

Marketing Live Local Seminars for the Information Technology Market

There's No Time Like Face Time

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I recently attended a seminar at the regional office of a large IT vendor, sponsored by a local VAR. They needed attendees and a staffer I work with asked me to please come fill a seat. The meeting was your basic pitch on a relatively mundane technology along with a catered lunch at the end...I didn't want to go. At the event there were three attendees from end user companies.

SURPRISE! The speaker was great: Personable, engaging, with interesting stories and information. What sounded like it was going to be a tech talk on a mundane technology turned out to be rather interesting and covered an important technological advance of interest to most IT shops. There were also many questions; the sign of an engaging presenter and interesting material.

In this case, attendance would likely have been much higher if the messaging about the quality of the presenter, the material, and the technology itself were delivered to the potential audience in a compelling way.

Not that it wasn't a success. If the VAR sponsor landed a single client it was probably worth it. Nonetheless, an audience of 20 end user organizations would deliver a lot more sales potential.

Promoting a live seminar is a marketing campaign to all the prospects from the start...those that attend the seminar are a bonus opportunity.

The issue is that seminars are often treated as a small-time marketing campaign. As such, they don't get the strategic planning and attention to detail they need to be successful. One thing is for sure: Riding on the coattails of a big name IT vendor, and counting on a free lunch to draw attendees, does not constitute a strategy.

Here's how seminars often come to life:

Bob: *How about we do a seminar?*

Mary: *Oooh, good idea. I'll set it up for eight weeks from today.*

Bob: *We can't wait that long, make it five weeks. What should it be about?*

Mary: *I should be able to market it in five weeks. How about you get Daryl to talk about how to plug in a USB cable?*

Bob: *Great, I'm sure my brother Daryl will do it, and he should have recovered from his brain surgery by then. We should order chicken wings and those little cocktail weenies too.*

Mary: *I'll see if our partner, The Mother Ship Corp, will let us use their meeting room.*

This typical approach is to select a date, a venue, maybe a food bonus, a topic/speaker, and then all you have to do is market it. Simple, however let's consider a slightly more strategic approach.

Create a Seminar Marketing Strategy

The coolest thing about doing a live local seminar is that it's a marketing campaign from the very start to all the identified prospects, not just the ones that attend. The seminar promotion process is a way to engage all the potential prospects, whether they decide to come or not.

With this in mind, a strategy can be developed. Here are the basic strategy components, although they do not necessarily reflect a set of steps in a particular order:

- Set goals for the seminar campaign.
- Select a compelling topic and presenter.
- Define the appropriate audience.
- Prepare content.
- Decide on appropriate timing and set a date.
- Select a venue and event bonuses.
- Create a marketing plan and schedule.
- Identify the audience and prioritize contacts.
- Plan event logistics.
- Execute.

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Set goals

Most seminars are simply meant to recruit attendees and generate leads or sales. While this is true, a seminar campaign offers other opportunities to consider:

- Collect information from potential attendees that assist with prequalification.
- Create a comprehensive profile of the local market, including its size, demographic characteristics, and most prominent players that are part of your target market.
- Build a local market database that can be fine tuned during the seminar marketing campaign process and used extensively in the future.
- Use the campaign as an opportunity to create a local networking group based on similar interests.

Select a compelling topic and presenter

Topic is most important. There are many basic product pitches that will work, but if you're marketing a relatively routine product or service you'll need a compelling twist in how you present the topic. Something that would make a prospect say to themselves, "Even though I know everything there is to know about this topic, their story sounds interesting."

The two basic twists are horror stories and success stories. Instead of the topic "We Do Virtualization Implementations Better Than Anyone," perhaps "Two Virtualization Disasters and Their Unseen Costs," or "Three Virtualization Implementations, 200 Servers Are Now Flower Pots."

Another option is a very technical seminar with lots of meat. This type of seminar can draw the techies out of the wood work. This identifies organizations with a specific interest in the topic. The attendees are probably not decision makers, but will likely be influencers.

