

Low-Investment, High-Yield Marketing: How to Use Seminars to Build Your Medical Practice

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arketing your practice through free public seminars is an excellent way to build your practice and your reputation in the community. But how do you do this without throwing away your time and money or, worse, making a total fool of yourself? It's all a simple matter of knowing: (1) how to get people to come; (2) where to hold your seminar; (3) what to present; (4) how to present; and (5) how to convert attendees to loyal patients.

Key words: Building a medical practice; free marketing seminars; powerful presentations; using PowerPoint; fear of speaking; converting patients.

Have you heard the buzz? Lots of people are talking about it: "It's a great way to build your practice—do a seminar!"

But should *you* do it? The answer is a resounding "yes!" if you want to:

- Bring more patients into your practice;
- Build up an under-utilized specialty of your practice;
- Help your new partner or associate get started;
- Announce a new affiliation with a hospital;
- Promote your merger with another group;
- Get maximum marketing exposure for minimal dollars;
- Establish yourself as the expert in your community in a given area of expertise;
- Distinguish yourself from your competition; and
- Market your medical practice without looking "salesy"

Maybe you don't care about any of that, but are looking for a way to give back something to the community that has helped you to build your already successful practice. If so, then free seminars are a fabulous route to help your neighbors get educated and make smart decisions for their health.

But how do you do this without throwing away your time and money or, worse, making a total fool of yourself? It's all a simple matter of knowing: (1) how to

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HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO ATTEND YOUR SEMINAR

First things first: what's the point of giving a party if no one comes? And "giving a party" is what you are going to do. Your seminar should be promoted and executed as you would a gala event. People like attending special, exciting events. So roll out the red carpet, and extend your invitation to everyone you want as a client.

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Which brings up another critical question: Whom do you want to come? You are looking for the person who is confused about the myriad of choices available and who would like some help figuring out which choices are best. She wants to put her healthcare in the hands of an expert. The problem is, there are so many who claim to be experts. As a result, she has done nothing yet, except cut out advertisements in magazines about the latest "miracle drugs" and articles about "state-of-the-art medical solutions" and kept them in a file marked "Medical Stuff."

One day, she looks in the newspaper (or in her mailbox or in her e-mail box) and there it is—an invitation

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that describes a nonthreatening event she can attend. It's *at a convenient time* and *in a convenient location*, and it's *free*, and *refreshments are being served*. What has she got to lose—except her aches, pains, fat, fatigue, sleeplessness, snoring, depression, lost libido, incontinence, gastric distress, wrinkles, and/or brown spots?

We sent out fancy invitations to a list we purchased from a local women's organization. The invitations were hand written, calligraphy-style, by one of our office staff members. Our phones started ringing immediately!

—K.J., M.D., Dallas

Don't overlook newspaper, radio, and TV spots. Depending on your marketplace and the time of year, you can get a lot of exposure for relatively little money by using these media effectively. No matter what kind of advertising you do, remember to: (1) Advertise your event four weeks in advance, once a week for the first three weeks and then every day during the week of your seminar; (2) Choose more than one advertising medium (newspaper and radio, invitation and newspaper, TV and newspaper); and (3) Prepare your staff.

Whoever is answering your phones must be prepped to answer seminar inquiries with a prewritten script that gives answers to commonly asked questions like "What is the seminar going to cover?" "Can I bring a friend?" and "Are you trying to sell something?" The better prepared and trained your staff is, the more likely it is that people will actually make and keep their reservations.

The first time we did it, we thought "how hard can this be?" Then we got our answer—it's only hard if you don't plan and prepare for it! The second time we used the script and trained our front desk. We had ZERO no-shows and converted 100% of our attendees to patients. This works!

—L.T., M.D., Chicago

WHERE TO HOLD YOUR SEMINAR

One of the most important decisions you can make is where to hold your seminar. People will judge the worthiness of your event on its location. There are two good choices, and each has merit.

Choice Number One: Your Practice

If you have a fabulous location and you want to show it off, this is a great way to do that. Make sure that you have plenty of comfortable chairs, with room to walk around. The upside of holding your seminar at your location is obvious: you don't have to pay rental for the space; your employees are there already to answer questions, make appointments, and sell retail (if appropriate); and you can pop in between your appointments to do a quick seminar.

The downside of using your location is very important: experience suggests that fewer people will attend your seminar because they will assume that you are holding the seminar to hook them into becoming patients.

Choice Number Two: Offsite

If your facility isn't large enough to hold at least 25 attendees comfortably, then you should have your seminar offsite. Local hotels are an option, but can be expensive. Consider a local country club, women's club, community center, public library, or elementary school. There is often some business entity that would gladly make its space available to you for free in exchange for a low-cost service or trade in advertising opportunities (like placing its brochures in your reception area). The upside of holding your seminar offsite is that it makes your seminar look less "salesy"—and therefore less threatening and more legitimate as an educational event.

There is only one downside to holding your seminar offsite: the minor inconvenience of transporting staff and materials to the venue. Needless to say, most find this well worth the effort relative to the benefits of a great location, ideal environment, and a setting that is familiar to attendees. If you can go offsite, this is the best option.

WHAT TO PRESENT

Keep it simple. The more complex you make your seminar, the less likely it is that people will get excited. The secret to giving a great seminar is to present it so that it speaks to every possible attendee. Different people need to be talked to in different ways, so flex the style of your delivery and your slides throughout your presentation.

Remember that your attendees are not educated in your area of expertise and they are not looking to be trained as technicians. In fact, most of your attendees are people who are looking for someone to tell them "this is safe and effective, and it really is okay to do it!"

Choose one subject, and stick to it. The best marketing seminars use the time to help patients understand options and learn how to make safe decisions regarding their healthcare.

