

# Face-to-Face Marketing When Media Alone is Not Enough



**HODGE SCHINDLER**  
INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS

## By Judi Schindler

The president of a large Midwest construction company, with whom we have worked for many years, was evaluating his marketing program –which includes advertising, media relations, Web-based marketing, trade shows and direct mail.

“You’ve done a great job in creating visibility and credibility with real estate brokers and developers, but isn’t there a way we can get in front of end users?” he asked, referring to business owners and managers who are looking for new offices or industrial buildings.

Tall order. Entrepreneurs and managers who are thinking about new buildings are not a cohesive group. They don’t belong to the same organizations, read the same publications or reside on the same database. And there are too few of them to rationalize mass media advertising.

While most people think of public relations as media relations, there are times when either you can’t reach your audience through print, broadcast or the Internet or you need to supplement your media program. That’s when you need to think about face-to-face marketing – placing clients directly in front of targeted audiences through informational events structured around their interests.

This strategy works well for consumer markets (think cooking demonstrations in grocery stores, hospital-sponsored health fairs and hotel-sponsored bridal expos). It also works well for B2B companies like construction companies, law firms or consultancies -- businesses that want to showcase the expertise of their management team.

In this case, we worked with the client to develop a breakfast seminar for business owners titled “To Build or Not to Build,” which was co-sponsored by a real estate brokerage, a bank and an accounting firm. All four companies contributed to the mailing list, shared the costs of the event and were featured in the panel presentation.

The event was marketed through a printed invitation, a program of e-mail blasts, a press release and mailings to members of local chambers of commerce and business associations that agreed to serve as “affiliated organizations.”

Special care was taken to make the program as informational as possible – no heavy-handed commercials. Attendees were presented with solid information on such topics of interest as the current real estate environment; lease-or-own considerations; financing options; how to control costs and the tax advantages of ownership.

The breakfast cost a total of \$4,600 (not counting staff or agency time) and produced six viable leads for the client. If only one of those prospects moves forward with a \$10 or \$20 million building, that represents a substantial ROI.

Face-to-face marketing is also a useful strategy for establishing an organization’s reputation in a particular area.

We have worked for many years with a local university’s promotion of its school of real estate. Two years before it offered a single real estate course, we helped them develop and manage a three-part lecture series featuring top real estate speakers from across the country and attracting prominent local industry players to each presentation.

In this case, the college borrowed the imprimatur of its speakers and attendees (as well as a board of advisors for the program) to position itself as a leader in real estate education. When the real estate school opened, enrollment surpassed goals by 20 percent.

Whatever the rationale behind a face-to-face marketing effort, one of the underlying benefits is that the event itself is as much a part of the message as the content. Whether they attended or not, everyone who received an invitation to the construction company’s seminar now knows of its expertise in build-to-suit construction. And the college has been able to build implied support and substantial credibility by aligning with top names in the real estate industry.

If face-to-face-marketing offers similar benefits for your company or clients, keep some key considerations in mind:

- Find a partner. Teaming up with another company with a similar client base helps offset costs while enriching your invitation list.
- Make sure the content is informative, not promotional. People don't have to be hit over the head. The less commercial the event, the more effective it will be as a marketing tool.
- Bring in outside speakers. Whether you feature a well-known expert from outside your company or ask one of your customers to present a case history, the event gains status and you gain added credibility.
- Handouts. Hold off on handouts until the presentation is over. Some audience members will flip through the material instead of listening. But do make the material sufficiently useful so they will want to keep it. And don't forget to include the sponsors' contact information.

- Work the room. Make sure you have enough staff at the event to cover the room (an 8 -1 ratio is not excessive), and coach staff to greet and talk to guests rather than huddle by themselves on the sidelines.
- Follow up. Once the event is over, look for opportunities to stay in contact with your audience. Send additional information periodically. Add the attendees to your mailing list. Create a DVD or transcript of the proceedings and distribute to those who could not attend as well as those who did.

The final suggestion is to make your face-to-face marketing program an annual event. If your maiden effort was successful, the second will be a smash. You've already learned what works and what doesn't. You have a built-in audience for the second event, and this year's attendees will create positive word-of-mouth for next year.

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