Speakers need to be matched to the audience. A proficient technical speaker will work for a very technical audience, but a little charisma goes a long way too. Good speakers are story tellers that can make the audience feel personally engaged. If the topic is management oriented, a more seasoned speaker is essential.

Finally, you can also recruit a speaker that says nothing about your company and what you sell, but is a great story teller and speaks on a subject related to your work. Conference keynote speakers are often not exactly on topic, but have a great and related story to tell.

Define the appropriate audience

Customers, new clients, or both? Including existing clients seems natural, but may not always be the best strategy. If you're looking to recruit new clients you're better off leaving existing clients out of the mix. Balancing marketing efforts between existing clients and recruiting new clients will most likely create a distraction in the marketing process, and also during the event. If existing clients show up then your staff ends up talking to people they already know.

If you are doing a good job maintaining your customer relationships, existing customers are better sold to one-on-one. If you want to include customers in an event focused on new prospects, be sure the staff is clear on the goals and their job.

Once the appropriate audience has been chosen, then that audience needs to be identified. Audience identification is discussed below.

Prepare content

The presentation content for the event should be prepared before marketing begins. Too often the content will take on a dynamic life of its own and may not reflect the original design intent. In addition, *hurry up* content at the last minute often doesn't flow or present well.

Distracted Attendees
66% of online event attendees are inclined to take phone calls versus 48% of in person attendees.
42% of online event attendees are likely to surf the web versus 28% of in person attendees.

Source: Meetings and Conventions. www.meetings-conventions.com/article_ektid42280.aspx

When the content is close to complete, the marketing messaging can be adjusted accordingly.

Decide on appropriate timing and set a date

Most local live seminars last a couple hours and include something similar to continental breakfast or lunch. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday are the most common days. Check to see that there are no conflicting events in the area, or even nationally, on your scheduled day. For example: If you want to hold a seminar on power and cooling infrastructure in Dallas, make sure AFCOM is not holding a nationwide event the same week in Las Vegas. Valuable prospects will likely be out of town. Weeks with a three-day weekend are also bad news.

Select a venue and event bonuses

Each city has its own unique geographic travel characteristics that may determine where you hold a seminar. Proximity of freeways, travel arteries, and perhaps the simple popularity of particular venues are considerations.

Additionally, consider identifying the 50 most important organizations you would like to see represented at the seminar. Plot their locations on a map and look for the greatest population density within a five mile radius. Start your venue search at the epicenter of this five mile radius.

Create a marketing plan and schedule

This topic is worthy of an entire article but we'll summarize some main points here. First, most seminar promotions tend to focus on email marketing. It's a fact that comprehensive market coverage is rarely attainable by only using email. Some phone and/or postal mail will be key to success.

A combination of postcards, email, telemarketing, and partner participation is optimal. High value targets deserve a phone call to inquire if you can send an email invitation to them. Where the budget allows, a

postcard mailing is in order. Postcards and phone calls are not necessarily required for everyone on your list. Prospects can be prioritized by their value, proximity to venue, and the existence of an email address.

Among the marketing collateral is also an event landing page with agenda, schedule, speaker bio, location, a map with directions, send this to a friend option, and an opportunity to ask questions.

Following up to confirm attendance is absolutely essential. Consider an email confirmation four or five days before, a telephone confirmation three days before, then an email confirmation the day before. In the best case scenario, an attendee is owned by someone in your organization. When a registration comes in, the attendee owner calls to thank them. Now there is a personal connection with the prospective attendee.

When the attendee owner places the last follow up confirmation call a couple days before the event, it helps to say “Can I count on you to attend?”

Identify the audience and prioritize contacts

Previously we mentioned defining the audience. Now it’s time to identify exactly who that audience is and acquire the marketing data necessary to execute the campaigns. In many cases there is an in house list, or perhaps a partner will provide one. At a minimum, this needs to be compared to other sources to be sure you have the most optimal market coverage.

