

How to Increase Attendance at Your Next Meeting

By Don Cooper, The Sales Heretic™

Whether you're planning a monthly meeting, a public seminar or an international convention, you want to have as many attendees as possible. The more people you have at your meeting, the more exposure your sponsors receive, the more value your attendees derive from networking and the more likely you are to fill your room block. Not to mention the more revenue you generate from registrations!

So how can you increase attendance at **your** next event? (Without spending a fortune on marketing or breaking your budget on a big-name celebrity speaker?) Just follow these guidelines.

Select the Right Speakers

Most meeting planners select speakers they've seen before or have been referred to them by another meeting planner. Which makes sense. You want to know your speakers will perform well on stage.

However, if you want your event to be an overwhelming success, that's not the only criteria. Because even if your speakers are amazing on the platform, if their marketing materials don't effectively sell them, you'll never get people to come in the first place. Remember, while **you've** seen the speaker on stage or on video, your potential attendees haven't. The only thing they will have to form an impression is the speaker's marketing materials.

When I say "marketing materials" however, I'm not talking about demo videos. Your members aren't going to judge speakers based on them, so you shouldn't either. Nor am I talking about a speaker's bio. Most speaker bios go on and on about their accomplishments, their awards and how great they are in general. Guess what? Your potential attendees don't care! They only care about whether the speakers will help them in their lives, jobs or businesses.

So what should you focus on in a speaker's marketing materials? **Their program titles and descriptions.** This is what your members will primarily use to decide whether or not to attend your event.

Are the titles (and sub-titles) attention-grabbing? Are they provocative, timely or enticing? Do they promise a benefit?

Are the program descriptions clear and compelling? Do they make you think, “I’ve GOT to see this!” or do they induce a yawn? Or worse yet, do they cause you to wrinkle your forehead and wonder what the presentation is actually about? If the program descriptions don’t excite **you**, odds are they won’t excite your prospective audience either.

Also look at the speaker’s testimonials, because you can use them in your own promotional efforts. Does the speaker have strong testimonials from attendees? Even better, do they have testimonials stating the results attendees have achieved because of the program?

Create Marketing Pieces, Not Just Announcements

Once you’ve selected your speaker—or speakers, as the case may be—you need to put together marketing materials that will attract registrations. This is where most organizations fall short. Too many associations and other groups simply send out an announcement listing the date, time, location and speaker. **That’s not enough!**

There are more people, tasks, tools and events competing for your prospective audience’s time and money than ever before. Which means, whether you’re putting on a teleseminar, a luncheon or a multi-day conference, you must make a compelling case **why** people need to attend. You have to convince them that this is the best possible use of their time and money.

In other words, you have to create marketing pieces. A marketing piece is a salesperson in print or electronic form. A **good** marketing piece doesn’t just provide logistical information, it persuades people to take action by addressing issues important to them.

A truly effective event marketing piece must have all 12 of the following elements:

1. Strong Headline and Sub-Head

“2009 Annual Conference” is not a headline. It might be what your event **is**, but it’s not a headline. Likewise, your presidential theme or conference theme is not a headline.

A headline grabs the reader’s attention and makes them want to learn more. In a marketing piece, it typically promises a benefit. Here are some examples:

- Take Your Business to New Heights!
- Make Money While You Sleep!
- Is This the Year You Finally Achieve Your Biggest Goals?
- Don't Just Survive the Coming Economic Crisis, Profit from It!
- Would You Invest One Weekend to Change Your Life?
- Reduce Your Costs and Increase Your Revenues!
- Turn the New Tax Laws to Your Clients' Advantage!
- It's Time For You to Work Less and Make More!

If your meeting features only one speaker, you can use their program title as your headline, assuming it meets the standards discussed above. For a multi-speaker event, you'll need to come up with a headline that sums up an overall benefit to the reader.

2. Date, Time, Location

Make sure all this information is easy to find. In a brochure or on a web page, list it at least twice. You might also want to provide driving directions, a map and/or parking information.

If applicable, include hotel and/or transportation information. Be sure to mention both the regular rates and the discounted group rates you've arranged, so your reader will appreciate the savings involved.

3. Program Outline

Give people a good idea of what will be happening at the event. For a full-day or multi-day meeting, provide a schedule. Include meals, networking time and anything else of importance.

4. Benefits of Attending

This is the heart of your marketing message. This is the answer to the question, "Why should I invest my valuable time and money to go to this thing?" You need to be **specific** and you need to promise **results**.

To determine what the benefits of your event are, ask yourself questions like:

- Why should someone attend this meeting?
- What's so special about **this particular** meeting?
- What will they learn how to do?
- What tools will they walk away with?

