

Making the most of customer seminars

Customer seminars can be a powerful marketing tool – if you can get customers to attend them. *CMP* uncovers the dos and don'ts of successful seminars



Rick Gunther

Close to 100 homeowners gaze at a PowerPoint presentation in the Cyril Clark Library Theatre in Brampton, Ontario, on a Saturday morning in April, eagerly absorbing the answers to their home ownership dreams.

These potential clients have taken time out of their busy schedules – away from their families and Saturday morning chores – lured by the promise of mortgage freedom.

The Tax Deductible Mortgage Plan (TDMP) – a Toronto-based brokerage that specializes in Smith Manoeuvre-type mortgages – realized a few years ago that, to reach its specialized clientele, there was only one way to go about it: customer seminars.

Since then, the company has launched a national campaign where, 20 times a month, homeowners from across the country gather in similar venues to attempt to understand the concept of tax-free mortgages. In the first quarter of this year, the company has put 6,500 homeowners through them.

In this time-starved society it's hard to believe the notion of the customer seminar hasn't gone completely extinct.

After all, with the advent of the Internet and endless real estate focused reality shows, why would a customer want to take the time

to attend one?

Yet, as proven by TDMP, there is still a demand for seminars – if they're executed and marketed effectively. TDMP owner, Sandy Aitken, says given the complex nature of the company's product, there's really no other way for a client to truly understand it. And there's no other way for Aitken to identify those who are eligible.

"Because it's such a specialized product, it's very difficult to find the right customers, so we educate thousands at a time to find a few hundred deals," he says. "You can't do that interviewing prospects one at a time."

Are seminars for you

While almost every broker/agent would hold customer seminars if they were guaranteed to get a few hundred deals out of them, that type of response is not usually the case. Like many marketing tools, seminars are often more about obtaining recognition in the community and getting people to spread the word about your services.

Marc Penner, an Invis mortgage broker in Winnipeg, usually attracts approximately eight to 10 people to his seminar, "How to manage your credit score". Although the attendance isn't huge, he likes the fact that

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he's making a difference in the community by helping those with poor credit.

"Nothing gets you more credibility than helping educate members of your community," he says. "I think there's a personal touch to it. I'm here trying to help people out and, at some point, the people that attend my seminars will tell someone."

In a city of under one million people, word travels surprisingly fast. Although the numbers are difficult to track, Penner knows that a lot of people come to him as a result of word-of-mouth – and the word often starts in the seminar room.

Tracy Irwin, a mortgage broker with Mortgage Centre Canada in Stoney Creek, Ontario, uses seminars to supplement her marketing for the self-employed, first-time homebuyers, people in transition and the retired.

Her seminars are packaged with other professionals, such as her "Learn to beat the

tax guy" series, where she invited a few other experts to share the stage with her and talk about prepaid funeral planning as well as financial advice for retirement.

While she attracts fewer than 10 potential clients, on average, the opportunity to meet individuals who fit into her target market – and who likely know others who do as well – makes the process worthwhile.

Setting the foundation

Irwin's marketing coach, Wendy Marlow of Burlington, Ontario-based The Art of Marketing – a company that specializes in the marketing needs of small businesses – says a seminar can be successful without churning out a vast amount of leads, but the results have to be in line with your goal.

"You have to ask yourself, what is it you want to get out of this seminar? Is it new business opportunities? More business out

of your existing client base? To provide a service in your community?" she says.

She adds that every company should have some sort of tagline – something that summarizes the overall purpose of the business – and all marketing, including seminars, should fit within that mantra. In the case of Irwin, who does a lot of business with individuals who are new to Canada, as well as those who are going through divorce, her tagline is "Mortgage solutions that open doors".

Focusing on the goals of the business as a whole will help you determine who your seminar's audience will be, Marlow says.

"Maybe you know what information you want to share, but you have to think of who would really be interested in listening to it," she says. "You have to give people a reason to come to your event. We're taking up their time, and we're competing in a time-deprived society."

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VIRTUAL SEMINARS

It's difficult to entice people to offer a portion of their evening or weekend to a seminar, which is why virtual options are becoming more popular.

This is the route Tracy Irwin from Mortgage Centre Canada took after noticing declining attendance at her seminars. Despite marketing to her database, as well as the databases of her professional partners, five different business networking groups, and advertising in the local paper, she wasn't getting more than seven people showing up.

"People are very busy now – the last thing they want to do is go out at night and attend something. I find it difficult to get people out – even when I hold events on Saturdays," she says.

Irwin decided to produce an educational DVD and post it on her website. She met an individual from a production company through one of her business networking groups, and has booked two half-days of production with them. For a 60-minute DVD, the production costs are around \$6,000.

Irwin opted against offering a podcast because she likes the visual capabilities of a DVD. She's combined various teaching scenes, classroom scenes and graphics to make the DVD more stimulating.

Wendy Marlow of the Art of Marketing says the virtual route is definitely the way to go if you've had problems getting people out to your seminars. She suggests considering such avenues as telecasts, webinars or podcasts.

"Rather than us telling people to come at a specific time, they can come at any time that suits their schedule," she says.



Wendy Marlow

When coming up with seminar ideas, Marlow suggests talking to your existing client base. Ask them what issues they're facing in their everyday lives – what questions do they have about their mortgage, or what challenges are they facing when it comes to their homes?

