

Big Fish in a Small Pond:

Using Events to Market and Grow Your Business

This is the third in a series of articles I'm writing for ISMA News about Developing a Profitable and Sustainable Stress Management Business.

In my last article, I talked about the importance of the business development process involved in winning large contracts. As a brief reminder, I gave this process the acronym, **MEETS**, which stands for: Initial **M**arketing, **E**vents, **E**mail marketing, **T**raining, and **S**ales of your Service. I described the stages of the process and explained how following the process leads ultimately to what we all want in business; Sales of our Service.

In this article, I'm focussing on my personal favourite of these stages; Events. Specifically, I'm going to explain exactly *why* I love to use events for marketing.

Events are my favourite marketing approach because, despite all the time, work and hassle involved in planning, organising and marketing them, they are incredibly cost-effective in developing and growing your business.

I've run and been involved in about 90 events across the UK in the last three years or so (including external events). Most have been free (hosted) events which my business has organised, where I have been the main or only presenter. I've also organised a large number of public training events where people pay to attend, and spoken at other people's events where I've been a keynote speaker. For marketing purposes, I've found that running my own, free events is the best strategy.

Free, hosted events

I should explain first about using *free, hosted* events.

I like to use *free, hosted* events as a kind of 'magnet' that attract the right people (or prospects); the people/organisations who may later buy my services. What I mean by this is that the events are *free* to all participants and they are *hosted* by a large organisation. Typically, I look to attract up to 100 people to an event from at least 50 different organisations across a specific region.

The idea is that the host provides the venue and the refreshments, which minimises the cost. Sometimes hosts will even pay your expenses or a small fee. You provide the bulk of the content, the main presentation, which is built around a hot stress-related topic or issue you have identified as being attractive to your audience.

Free is incredibly attractive to people, and remains one of the most powerful marketing words, especially in the current climate. We all love a bargain and the idea is to make sure that's what participants get; a quality, content-rich event, which costs them nothing to attend.

That might sound a bit crazy, doing all that 'for nothing', but it isn't because it's all about the process. You're using the free event to attract the right people and begin a relationship with them that ultimately results in what you want – business. I've heard a lot of people say that free events are a waste of time and are not valued. Nothing could be further from the truth in my experience.

Also, *free* opens marketing doors that otherwise would remain tightly shut and locked. Hosts, large employers, membership organisations, institutions, even similar businesses to your own, will support and actively promote your event. Why? Because it's not only free but a quality event that's relevant to the people they want to engage with, such as managers, members, readers, and customers. That makes them look good and everyone is interested in some good PR.

This is also true of 'hubs'. **Hubs** are those people who have databases of, or organise networks of, relevant and interested people, usually of similar professional background. By finding and engaging with hubs, there is the potential to *virally* spread your marketing message. Of course, if you're offering something attractive like a free event with excellent content, relevant for their network, it makes it much more likely they will promote it to their members.

I've had single hubs that have generated hundreds of attendees to my events, because they were free and seen as highly relevant to the network's members.

This is why you should always look to market and base your events around a *hot issue or topic* relevant to your audience and not around yourself or your business. That is, your event should never be a sales pitch.

7 compelling reasons to market with events

- 1. Big fish in a small pond.** Marketing is tough at the best of times and getting the maximum return on your investment is key. What many people do is pretty much what everyone else does, such as advertise in a journal or take a stall at a large HR conference, which is also very expensive! With these approaches, it's very hard indeed to get noticed, and you'll find you're competing with a lot of others who have much larger budgets and glossier brochures. You're the proverbial small fish in a very large pond (Or lake? Or ocean?) At your own, hosted event you are *the* big fish, in fact often the **only** fish, and therefore have 100% attention while you are speaking. This is pretty much the Holy Grail in marketing. If you run events, the likelihood of starting a relationship that will ultimately win business is exponentially higher.
- 2. Direct experience of 'you' and the opportunity to connect.** Generally, people won't buy a service based on your area of expertise without first having met you at some point *and* seen you in action. Events provide the opportunity for both. Events provide an opportunity for what the American Psychiatrist and Author, Edward (Ned) Hallowell, calls the 'human moment'; the opportunity to *connect* with people. You get to shake people by the hand and look them in the eye. Social media and online networks might be all the rage, but I can assure you that in the world of selling professional services, personal contact and relationships

still matter, perhaps even more so. My impression is that nowadays fewer Professionals are using events in the mistaken, misguided belief that all you need to do is use twitter and facebook. Using events in your marketing will give you a major competitive advantage.

