

How to Generate Leads and Boost Sales Using Events

Abstract:

Webinars, executive round tables, seminars and other events can be incredible tools for generating and nurturing leads and filling your sales funnel. This article defines the benefits of events and provides helpful guidelines for making sure your next program is successful.

Imagine the possibilities — a group of target prospects who have a problem you can solve or need information you can deliver. This is the dream of every marketing and sales professional, and it happens every day. A well-planned webinar, seminar or other corporate event can fill a room with qualified prospects and outstanding sales opportunities for your company.

Unfortunately, not all events are successful. With so many events competing for attendees' time, even companies with a strong market presence can no longer announce a webinar and expect to attract hundreds of registrations. You may even wonder if events are overused and worth your marketing dollars. The fact that thousands of events are offered every week is testament to the effectiveness of this marketing and sales tool.

Benefits of Events Marketing

Events can be used to achieve a wide range of business objectives, one of which is lead generation. A key benefit is that events can shorten the sales cycle. By responding to your invitation, registrants have expressed interest in your message. Essentially, they have pre-qualified themselves long before the event takes place. Attending your event can take the place of a first sales call — moving prospects down your sales funnel faster.

Some other important benefits include:

- Reaching many prospects in a short amount of time.
- Being viewed as a thought leader in your industry
- Convincing the audience you know your business (and theirs).
- Stimulating a buying atmosphere.
- Creating buzz for your products and services.
- Introducing and demonstrating new products and services.
- Creating joint marketing opportunities with your key partners.
- Integrating your marketing programs with your sales effort.
- Opening the door for future sales calls.

These benefits apply to a variety of online and offline events. With many outstanding Web conferencing capabilities to choose from, hosting a virtual event is easier than ever. The decision to host a Web versus an in-person event depends on a number of factors including your sales channels, audience location, lead time and more. If you have a local sales presence it's hard to beat the value of a face-to-face event. However, for a geographically diverse audience, webinars are extremely effective.

Planning and Execution

You've decided to host an event, your sales organization is on-board and you've identified a target audience. Now what? Planning the perfect event takes more than knowing how to access an online meeting site or how many muffins to order. The elements that make an event successful are similar for

every type of function — from a golf tournament for the executive crowd to an highly technical seminar for engineers. By following simple and common sense guidelines, you can ensure a successful event that will create outstanding sales opportunities for your company.

Nine Elements of Event Success

1. **Know your audience.** Who should you target and what are their information needs? Identifying this information will determine the type of event you should host. Top executives are most likely to respond to an exclusive, peer-to-peer function while mid-level managers usually look for the most educational bang for their buck. Once you've selected your target, figure out how you will reach them. Do you have good in-house mailing lists or do you need to search for outside lists? Don't forget to tap the personal lists of your sales teams.
2. **Follow a Project Timetable.** You can begin planning an event six months out or six weeks out. Your timetable depends on your sales cycle and other internal factors as well as the complexity of your event and registration goals. A multiple day conference for 200 attendees takes more planning than a breakfast seminar for 20. No matter what your timetable, you should map out the major milestones and deadlines before you begin.
3. **Create compelling content.** The most obvious principle is to give attendees information they want. Portray your company as a thought leader on your topic, but refrain from using blatant sales pitches. Nothing turns off an audience faster than a commercial for your company. By offering compelling information supported by case studies and valid statistics or results, your audience will turn to you to learn more.
4. **Timing is Everything.** The best days for events are Tuesday through Thursday, and the best times of year are February through June and September through early November. The time of day depends on the type of event, location and other local factors like traffic and weather. Also, don't forget to check your calendar for holidays, school vacations, national conferences and other important dates that could affect the availability of your attendance.
5. **Create Invitations that Work.** The first rule regarding invitations is to sell your event and not your product or service. Personalized invitations usually get the best response, especially with a executive audience. Be sure to include enough content for the recipient to measure the value of the event and motivate them to register. Send multiple invitations and vary the media. Finally, you should provide multiple response options like Web, phone, e-mail, etc. Plan to capture every lead from your invitations, including regrets. Every person who expresses interest is a prospect for your company.
6. **Improve Attendance.** Send a confirmation to each registrant immediately upon registration. A day or two before your event, give attendees a reminder with a quick e-mail or phone call. A final reminder an hour before a webinar can have a significant impact on attendance rates. These steps are key to improving your attendance rate.
7. **Script Your Audience Interaction.** Determine what you need to know from your audience during the planning stage. Then encourage interaction during the presentation to involve your attendees and learn from them. Ask for questions, and use audience polling liberally. Include an exit survey to gauge your audience's satisfaction and ask for more information.
8. **Deliver on Your Promises.** You can create the coolest invitation and select the hottest venue, but you *must* deliver on your promises to guarantee success. You should leave your audience wanting more information, which helps facilitate your post-event follow-up.

9. **Follow Up All Leads.** Soon after your event, plan to touch all registrants with an e-mail, phone call and personal note. Include attendees and no-shows as well as any regrets. You may want to offer an archive of your event on your Web site or send additional information about your company or event topic. You can also offer to deliver a more personalized version of the seminar at your prospect's site.

Results

If you follow all of the guidelines, what kind of results can you expect? Average registration is usually between ½ to 1% of your total target audience, but can be as high as 5% in a highly targeted market. Actual attendance results are usually around 50% of all registrants, but can be as high as 70% for a well planned, compelling event. How can you improve results?

Improve Registration

1. Invite your audience more than once.

- Send snail-mail *and* e-mail invitations.
- Send the same invitation more than once.
- Follow up your invitations with tele-invitations.
- Have employees and sales people extend personal invitations to their contacts.

2. Promote your event.

- Send press releases to be included in local business calendars.
- Publicize the event in your company newsletter or on your Web site.
- Distribute invitations at your next tradeshow.

Improve Attendance

1. **Send confirmations to each registrant.**
2. **Send reminders several days prior to the event.**
3. **Give registrants the chance to submit questions in advance.**

Your results will vary depending on your individual market and your audience. After testing the waters and seeing how your audience responds, you can develop a reliable formula for your next event. For example, if you have a 4% registration response and 65% attendance, you will need 77 registrations in order to have 50 actual attendees. 77 registrations require a postall mailing of 1,925 invitations. You can ramp these numbers up or down, depending on your budget and marketing goals.

There are unlimited options for lead-generating and lead-nurturing event programs. The key is to determine what message you need to portray and then match that message to your event and audience. Attendees will become valuable prospects that will begin their progression through the sales funnel by responding to your event. Did you ever wonder why so many companies offer seminars and other events? Because they work!

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Dunthorpe Marketing Group is a direct marketing management agency that specializes in integrated, multi-touch lead generation and nurturing campaigns that do the hard, practical work of generating qualified leads, nurturing them through the sales pipeline, and building profitable, long-term relationships with customers.