- What problems will they learn how to solve?
- How will this meeting help them?
- What will they be able to do better?
- What kind of difference will this make in their work or their lives?
- What will they be able to increase or reduce?
- Of what value are the other elements of the meeting?
- What will they miss out on if they don't go?

If you've chosen your speakers based on the criteria outlined earlier, you can simply use their program descriptions for all or most of this element of your marketing piece. Because a good program description answers the above questions in clear and compelling fashion.

5. Presenter Bios

Biographical information establishes the credibility of the speakers. I mentioned earlier that potential attendees don't really care about a speaker's bio, but ironically, if it's not included, they'll wonder who the heck this person is.

6. Special Features

Besides a speaker or two (or a dozen), what does your event have to offer? Mention any and all features that might be of interest to your attendees. Like what, you ask? Things like:

- Local tours
- Trade show
- Golf tournament
- Autograph session
- Comedy show or concert
- Spa discounts
- Organized activities
- Live or silent auction
- Awards banquet
- Live demos
- Spouse/partner sessions

7. Testimonials

Testimonials are one of the most powerful, and most overlooked, elements of a persuasive marketing piece. You want to use two types of testimonials:

testimonials about your speakers and testimonials from attendees of your previous events. The more, the better.

8. Who Should Attend

Specifying who the meeting is intended for creates a connection between the reader and the event. If it's designed for them, they feel more attracted to it. Listing who will benefit from attending can also cause the recipient to consider bringing along colleagues, staff, friends or family members.

9. Investment

Notice it's not "price" or "cost." Those words imply your meeting is an expense. The word "investment" promises a return.

Put the investment amount near the end, so they get a chance to appreciate the value of the event first. If there are any special offers, be sure to highlight them. And point out what a bargain the meeting really is.

10. Registration Incentives

You want your attendees to register now. Not tomorrow. Not next week. **Now.** But if there's no incentive, the natural tendency for people is to wait until the last minute. And the longer they put it off, the greater the chance they'll forget entirely. So give them a reason to register immediately. Such as:

- Early-bird pricing. You might even have three different prices: early-bird, regular and on-site.
- A special benefit for the first 20, 50, 300 (or whatever number) registrants, like premium seating, a meet-and-greet with the speaker or a contest entry.
- A free gift if they register by a certain date. (I've given clients special reports to use as an incentive. It costs me nothing, it costs the association nothing and it drives early registrations.)

11. Registration Information

Make it easy to register! I've seen registration forms that were so confusing, I had no idea how to fill it out or how much the event was actually going to cost. Whether the information is on paper or on your web site, be certain the registration instructions are simple, clear and easy-to-follow.

12. Call to Action

A call to action is like the close in a sales presentation—if it's not there, the prospect likely won't do anything. So tell them **exactly** what to do ("Click here

to register!” “Fill out the enclosed form...” “Fax this page to...” and when to do it (“Now!” “Today!”).

Many people protest when I tell them all the elements they need to include in their marketing pieces. “That’s too much information! Nobody will read all that!” they say.

The evidence supports exactly the opposite. Research has proven again and again that, if it’s written well, long copy **always** outperforms short copy. Don’t be afraid of writing too much, be afraid of writing too little. If you leave out any of the above items, your registrations will suffer.

Want some help crafting effective marketing materials? I have a special report entitled *Power Words for Sales and Marketing*. It shows you how to use the most compelling marketing words to create irresistible brochures, flyers, e-mail blasts and more. To get your free copy, just e-mail me at Don@DonCooper.com.

Use Several Different Marketing Channels

There are lots of different options for marketing your events: in person, direct mail, and electronic. Don’t limit yourself to just one. The more you use, the more effectively your message will get across.

Also, using different media enables you to get your message in front of more people within an organization. For example, your e-mails may go to one person, but your postcard may be seen by another.

As you plan your marketing campaign, consider using each of the following:

Your Web Site

The first place your meeting information should appear is your web site. Post whatever information you have as soon as you have it. Put a big visual link on your home page, and as your event date draws nearer, make it ever more prominent. If it’s a major event, you might even want to create a separate web site specifically for it.

E-Mail

E-mail has become the favorite method of promoting meetings because it’s basically free. It also can be written long-format—enabling you to get all the

relevant information in—and you can include hyperlinks to the registration form on your web site.

Don't rely on e-mail exclusively, though. E-mail isn't always directed to the person you actually want to see it, or to all the people you'd like to see it. And with constantly improving spam countermeasures, more and more legitimate e-mail is being blocked. (I hope there's a special circle of Hell reserved for spammers. They've ruined the Internet for the rest of us.)