List vendors should be able to compare your existing market data to their database and show you how they can add value to what you have. ACR does this for clients frequently, and there are some very simple methods for comparing data especially for a limited geographic area. The purpose is not so much about eliminating redundant data, but rather identifying prospects that are not on the source list.

Once a list has been developed, all the prospects can be prioritized by their contact type value, organization type value, and geographic proximity to the venue. This prioritization can be used to identify which prospects will get phone calls or direct postal mail.

Plan event logistics

The devil is in the details, and event day is hectic enough without realizing you missed some details. This includes items like having a registration list, extra badges, handouts, a critique sheet, product information, etc. It’s also good to have a list of contact cell phone numbers for everyone involved, including speakers, staff, audio visual company, venue staff, and any other suppliers involved on event day.

Execute

Seems simple enough, but this is where the wheels usually come off. A typical example is that many organizations count on sales reps to make the phone calls. More often than not, this isn’t happening or the sales reps invest their time contacting existing clients. There has to be buy-in and commitment from all participants on executing the strategy as planned. Executive commitment and control will go a long way.

Creating Unique Events

If there is a specific unique event that always works we would probably all be doing it already. With that said, the benefit of a truly unique event is that those who attend are likely to remember it, and your company. A rather unique event may also be useful as a way of encouraging past attendees to come again (with a different or varied presentation), thereby building credibility and recognition for your company.

Here’s a few examples we’ve seen clients use:

Football Stadium Tours – This idea included a presentation then a behind the scenes tour of an NFL facility.

Bourbon and Wine Tasting at a fancy restaurant – This event was specifically designed to attract 10 or so high level CIOs in significant IT organizations. To make this more attractive, the vendor invited the CIO and a guest of their choosing.

A speaker from the FBI or CIA, or a similar organization – These organizations often have a community outreach interest, and there are some fascinating cyber security and technology story tellers around.

Use a local CIO or other IT staffer to tell a technology story – This approach is not new, and not all that unique either, but really doesn't get used very often. End-user presentations at the local level can attract attendees that you are not likely to get to a technical presentation.

Remember that unique events, like food or other perks, do not make an event successful, they just enhance the experience. Solid marketing and follow up are still required.

Enhancing the Event Experience

As mentioned earlier, free food and giveaways alone do not attract the right audience. However, they do enhance the experience for attendees, and when they leave you want them to anticipate your next event. At a Microsoft event, door prizes were not used to promote the event, but once the attendees were on site they mentioned the 20 or so giveaways a number of times to encourage audience members to stay, and it worked.

Using an Outside Event Promotion Service

There are companies that specialize in organizing and promoting events. Many offer end-to-end services, including providing lists of prospects to promote the event to. Please don't count on someone else to identify your audience for you. Your participation in all phases of the event is critical, especially with the audience identification strategy.

Stick With Your Plan

It is a very rewarding experience putting together a well attended and well received event. The amount of planning and work is not trivial, but it doesn't have to be overwhelming either. Create a strategy with enough lead time and keep your eye on the plan so no steps get missed.

Don't forget post-event follow-ups!

ACR does not provide end-to-end event promotion services. Our expertise is audience definition and identification. Some of the ideas presented here, like prioritizing various types of attendees, are very simple if you work with data every day. We provide these types of additional services to clients at no cost. Contact Alan Howard if you have questions about this article or IT market identification: alan@acrhq.com or 800-234-2227.

Applied Computer Research, Inc. publishes the *Directory of Top Computer Executives*, a database of the mid size and large IT user organizations in the U.S. and Canada. Over 34,000 organizations and 63,000 IT executives are included. ACR uses the techniques discussed in this document, and many others, to develop sales support and marketing campaign lists for telemarketing, direct mail, email marketing campaigns and field sales support. Visit www.itmarketintelligence.com, or call 800-234-2227 for more details.



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