3. **Targeting, efficiency, qualification and motivation.** Events enable you to meet a lot of the right people (so it's *targeted*) at the same time in the same place (so it's *efficient*), who have chosen to be there (so they are *qualified* leads). Not only that, because of the questions you ask them when they register for your event, you will know why they are *motivated* to attend.
4. **Social proof, raised profile and credibility.** Events with high numbers of interested attendees provide social proof that you are an expert and a credible source of information. Social proof is one of the most powerful weapons of influence. When people are uncertain about what to do (or whose service to buy) they check out what others are doing and follow suit. Potential hosts are also more likely to offer to host your events when they see that similar organisations have done the same. Perhaps the most important benefit of being seen as a credible source and authority is that it lowers the perceived risk of doing business with you.
5. **Reciprocity.** Providing high quality information and resources via a free event generates strong feelings of reciprocity towards you, increasing the likelihood that participants (or their organisations) will become your clients. Of course, reciprocity is another potent form of social influence.
6. **Commitment.** Attending an event (even going to the trouble of *booking* an event), requires a commitment on the part of the attendee or the organisation sending people. Commitments are again powerful weapons of social influence. After the event, attendees / organisations are much more likely to act in ways that are consistent with their initial commitment and indeed may make much larger commitments later on. That commitment may be to purchase a service from you.
7. **Marketing magic?** There's something magical about a great event. Each event creates a new community and builds a 'buzz' around what you're doing (sometimes called 'word-of-mouth marketing'). You'll find after a while that this starts to rub off on your business in profitable ways. People will phone you and say: "Such-and-such attended your event and said it was brilliant. Could you do something similar for us?"

Conclusion: free hosted events will help generate business

In conclusion, events are a great and cost-effective way to build your business. Free events in particular can attract large numbers of interested people, because of their potential to be marketed virally. To minimise the cost of events, you need to find large organisations that will host your event and provide refreshments.

There are several compelling reasons for using events as part of your overall marketing strategy. The most important of these is that you can be 'the big fish

in a small pond' where you are not competing for attention. Events also provide the opportunity for you to connect with and present to future clients, so raising your profile and credibility.

Events enable highly targeted marketing. The people attending your event have already demonstrated they are interested in your topic. They have also made a commitment to register and attend, which increases the chances they will make larger commitments later on, such as working with you. Events also provide opportunities for engaging other powerful weapons of social influence such as social proof, authority and reciprocity, all of which increase business.

There's something magical about great events. They can create 'buzz' and get people talking about you. This word-of-mouth marketing will win you business in ways you can't even imagine.

Detailed how-to secrets?

There's clearly a limit to what you can cover in a short article, and what I haven't covered here is the detailed aspects of precisely how to use events in your marketing. I'm currently writing an eBook and developing some face-to-face business development training about this topic. I hope to offer this training in association with ISMA Business for those people who want to learn more about using these approaches to develop and grow their stress management business. I'll be launching this in Spring 2014.

This will include:

- How to choose a great event topic, highly attractive to your potential clients
- How and where to find free information and resources, including stress research, and how best to use these resources in your marketing
- How to plan and organise your event, step-by-step, including timescales
- How to set up your event to maximise the marketing benefits to your business, such as generating valuable market research and intelligence
- How to format and structure your event to maximise its cost-effectiveness
- How to build and use your own targeted databases
- How to market your event, so that you attract large audiences of the right people from the right organisations
- How to find large organisations that will happily host your events and provide refreshments at no cost to you
- How to identify and work with (regional and national) 'hubs' so your event can be marketed virally to large numbers of interested people
- How specifically to follow-up your events to maximise sales of your service and convert attendees to clients
- How best to work with partners and professional colleagues; the do's and don'ts
- How to use free web tools and apps to automate and streamline your events and wider marketing
- How to benefit from social media before, during and after your event
- How to minimise 'no-shows' at your event, and how you can still win business, even from people who don't turn up

If the content of this article is of interest, please drop me an email and I'll keep you informed of developments.

Good luck with growing your business.

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Useful links:

Business articles: <http://www.the-stress-site.net/business-articles.html>

Business mentoring: <http://www.the-stress-site.net/business-mentoring.html>

Alan's blog: <http://alanbradshaw.blogspot.co.uk>

Recommended tools: <http://www.the-stress-site.net/business-tools.html>

Business development toolkit for Professionals (e-book): <http://www.the-stress-site.net/business-development-toolkit.html>

Profile:

Alan Bradshaw is a Business Psychologist specialising in the fields of stress management and resilience. His business, Work-Life Solutions, provides stress management training and consultancy to clients across all sectors. Alan also provides training, coaching and mentoring to consultants and practitioners around business development and marketing.