After that, establish a message for your seminar. Marlow offers the example of Penner, whose message behind his seminar on credit could be, "There's a way to make your credit better". Think about who would be interested in that message, and then spend time before, during and after the seminar catering to that person.

Before the seminar

One reason why TDMP receives such a strong turn-out to its seminars is the effort the company exerts before the seminars even begin.

To get a turn-out of between 100 and 150 potential clients, the company blankets the respective city with two million brochures and supplements the mass mail-out with a radio campaign. The result is two attendees for every 1,000 fliers – a response rate of 0.2%.

"It's not inexpensive to get people out," says Aitken, adding that the fact the company does large numbers of seminars lowers the average cost. "Our costs are a fraction of what someone would pay if they did one seminar."

Aitken doesn't do any other type of marketing, and – although he won't divulge the total marketing costs – says it's definitely

"Nothing gets you more credibility than helping educate members of your community"

worth it. After six months, the response rate increases, proving that it just takes a little time for people to warm up to the idea.

Marlow says every mortgage broker/agent should spend the same amount on marketing their seminar as they do on the seminar itself. While this doesn't mean you have to print and distribute two million fliers, you should take the time to think about what locations your potential client frequents, and post professional-looking fliers that they will be likely to see.

"You have to market to the specific target market. Most of the time people don't do this – they run out of time and end up putting an ad in the paper," she says, adding that unless it's a smaller community paper that your ideal client is likely to read, this is often a waste of time and money.

Instead, Marlow suggests placing fliers in high traffic areas – such as a walk-in clinic – or adding it to your phone message, website or newsletter. She also recommends marketing the seminar to your friends and family – who will be most likely to pass it on.

Rick Gunther, a mortgage agent with Dominion Lending Centres Mortgage Professionals in Georgetown, Ontario, markets his "New Homebuyer Presentation" at the local library as well as in the local paper.

He finds the strategy successful – often attracting between 25 and 50 people at his spring and fall seminars. Gunther attributes this to the fact that he markets and holds the seminar in the same high-traffic place – the library – and ensures that people are notified of the event early on.

"Timing is a big part of it," he says. "You have to get the marketing materials out well ahead of the spring market – as early as January for an April seminar. I used to think that was too early – that people would forget about it – but that hasn't been the case."

Seminar mechanics

When it comes time for the actual seminar, choosing the appropriate venue is as important as marketing the event. You want to find a place that reflects your seminar's subject matter as well as the intended audience.

"If the clients you're attracting have poor credit, you don't want a very sophisticated venue," says Marlow, adding that room rentals can cost as low as \$20 at your local library.

Mortgage Centre's Irwin has held her seminars at a variety of venues – including the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton, Ontario as well as the Burlington Art Centre. The art centre is one of her favourites, because it's more aesthetically pleasing than a library, and doesn't cost very much. She adds that some coffee shops also have upstairs meeting rooms with a nice feel to them.

Penner of Invis holds his seminars at a local business centre that offers satellite capabilities – so he can reach out to individuals in smaller communities outside of the



Tracy Irwin



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Winnipeg area. He holds a seminar for homebuyers in the Winnipeg area, and the seminar is videotaped and fed live to remote business centres.

In addition to ensuring the atmosphere is pleasant for your attendees; your seminar should also be engaging. Yolanda Fitzpatrick, a business consultant with the Halton Region Business Development Centre says it doesn't hurt to go to the library before a seminar and take out a few books on public speaking. She also suggests asking your attendees at the beginning of the session about the type of information they would like to receive.

"At the beginning, ask clients what they're expecting out of the seminar. And when the seminar is done, make sure you've gone through each and every point – and addressed their expectations," she says. "Also, find out a few things about the people in the room, and be ready to adjust your presentation to meet the needs of the audience."

Fitzpatrick says one way of achieving this is by arriving up to 45 minutes early. Take the time to ensure all audio-visual equipment is working properly – to avoid embarrassing set-backs mid-seminar – and greet each of your attendees as they walk in.

"Get to know each person as they walk through the door, and make them feel welcome," she says. "Most brokers use seminars as an opportunity to get more sales, and a lot of sales come from helping people. Use the opportunity to uncover ways to help the client."

Once the seminar is finished, hold a Q&A session until every last question is answered, and ensure that every candidate has filled out a feedback form. In the feedback form, make sure you get each candidate's e-mail address, and include a question such as, "What do you need to know about next?" to generate ideas for future seminars.

Add the e-mail addresses to your database and be sure to follow-up the next day. Or if you'd like to save a few steps, find a computer program that will do the work for you. Aitken of TDMP uses an automated CRM program called Salesforce that enables individuals to sign up for seminars on his website and the program immediately transfers their contact details directly to his database.

Through this system, Aitken not only keeps in touch with all potential clients who went through his seminar, but he also can monitor specific attendance rates from every event the company has ever held.

However you choose to do it, make sure you spend as much time and effort on the follow-up process as you did on marketing and holding the seminar.

"Think about what you want people to do after the seminar – do you want them to call you, sign up for your newsletter or visit your website?" says Marlow. Once you've decided, factor this into your seminar content and your follow-up process.

"Remember, you have to touch people at least six times before they start thinking of you," she says. **CMP**

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~ pronunciation [det] [set-l-muh nt]

~ **noun**

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