



Successful Seminar Selling, Part 1: Sounding Off!

I OFTEN HEAR differing opinions on having successful seminars. Some producers say have them with meals, others say without. Some recommend seminars with lunch, others seminars at dinner. Some suggest pizza and colas, others say simply feed attendees donuts. Some producers like hotels and others country clubs.

My all-time favorite seminars were conducted on a ship. Our office invited clients to join us for a weeklong adventure on a "seminar at sea.". No matter what flavor a seminar is, it is imperative that some tools of technology are used to assist in organizing and supporting the producer's success.

My guiding principles for successful seminars are to keep them compelling and correct. A boring seminar inspires no one, and a seminar employing incorrect technology is as bad as one that provides incorrect information. A lot of planning goes into a successful seminar. From deciding who to invite, to the actual presentation itself,, to following up, properly implementing each step will help ensure achieving the goal of having a seminar in the first place: Sales.

Aside from scheduling follow-up appointments, educating the attendees should be a seminar's primary goal. Why have life insurance? To the producer it is obvious, but to the 25-year old starting a family and buying his first home, it is not.

Technology can assist the producer in many areas. From helping create invitations to tracking what clients attended, the need for computers is obvious. What is not so obvious is the technology used in the presentation itself.

There is nothing more annoying than attending a great seminar that is poorly equipped. While effort has been put into its content, no planning was done in its execution. In larger seminars, incorrect equipment often is rented or provided by the venue where the seminar is held, turning the producer's well rehearsed performance into amateur night. A producer who knows his equipment and some basic

sound techniques will be better empowered to handle some of those technological hiccups.

A seminar does not simply happen. People invest time, effort, and money to create them. It is like a Broadway production on a much smaller scale. I do not ever recall, however, a lead actor stopping in the middle of his performance and worrying about whether the people in the back row can hear him. Imagine an actor going tap, tap on the microphone, "Uh, can you hear me O.K?", Please!

I realize that not all producers host large seminars. Some may have only 10 or 20 attendees, some even fewer. But for those who have large groups, a unique set of problems arises. Even those attending or sponsoring conventions will be able to relate

Miking my point.

All microphones are not created equal and all speakers are not equally proficient in their use. This can create problems that may detract from the seminar. Case in point: feedback. That annoying high screeching is enough to send some people packing. Furthermore, improperly miked speakers can be difficult to hear or understand, turning fellow seminarians into lumps of bored, unresponsive prospects.

Both of these problems stem from not understanding and employing the proper sound equipment and microphones. Both of these problems are foreseeable and preventable, and usually require only a little additional capital.

The producer will want to make himself familiar with two primary types of microphones: Omni directional and cardioids (super and hyper). These terms refer to a microphone's pickup pattern.

Omni directional microphones will pick up sound equally from almost any direction and are good for choirs, orchestras, and group settings, or possibly mounted on a podium on stage. They are not good for seminars where untrained speakers grab them and roam unwittingly in front of loudspeakers. But I see omni directional microphones being used for this purpose, leaving everyone wondering why the feedback is so bad and no one can hear the speaker.

The cardioids family of microphones are considered directional microphones, meaning that they pick up sound mostly from the limited direction in which they are pointed. This is a more desirable approach in helping to eliminate feedback in today's free-roaming seminars. Their implementation, however, requires the user to be a little more astute about the mike's presence and placement. Anyone who wants to learn more can find a great overview of microphones by manufacturer AKG at [http://www.akgusa.com/whitepapers/ABCs Mic Basics.pdf](http://www.akgusa.com/whitepapers/ABCs_Mic_Basics.pdf).

Hiring either a technician or a company that specializes in seminars probably is worth the cost. Asking the designated technician, however, to explain the difference between an omni directional, supercardioid, and hypercardioid microphone will ensure that the producer has someone in the know. If the technician can't explain these, the producer should keep looking.

Practicing a seminar in front of a video camera and then critiquing oneself is a great training tool. Not using the same equipment that is used in the seminar while doing this critique, however, is a mistake. Proper microphone position is as important as pronunciation.

I attended a seminar where the speaker had a case of what I call "lazy arm." He would start with the microphone held in his hand directly in front of his mouth. As he talked about his subject, his arm slowly would sink to about stomach level, making it impossible to hear him. He eventually would realize this and quickly would place the microphone back in front of his mouth, startling those who had started to doze off. Maybe he thought that this was a great way to entertain his audience. I found it unprofessional.

Gates, limiters, and perimeters

Most microphones have on/off switches that someone almost inevitably will leave in the on position. An open microphone adds undesired background noise and greatly increases the potential for feedback in an amplified setting. To solve this, the producer should employ gates into his sound system (and no, I do not mean Bill Gates). Gates are a nice little feature that are built into some mixers (again, I do not mean a social party or hand-held stirring device), or that can be added as extra equipment. The purpose of a gate is to mute the sound source while it is not in use. Properly employed, a gate will help to control better the quality of sound and assist in eliminating feedback.

There is another piece of equipment the producer should consider using in all of his seminars, called a limiter. Some of us speak louder than others. This can become a problem when more than one person will use the same microphone or even as the same person progresses through his presentation and varies his tone. To help control the volume of a speaker's voice, a limiter can be employed to reduce the sound level automatically, eliminating unexpected variances and startling the audience. (Unfortunately, a limiter does not limit a droning guest speaker's time at the microphone).

The final consideration in setting up sound for a seminar is the audience size. Having an inadequate sound system, even in a small seminar, can be discomforting. Employing two loud speakers blaring at the audience can be too loud for the people closest to them and too quiet for those in the rear. Employing only the speakers found in the ceilings of most meeting rooms is wholly inadequate.

Using a combination of loudspeakers, however, including those in the ceiling, zones of coverage, and sound perimeters will ensure a comfortable and uniform level of sound for all attendees. After all, the idea of the seminar is to make guests relax and enjoy the show. With

the proper sound reinforcement system, the room's ambiance can be changed at will. I love the successful seminars that employ high-energy music to excite the audience.

For the producer who takes his sound seriously, and who would like to solve feedback problems and other sound related issues, I wholeheartedly recommend Yamaha's Sound Reinforcement Guide.

Sound is only a minor aspect of a successful seminar. Without it, however, not many attendees would know why they came in the first place. So while it may seem like a minor detail, it is not. The message is important; if no one can hear it, what's the point?