

## Seminars a growth tool for service firms

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Linda Berke

Ten years ago, when corporate training manager Linda Berke decided to launch her own business, she partnered with a local nonprofit breast cancer organization to offer workshops to community members. The seminars – for which attendees paid a nominal fee of less than \$50 that Berke donated to the nonprofit – provided information on skill development for entrepreneurs.

“Offering seminars was how we first got the word out,” Berke said of her business training firm. “In the beginning, it was about exposure. Then, it became about credibility.”

Soon, another organization asked Berke to run a free seminar for its group. A paid client followed, and Farmingdale-based [Taylor Performance Solutions](#) was launched.

To be sure, executives at many professional firms offer free informational seminars and workshops as a way of generating brand recognition and developing business, while providing a service and sharing their knowledge with community members.

Business development events can and should be part of a successful overall marketing strategy, said Bill Corbett Jr., president of [Corbett Public Relations](#) in Floral Park.

“When done properly and with an event marketing plan that includes goals, follow-up procedures, an appropriate budget and a good topic, a seminar or workshop can be very successful,” Corbett said.

Measuring a direct return on investment from events can be difficult, however. Generally, “a seminar should at least generate enough leads to cover the cost of the event and create enough brand awareness for the presenters to justify it,” Corbett said.

While leads may not follow immediately, branding value often does. In the past, Woodbury attorney Jeff Schwartz held informational seminars offering free legal advice every few months.

“Every time I held a seminar, I would get business from it,” he said, noting business often came from event attendees as well as referrals, or secondary clients, who heard about him from attendees.

For Mark Portnoy, president of the Syosset-based human resources and labor relations consulting firm [Portnoy, Messinger, Pearl & Associates](#), it’s hard to “measure exactly how seminars translate into money.” His firm’s strict rule is that the seminars offered, which range in topic from changes in labor law and wage-and-hour concerns to ways of protecting employers against discrimination charges, are content-loaded.

“We hope attendees think of us as a source for reliable information when they need us,” he said, noting new clients will often call and say they’ve been attending the firm’s seminars on a regular basis.

After attending countless networking events and hearing one too many sales pitches, Berke realized her seminars needed to be educational.

"That's how you establish credibility," she said.

Corbett agreed.

"Nothing is worse than getting to a program that is touted as informative but is nothing more than a commercial," he said.

Another potential downfall for events: not filling the room with the right people. When the Small Business Development Center at Farmingdale State College invited Berke to run free workshops on skill development for entrepreneurs, she welcomed the opportunity.

Partnering with a networking organization or association helps ensure seminar attendance, she said. But presenters also need to be responsible for marketing, such as announcing the event on their website and social media accounts.

Portnoy, Messinger, Pearl discovered that charging a nominal fee, as opposed to offering events for free, helps garner a better turnout, Portnoy said.

While business development workshops and seminars are far from money-making events, budget is key, according to Corbett.

"It is important to spend the appropriate amount of time and money on creating the program, purchasing or acquiring lists, setting aside staff time to follow up with calls and promoting the event to the appropriate target audience online or in publications," he said. Postage and printing costs can add up, but they're necessary.

"We often see those who run seminars fail to put enough into the budget to get the word out to an appropriate number of prospects," Corbett said.

John Klimchak, a certified financial planner with Economic Evaluation Group in Melville, holds seminars two to three times a year to help professionals understand what's happening in the health-care arena. He often partners with a professional well-versed in the specific event topic. For a recent seminar about health-care reform, Klimchak teamed up with Glenn Franklin, a labor and employment attorney at Franklin, Gringer & Cohen in Garden City. Invitations, which were sent on Franklin's letterhead to accountants, were mailed four to six weeks prior to the event, and followed up with phone calls. After the event, Klimchak sent thank-you letters to attendees, inquiring if they wanted to set up a meeting to learn more about health-care reform or discuss doing business together.

Although Berke's business is now well-established, she still tries to find the time to hold four or more free seminars a year.