

silverFox training TOP TIPS SERIES

PLANNING FOR YOUR SEMINAR

Staging a seminar is a big decision. It takes time, resource, budget and serious planning to deliver a good seminar, but the benefits can be worthwhile. Think of the excellent seminars you have attended. What was good about them? What made them stand out? Did you learn lessons or gather information that you are using in your own business? If the answer to this last question is 'Yes', then the seminar has been a highly successful marketing exercise. You could be doing the same and integrating seminars into your clients and your own marketing programme, or taking advantage of others' seminar programmes by offering yourself or one of your colleagues as speakers.

What is a seminar?

Seminars are small conferences, usually taking place over a day, or even half a day. The seminar has a theme, and the content is built around a number of speakers who will address different elements of the theme. The invited audience comprises invitees from your target group, either taken across horizontal or vertical sectors, depending on the seminar content.

Why Do One?

Seminars do not provide an opportunity to sell overtly. They are more of a 'soft sell' marketing opportunity to get face to face with your target market and engage in a debate where you can be seen as a thought leader and solutions provider. The benefits are that you will be seen as a driver of business development, rather than a follower.

Your customers and prospects will be impressed by this aspect of your relationship with them and the seminar will help to create a more receptive environment in which you can sell to them, often in a more cohesive, strategic way.

What should the content be?

Seminars are about issues, trends, expert opinion and solutions. They are not product demonstrations. The seminar has an objective status because it generally combines the attendance of a number of individual speakers from different organisations. You will be one of a number of 'experts' addressing an audience which has come to be educated about issues which they need more information about – because it is relevant to their business.

Seminar Content & Theming

You should build your seminar around a theme and make it fit for purpose. Do some research amongst your target market. What would interest them? What sort of topics and what level of speakers would get them out of the office? Often, you can determine this by speaking to key customers, finding out what their interest would be, and going from there. When planning, you could be looking at topics which are 'generic' and which attract invitees from across business groups, or 'specialist', which would attract delegates from a single vertical sector which you are targeting, say healthcare, education or manufacturing.

Building Content

Form a steering group internally to look at designing the seminar content around the chosen theme. Between the group members, you will know what the key issues are. Make the subject matter real and immediate but also forward looking. Perhaps include a case study or two, where real-world solutions are being used to tackle problems which the audience will share. As you build your seminar 'skeleton', you will begin to see where the opportunities for individual speaking slots occur.

Getting Speakers

Your speakers should combine internal expertise with external. A typical seminar that is well conceived and put together will have content built around, for example a Chairman from your organisation combined with one or two senior level customers or partners and an academic or commentator to give an objective 'overview' about the particular market sector or technological possibilities. Seminars are not as major as conferences; they do not necessarily need plenary sessions and breakout rooms, but this approach can work quite well if delegates want a more 'hands on' approach with some of the content. Remember that your delegates are not paying commercial rates to attend, but they will want to hear something which adds value and increases their knowledge – that means speakers will need to be good, well rehearsed and interesting. You should not be paying for speakers when you organise a seminar, unless you want to open up with someone who is very high profile. If this is the case, it might mean negotiating a fee.

Use the following set of guidelines when you are putting a seminar together.

Planning

Planning is the key to a successful seminar. You should normally allow three months to organise an event involving external participants. Some events with high-profile speakers are often set up a year in advance.

Creating A Budget

A key factor affecting the cost of an event is the number of people attending. This is particularly true if you are offering hospitality. The number of people invited also affects the cost of printing and sending out invitations. The main costs that you need to consider are: printing and posting invitations or other publicity material; hospitality; photocopying handouts; photography; and speaker(s) expenses. The cost of hiring a venue will be a major item. You should also be aware of 'hidden costs', the greatest of which will be staff time. But there are also general office costs for stationery, photocopying, faxes and phone calls. If the event is being sponsored, you should aim to recover these costs as well. If you are charging for an event and hoping to make a profit, then you should be more concerned with price than with costs. Find out what other people are charging and what your customers would be willing to pay.

Booking speakers

Setting a date for an event can be time-consuming and difficult, especially if a number of people are involved, or if the event involves a senior figure with many commitments. Book the main external participants as soon as possible and have reserves in mind. Some public figures, such as politicians, may not be able to commit themselves too far in advance and may have to cancel at short notice. Clarify at the outset the precise nature of key participants' commitments, including their willingness to participate in publicity.

Setting a date

The timing of the event may affect potential media coverage. The best time, if you want the media present, is mid-morning. You should not expect media attendance at an evening event unless it is very newsworthy and information has been provided beforehand, such as copies of speeches.

Booking a venue

It pays to check a location personally. Is the room a standard size? What is its quality like? Can it meet the requirements for overnight accommodation? You should also consider the needs of disabled participants in booking space. Does the intended space have an induction loop for people with hearing impairments, is there level access for people with limited mobility?

Support services

Set up and monitor the following essential support services: audiovisual equipment; catering requirements; dates; approximate numbers; venue; cloakroom; layout of rooms, and sign posting.

Display and promotional material

Arrange display material of your own and from other sources, which may be of interest to your delegates. This could include PCs demos, display boards with graphics, sales literature, press releases and so on. Don't forget a logo board for the front of the lectern.

Guests

Produce a guest list of people attending and circulate to key staff who will be acting as hosts at the event. Contact any VIPs who have not responded. Produce name badges for everyone attending, particularly staff who need to be clearly identified.

Hosts

Arrangements should be made for key guests to be met and looked after by representatives. Senior staff should be briefed on who is attending. Security staff should be advised in advance if any delegates may need directing to level entrances, lifts or toilets, or require other special assistance.

Information packs

Identify the handouts and programme details for visitors and consider how to present these professionally.

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