***People are not born great presenters—
they become great presenters.***

Do not try to sell them on "wellness." Instead, teach them about all of their medical options. Explain the benefits of a given approach versus the lack of safety with another. Distinguish temporary solutions from permanent cures. Tell them about things you *don't* do, and tell them why you *won't* do them. Be honest and real; they will respect you and want to hear more.

If your seminar is connected to appearance changes, then be certain to include before and after photos and include personal stories about those patients (with their permission, of course).

Use The ACTION Formula (see "Get What You Want in 2008: Five Steps to Success," *J Med Pract Manag*

Table 1. The Do's and Don'ts of PowerPoint Presentations

DO	DON'T
Use animation throughout your presentation.	Animate slide transitions—it makes people seasick.
Allow your presentation to unfold one point at a time. Your audience shouldn't see where you're going, only where you are and where you've been.	Put all your points on the slide, and then go through the list. People read ahead and miss what you're talking about.
Use color and clip art to emphasize important points and bring entertainment to your presentation.	Overwhelm the slides with "stuff"—busy is stressful and distracting.
Line yourself up physically so you can see your presentation on your laptop without looking away from your audience.	Look back at the screen.
Use a laser pointer and remote control.	Walk up to the screen and point with your finger. Also, never turn your back on your audience.
Create a presentation folder with all of your slides so that you know what is coming in advance.	Say things like, "Let's see . . . what did my secretary put in here next?"
Plan your transition statements, specifically what you will say before and after each slide.	"Wing it"—it sends a message that this is how you practice medicine, too.

2007;23:171) to organize your material. Remember, you want people to take ACTION as a result of their attendance. So you have to make sure you address the three critical components of motivation in your seminar: (1) Desire: a clear sense of what the person wants; (2) Resources: the ability to do everything it will take to reach his or her goal; and (3) Permission: the willingness to do what it takes and live with the consequences of his or her actions.

HOW TO PRESENT

Fear of speaking has been named the number one fear in the world. In fact, the prospect of speaking in front of others is considered by some as more frightening than death. Fear usually starts when we imagine failure and the embarrassment we will experience as a result. You know yourself best; if you think you need to get some help to overcome your fear, than by all means do so. It's likely, however, that your fear of speaking will go away entirely if you learn how to do effective presentations and then practice the skills until you master them. Give yourself a chance, and try these techniques.

C.O.P.E.

People are not born great presenters—they *become* great presenters. Even if audiences currently yawn through your speeches, there's a simple formula that will transform your presentation and eliminate your fear:

$$\text{Customization} + \text{Organization} + \\ \text{Passion} + \text{Entertainment} = \\ \text{Powerful Presentations}$$

Customization: Write your presentation so it speaks your audience's language. There is no point in talking about things that have no relevance for your attendees. Always plan ahead in case your predictions were wrong. If

the people who show up are entirely different than those you anticipated would be there, remember it's better to turn off your PowerPoint and say "OK, let's talk about what's important to you" than to "stick to the plan" and have no impact.

Organization: There's an old cliché that says it all: "Tell them what you're going to tell them, Tell them, and then Tell them what you told them."

Passion: You can spend an entire evening and say nothing new, but if your listeners feel your passion and sense your emotions, you will move your audience to action. Forget everything you ever learned about "professionalism." When it comes to speaking, enthusiasm sells better than facts. When you combine emotion with facts, you have a very powerful result.

Entertainment: Don't tell jokes. This bears repeating: Don't tell jokes. *Trying* to be funny isn't funny. Being REAL—now *that's* funny. Tell real stories, laugh at yourself and your own mistakes. That will endear you to your audience.

Use Visual Aids

PowerPoint presentations are very effective presentation tools if you use them effectively. There are some important do's and don'ts (see Table 1), but the most important is this: your slides should serve to *enhance* your point not *make* your point. The critical information should come directly from your mouth.

Keep It Short

Your seminar should be 45 minutes, with a 15-minute question-and-answer session at the end. Script your presentation to take your attendees on an emotional roller coaster ride that is peppered with information, humor, and passion. It should begin with your audience politely listening and end with them sitting on the edge of

their seats, motivated to make a change in how they care for their own health and that of their loved ones.

HOW TO CONVERT ATTENDEES TO CLIENTS OR PATIENTS

This is the easiest part! If you do a great job delivering your seminar, conversion is the most logical outcome of the event. Remember, people who attend your seminars are self-selecting as interested in your services.

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Set up a registration table at the door, and have your staff assist you with registration. Then at the end of your speech, refer everyone back to the same table to reserve a time for their “complimentary 10-point health check” or “complimentary consultation.” Give them gifts for attending. Make sure your giveaways are well branded. If you offer elective services, have plenty of menus of your services, along with well-posted notices about the availability of financing options.

Instruct your staff not to push. The biggest mistake people make is when they try to sell at their seminars. This is a *gift* you’re giving to your community members. Don’t

mess it up by trying to sell them something. Inform them about the possibilities, and show them your heart. The rest will happen as a result of your well-scripted presentation; your tasteful, entertaining slides; and your helpful staff members who are available to answer questions after your presentation.

Seventy-seven percent of our attendees made appointments for their Surgical Eligibility Analysis before they left that night. And 100% of those people actually showed up for their appointments. What I found really interesting was that all of those who turned out to be eligible for surgery went ahead with it.

—H.K., M.D., Atlanta

THE BOTTOM LINE

Seminars are becoming popular marketing tools all over the country. If you develop and implement them effectively, they can establish you as the authority in your area, and set you up with a steady flow of new and loyal patients. The best part is the feeling you’ll have as your attendees are leaving your seminar saying “thank you.” When you look in their eyes, you’ll know you’ve already made a difference in their lives. Marketing with seminars allows you to touch your patients’ hearts—without instrumentation. ■