

BY MARSHA REDMON

Smash-Hit Seminars

Invite the right guests (and panelists), give them what they want, and follow up afterward.

Marketing

Ever plan a party and then worry that no one will come? Much more is at stake when the “party” is a seminar your law firm puts on for clients. Client seminars are one kind of relationship marketing that law firms have embraced universally. Seminars let lawyers get in front of clients and prospective clients to showcase their strengths while also educating and (it is hoped) entertaining them a little.

Good client seminars are like good parties—the key is getting the right people to come and then making sure they enjoy themselves and get what they came for. Then you must follow up to turn those contacts into more business.

At least one D.C. law firm has had a seminar disaster: Torrential rain kept most of the guests from coming. But even with an audience of two, the seminar led to new business.

Unfortunately, the most likely seminar disaster is the one that few firms worry about. Imagine this scenario: Your clients sitting through numbingly dull PowerPoint presentations, eyes glazed, staring at slides so laden with detail that they are unreadable from the fourth row. Not to worry—the lawyer who’s presenting reads each of his 27 slides!

Lesson No. 1: Never bore your clients with dull presentations. Every speaker, no matter how experienced, can benefit from coaching and practice.

HOLD THEIR INTEREST

If your firm doesn’t have the time or resources to commit to making the seminar interesting, fast-paced, and interactive, don’t do it. Here are a few suggestions to keep your clients engaged during your seminar:

- **Target the audience.** Find out exactly what interests this group of people and what turns them off. Do this by interviewing a few people who epitomize your target audience. Consider including speakers from the industry you’re targeting—audiences appreciate learning from their business colleagues as well as from lawyers.

- **Tell stories.** Each speaker should pepper her presentation with stories about the topic in the real world. Tell client success stories. Take a current event or company in the news and apply

your knowledge or advice. Stories bring everyone to a more equal level of understanding. Someone who doesn’t understand a technical explanation about a subject will likely understand the topic better once it’s applied to a real-world situation.

- **Make it interactive.** Ask the guests what they want the seminar to cover. Have an audience member write it on a flip chart. Now the audience knows you’re interested in giving them exactly what they need. Work in the answers throughout the seminar. Briefly review the list at the end of the session to summarize the topics they requested.

- **Avoid major PowerPoint mistakes.** Presenting well with PowerPoint is a full-day seminar in itself. First, it helps to think of a single PowerPoint slide as a billboard you’re driving by on the highway. If you couldn’t read it on a billboard at 30 miles an hour, there is too much on the slide. Second, never read the slide to the audience. They can read. The presenter is there to amplify what’s written on the slide.

- **Get coaching.** A presentation coach can polish speakers by gently teaching them the most important skills: how to present with energy, how to make their language simple and to the point, and how to read the audience and grab their attention when it wanders. Every presentation can be improved.

- **Have the speakers practice together.** Good seminars happen when a team of speakers acts like a team: They smoothly introduce each other, don’t greatly overlap in their presentations, and don’t contradict each other.

- **Start and end on time.** Have someone at the back of the room keep each speaker on track by holding up a sign when there are 10, five, three, and one minute left to go.

Here are some of the ways that D.C. law firms are using client seminars to win new business.

GUARANTEED MEDIA COVERAGE

Covington & Burling’s approach to seminar marketing features roundtables with guaranteed media coverage. The firm has connected with legal publications in Washington, New York, and San Francisco to sponsor roundtable discussions with a panel of experts on a chosen topic. The newspapers promote each roundtable through advertising, moderate and record the discussion, and publish an edited version.

[*Editor's Note:* Covington sponsored four roundtables with *Legal Times* in 2000 and six this year. Topics have ranged from high technology and intellectual property to health-care issues. The editors of *Legal Times* select the panelists, script and moderate the conversation, and edit the transcript for publication in the newspaper.]

In July, Covington did its first roundtable in New York with *The Daily Deal*. Kelly Stokes, the firm's D.C. director of marketing, says they invited a select number of high-level executives to participate along with the firm's lawyers in a nonpublic forum.

Another big benefit of the roundtables, according to Stokes, is increasing awareness of Covington's less-visible practice areas. "We already have a brand and a reputation for certain work. But we also do a ton of corporate work, we have a thriving IP practice, and one of the largest life sciences practice groups in the country. Those aren't always the first capabilities people think of when they think of Covington."

SERIES OF SEMINARS

Patton Boggs' approach to marketing includes a series of seminars designed to win business in the biotech area. Partner Sean Murphy is heading up a five-part series that started in May and will end in November. Topics focus on the needs of biotech companies: corporate organization, confidentiality agreements, raising money, the Food and Drug Administration, and IP issues. The speakers so far have included the CEO of a biotech company, a venture capitalist, and Patton Boggs lawyers from different practice groups. Murphy says he has gotten strong feedback from the audience that they like to see folks from the biotech industry among the speakers, along with the lawyers.

Murphy says another goal of the seminar series is to "give prospective and existing clients access to the networks and relationships we have that can be helpful to them, outside of the practice of law." So far, Murphy has gathered venture capitalists, bank presidents, temporary hiring agencies, and real estate people, especially those that specialize in leasing laboratory space—and introduced them to the biotech audience.

Patton Boggs invites about 200 selected guests, and also advertises the events in "TechThursday" in *The Washington Post*. Around 75 to 100 people usually attend. Murphy says they follow up with mailings and track the new business that results from the seminars. According to Murphy, Patton Boggs has expanded business with some existing clients as a result of this series.

CLIENTS AS CO-SPONSORS

Another popular approach to seminar marketing is co-sponsoring events with clients. Piper Marbury Rudnick & Wolfe has teamed up with two clients—Ernst & Young and software maker Acxiom—to present seminars on the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. HIPAA doesn't go into effect until 2003, but Piper's marketing coordinator Lisa Carpenter says time is short: "[W]ith all that companies need to do to comply with HIPAA, people need to act now."

Presenters at Piper's HIPAA seminars include lawyers from its health care, information technology, and privacy groups; Ernst & Young consultants who help companies plan and implement systems to comply with the new law; and Acxiom software representatives who explain how their software can help companies manage patient information to comply with HIPAA. Piper is offering seminar guests a fully searchable version of the new HIPAA law on a CD-ROM.

So far, two seminars have been held in New York and Baltimore, and the firm plans to do more in September, including one in Washington.

The three co-sponsors send invitations to their clients, following up with phone calls immediately before the event to increase attendance. Carpenter says the fall seminars will be open to the public through announcements in published event calendars.

TURNING CONTACTS INTO CLIENTS

To get the kind of business you want from a seminar, you have to get the right people into the room, which means carefully targeting your seminar audience. The next challenge is getting them to show up. Reminder phone calls the day before the event can increase attendance by as much as 25 percent.

After the seminar, quick follow-up is key. Send an evaluation form to each attendee. Call those whose business is most coveted. Ask their opinion about the seminar. Talk about their business needs and growth plans.

The bottom line: Seminars give a firm and its attorneys a chance to shine in front of clients and prospective clients. Then it's up to the attorneys to build relationships based on those contacts. It's not rocket science, just good people skills.

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