Brochures

Brochures are great because they give you lots of room to make your case. They can be really small or really big. And they can be as fancy as you choose, allowing you to balance image with budget.

They're also versatile—you can hand them out at events, use them as a stand-alone direct-mail piece or insert them into your newsletter or magazine. Be sure to create a pdf version as well, to post on your web site and use as an e-mail attachment.

Flyers

Cheaper, easier and faster than brochures, but less glamorous and impressive. Perfect for promoting monthly meetings. Like brochures, they can be used as a handout, a direct-mail piece or an insert.

Postcards

Postcards are too small to tell your whole story, but they make great reminders. They're inexpensive to print and to mail. For monthly meetings, consider creating a template, so each month you only need to fill in the blank spaces. For a major event, think about using an oversized postcard—it will give you more room for copy and will stand out in your recipient's mail.

Phone Blasts

For a small investment, you can arrange an automated phone blitz that will call your prospective attendees and leave a recorded message on their voice-mail. This is especially impactful if the president of the organization or the keynote speaker is the voice the listener hears.

Faxes

I know what you're thinking: "Faxes are sooooo 20th century." Yes, but they still work. Keep the text to one page and include a fax-back registration form on the sheet. (Make sure there's enough room for them to write **legibly**.)

Newsletters and Magazines

If you're already sending out a newsletter or magazine (whether print or electronic) be sure to plug your event frequently within its pages. Highlight different aspects of your event in each issue, telling your story serially. If your speakers have articles, publish them to build familiarity and interest.

Events

Whether they're your own or someone else's, events allow you to physically connect with your desired audience. Talk up your event with everyone you meet, make an announcement to the group and hand out brochures and flyers. If the event is produced by another organization, see if you can get a copy of their mailing list or if they will do a mailing on your behalf.

Market to Your Audience Early and Often

Many event marketing campaigns are doomed before they begin because they start too late. You must create awareness of your meeting before your prospective audience has the chance to make other plans. The sooner your message gets out, the easier it is to get on people's radar.

For a monthly event, your first marketing push should go out 2½ to 3 weeks beforehand. For a one-time event, at least 3 to 4 months ahead. And for an annual event, your campaign should begin 6 to 9 months in advance.

This doesn't mean you have to have all the details set that far ahead of time. Your earliest marketing efforts can be teasers, just mentioning the event and whatever major details you already have confirmed. You can then present the full information later in additional marketing communications.

How many times should you market to your prospective audience?

For a monthly event, shoot for 3 to 4 communications. For a one-time event, 6 to 8. And for an annual event, 9 to 12. Seem like a lot? It is. **It needs to be.** Because the more often you hit your potential attendees with your marketing, the more registrations you'll get.

Each communication can (and should) be a little different. One marketing piece might highlight the keynote speakers, while another focuses on the concurrent sessions. A third might detail some of the other features and benefits of your event. One could simply be a long list of testimonials. There are lots of good reasons to

send out a marketing piece and as you put your mind to it, you'll come up with plenty.

Do These Tactics Really Work?

You bet they do. During my year as president of the Colorado Chapter of the National Speakers Association, I implemented this approach and increased our monthly meeting attendance by more than 50%.

Since that time, I've helped various organizations set attendance record after attendance record, in some cases **more than doubling** their previous year's registrations. Which translates into tens of thousands of dollars in additional revenue.

"Thanks to the marketing tools you gave us to promote the event, we set an all-time attendance record!"
Tracy Taylor-Sea, Longmont Chamber of Commerce

Whether your meeting is local or international in scope, members-only or open to the public, dirt-cheap or big-ticket, these strategies will work for you too.

Choose speakers with powerful marketing materials, use them to help create persuasive marketing pieces of your own, use a variety of marketing channels and market early and often. Employ these tactics and watch your registrations soar!



Don Cooper—The Sales Heretic™—is an internationally-acclaimed sales expert who helps salespeople, business owners and professionals dramatically increase their sales. He delivers custom seminars and keynote speeches for corporations, associations, chambers of commerce and other business organizations.

His most popular programs include:

- **The Myth of Price:** Why you should charge more and how to do it
- **Never Sell Ice to Eskimos:** A practical program for powerful prospecting
- **The Physics of Closing:** How to make the hardest part of the sale easy
- **When Bad Things Happen to Good Customers:** How to transform customers from enraged to ecstatic

*To learn more about how Don can help you set an attendance record at **your** next event, or to request your free copy of Power Words for Sales and Marketing, call 303-832-4248 or e-mail Don@DonCooper.com.*