ADVISOR PERSPECTIVES

Why Client Events Aren't Appreciated

By Dan Richards
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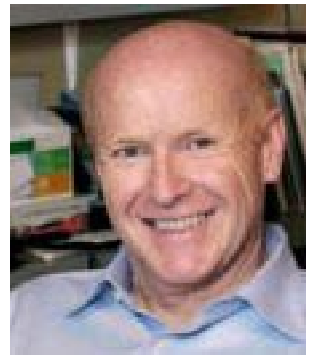

Recently, an advisor based in a community of 500,000 people emailed me, seeking advice on a client appreciation event.

He has tried boat cruises, a car rally at a BMW dealership and VIP screenings of movies for his best clients, plus a few other things.

While he takes photos of the event, he is reluctant to put them on his web site as those clients who were not invited might be miffed.

He is thinking of an event for next year that all his clients, small, and large, could attend – since this would be a rather large affair, he needs to think of the cost.

He has thought of a summer picnic, but the weather could destroy the event, even in a roofed venue.

He has considered renting the arena where the local minor hockey team plays for a one-hour skate, followed by some sort of meal, but he's concerned that not all his clients skate.

He ended his note: *"Any thoughts would be welcome."*

Targeting top clients

It sounds like this advisor has done a good job of organizing events for his best clients – and suffers a bit from the "done it all" syndrome.

That said, I encouraged him to continue to run selective, by-invitation events targeted to top clients – the consistent feedback I get is that not only do these pay the biggest dividends in goodwill and additional business, but it's often hard to get bigger clients out to "mass" events.

The challenge is breaking through – when it comes to events for top clients, you need to pick one of two strategies.

Either do something dramatically different that stands out – and keep repeating it, so it becomes your signature … or mix events up so they're always fresh and different.

Go big or go home

As an example of a repeated “signature” event, every January one team based in another mid-sized community invites its top clients to a Friday night dinner and overnight stay at a local inn (owned by a client).

While not cheap, this generates huge feedback and goodwill – it’s become something clients eagerly anticipate. In fact, they get emails from clients planning winter vacations asking for the date so they can plan around it.

Along similar lines, another advisor and his associate (along with their spouses) host his top six client couples for an annual outing to an internationally renowned theatre festival located in a high-end town about two hours away – it starts with a reception and early dinner on Saturday, followed by a play, and ends with brunch Sunday morning.

Again, not cheap (he estimates the dinner, theatre tickets, hotel rooms and brunch next morning cost $5,000) – but clients love it and look forward to it each year … and he estimates that he almost always recovers the cost in the first 30 days through referrals alone.

As an aside, this doesn’t have to be an annual event. When it comes to communication of any kind, there’s a “go big or go home” syndrome – you’re better off doing a more unique and compelling event every two or even three years than a less memorable event annually.

The power of novelty

The other route is to keep coming up with fresh and different activities for top clients – understanding that normally, even if you get a good response the first time you do something, when you repeat it you’ve lost the novelty factor and the response will be less enthusiastic.

The solution is to keep coming up with new ideas. One possibility for events targeted to top clients is to put together a list of things you’ve haven’t done, such as a cooking class, wine tasting or golf clinic in the spring – and perhaps tap into your professional network to put together a comprehensive a list of potential ideas.

Then take this list to your best clients – and ask them to indicate their interest in these different events.

There are three benefits to this:

First, you’re sending the right signal to top clients even before the event takes place.

Second, you'll tailor the events to the things that interest people the most.

Finally, when you invite clients to an event in which they expressed interest, you can tell them it was selected based in part on their input – and greatly increase the chances they'll attend.

Running a broad-based event

For a broader event for all clients, again uniqueness is key. The challenge is doing something affordable that still stands out.

The skating idea at a high-profile venue has worked well for other advisors – and as for clients who don't skate, that's offset by the goodwill among those who bring kids and grandkids as well as friends who they invite.

The key is to brainstorm with your staff as to what you can do to make this really special. One Vancouver advisor invited clients to a Sunday afternoon skating party at GM Place, the arena that's home to the Vancouver Canucks, the local NHL team. As part of this, he had a recently retired Canuck come out and sign autographs in exchange for a contribution to the Vancouver Canuck charity foundation.

The only additional costs were for hot dogs, potato chips and hot chocolate – despite the modest refreshments, they got a huge response from clients.

Another advisor got great feedback when she invited all clients to coffee and danish on Saturday morning to hear two speakers on the topic of giving back to the community.

One was a recently retired college football coach (who did a great job – upbeat, funny and entertaining); the second was a speaker from Save the Children (the charity started by Craig Kielburger) who spoke in exchange for a modest donation.

Still another advisor does an annual family day at the zoo – so advisors have to think about unique venues in their city.

Weather concerns are a risk at any outdoor event, and all you can do is hold an event at a time of year when the odds are in your favor and have a number people can call the day of the event to find out if it's on.

As long as the risk is fairly low, I'd rather take my chances on a super event that might get rained out but would be gangbusters if it worked, than a safer event that attendees will quickly forget.

Dan Richards conducts programs to help advisors gain and retain clients and is an award winning faculty member in the MBA program at the University of Toronto. To see more of his written and video commentaries and to reach him, go to www.strategicimperatives.ca.