SIX MONTHS OUT:

1. Determine topic, audience and location
2. Prepare a budget and determine break-even point and desired goals
3. Find speakers (this may take several weeks to complete)
4. Find and obtain mailing lists for your target audience

5. Design brochure and begin work with artists and copywriters
6. Plan your publicity - remember that magazines, trade journals, etc. have timelines three to four months before publication date
7. Secure a hotel and negotiate a contract
8. Prepare a detailed timeline for the next six months

During the next three months, all the details related to the above steps will be handled. This includes everything from obtaining press kits from speakers, to writing press releases and negotiating articles and interviews - to getting a final layout and proof of the brochure so it's ready to print.

The details of planning a high quality, professional seminar are immense. Confirming speakers, their room set-up needs, their audio-visual needs and printing needs (hand-outs) can be a major task in itself.

Then there is the mailing. Do you have all the lists? Will you mail the same piece twice? (Multiple mailings to the same list can increase your return to 5% or more.) Or will you do an advance general program or notice of event followed by a full registration program? Will it include a cover letter or be a self-mailer? And be sure to allow enough time for the arrival of bulk mail.

Three to two months out from the event, the mailings begin. Logistics need to be confirmed with the hotel. Find out if any weddings, parties or other noisy events (like remodeling) are planned for areas near your meeting room.

THREE - TWO MONTHS OUT:

1. Confirm hotel logistics, including menu, room set-ups, sleeping rooms
2. Order name badges, ribbons, signs, etc.
3. Order registration folders
4. Confirm interviews with media and any arrange for paid advertising

5. Confirm speakers, send brochure/program and verify all details
6. Hire a photographer (if you want action shots for your next brochure)
7. Reserve audio-visual equipment and learn how to use it or hire qualified people

Perhaps one of the most important details is to plan for delays. Something always goes wrong! If you've started your work with plenty of lead time - an illness of the artist or information lost in the mail won't do you in.

Revue your timeline regularly (at least weekly) to be sure you've got the details covered. Keep a log of registrations so you can see at a glance how you are doing. Your pre-registration date should be about three weeks prior. A discount on pre-registration should be substantial enough to encourage advance registration. The three weeks out timeline gives you a chance to revise your plan if registrations aren't surpassing your break-even point.

One month out from D-day. Detail is now of primary importance as all of the smaller and vital pieces fall into place.

ONE MONTH OUT:

1. Confirm, confirm, confirm. Speakers, audio-visual staff and/or equipment, hotel logistics (finalize menu, room set-up, etc.)
2. Prepare name badges, registration packets, hand-outs.
3. Send confirmation notices or packets to attendees
4. Implement plan B if necessary to increase registration (telemarketing, special mailing, whatever it takes to get attendance up)
5. Prepare supplies box with all the miscellaneous supplies (see Table 1)

Assuming you have enough registrants to surpass your break-even point, now you need to focus on the 'day-of' details. Many of which will need to be confirmed the day before. Much of the detail at this point has to do with familiarizing yourself with the hotel room(s) - everything from lighting outlets to microphone

and easels. Know who to call on the hotel staff for heating/cooling problems. Know the fire exits and emergency procedures. Hopefully you will never need them.

The big day has arrived. You arrive at least one hour or more prior to starting time. Make sure the hotel has your seminar properly posted on the marquee in the lobby. Put up your signs and set up the registration table. Double check the room set-up and test run the equipment. Try the sound system and get a level check.

Sit back, take five deep breaths and relax. Get in a cheerful mood to greet registrants and speakers. Remember, something is bound to go wrong. However, you have done such a fantastic job of preparing this event that you can handle anything.

When the day is over, distribute evaluation forms, thank the attendees for being there and acknowledge the speakers. Then, when everyone is gone, go have a drink - you deserve it!

Good seminar planning involves evaluation by you, as well as by the participants. What when wrong, what went right. Do this in the next day or two and revise your timeline for the next event. Keep notes as you do along of what you can improve, add or delete from your plans.

If you are considering the business of seminar promoting, keep in mind that it means running many events in a year and juggling the different stages of planning as you go. It's a difficult business and a very rewarding one. Knowing that you were responsible for making a difference in someone's life - because they received education through your event - is the best reward you can get. However, making a profit at it isn't a bad runner-up.

Table 1
SUPPLY BOX

Note paper (scratch pads and full size paper)
Message pads
Pens
Felt-tip markers (name tags)
Thumb tacks
Stick pins
Paper clips
Masking tape
Cellophane tape
Scissors
Staples, stapler
Name tags (stick on or plastic with inserts)
Sign in sheets
Speakers name tags or plaques
Registration signs
Registration check list (preregistered)
Receipt book
Change slips
Evaluation sheets
Registration packets
Hand-outs
Books, tapes or other products for sale
Receipt book
Change and money box
Inventory control sheet
Charge slips

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PATRICIA CLASON has been a professional speaker, trainer, consultant and writer for over twenty-five years. She is now the Director of the Center for Creative Learning which offers programs for personal and professional development at offices in Milwaukee and Madison, and Detroit. She has traveled across the continent doing over 3,000 presentations for corporations, associations, government agencies and non-profit organizations since 1975. Patricia has written many articles, training programs and personal growth seminars and has been a sought-after guest for radio and television.

The focus of her work is on alternative methods of teaching and learning that produce high quality results. Her search for the best in the technology of human resource development has taken her as a student on many adventures through traditional and some not-so-traditional training programs.

Currently she is the owner of three businesses, the Center for Creative Learning, Great Ideas! Speakers Bureau and Accountability Coaching Associates. As a consultant and coach to other businesses, large and small, in the areas of start-up, marketing, and management skills, she guides people to manifesting their dreams. Her articles often appear in business and trade publications and her column Ask the Coach appears monthly in the Employment Times.

To keep all this together, and still have time for her family and herself, Patricia must truly practice what she teaches in the areas of communication, time management, people management and motivation.

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