

Hosting a Successful AIA/CES Showroom Program

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I recently attended an AIA/CES program sponsored by an international product manufacturer at their local showroom. I was initially informed of the program by email and decided to attend. In general, it was a graciously hosted, useful program. However, as I reviewed the events of the evening, I was struck by some of the obvious sales and marketing opportunities that they overlooked or missed completely.

There are a number of pros and cons to consider when hosting an education program in your showroom or studio. Some manufacturers host programs because they think it is more cost effective than doing the box lunch rounds for design offices. Based on my observations and the problem of no-shows I am not convinced this is a valid point. On the other hand, manufacturers with complex products that require large samples or displays can be much more effective hosting programs in their showrooms.

The primary risk to hosting programs in showrooms is no-shows. Requesting RSVPs and sending follow-up emails is a must to keep potential attendees focused on attending. Based on that recent experience, I would like to discuss a number of points that I believe would benefit any product manufacturer hosting an education program in a local showroom.

Make Sure the Title Tells the Story

When I got the invitation to attend the seminar the title was rather product oriented and not something I was particularly interested in. However, I did have an interest in seeing the showroom and getting to know the individuals who worked there. As it turned out, the program was excellent and not product oriented. Unfortunately, the attendance was quite poor and I believe it was due to the fact that the program title and description were not as interesting as what they ended up talking about.

Make certain that the title of the program is descriptive and that the description is detailed and of interest to design professionals. Conversely, if you advertise a great program it had better deliver what the description promised.

Greeter at the Door and Name Tags

One of the things that was done very well was that the presenter greeted everyone at the door to welcome and thank them for coming. This was very gracious and made everyone feel at home. Unfortunately, that's as far as it went. The rest of the staff stayed in their offices until the program started.

I strongly recommend providing name tags. I suppose some people think it is tacky but I really appreciate being able to address people by name. It is much more civilized and I believe it makes people more willing to mix and mingle. Also, it is critical for staff to be able to associate names with faces during follow-up calls and visits.

Sign-in List and AIA Sign-up List

Obviously, if you are presenting an AIA/CES program you must have the appropriate sign-up form and you need to get attendees to sign it. One of the opportunities presented by signing-in is obtaining names and contact information of the attendees. An AIA/CES sign up form only lists name and AIA number. Make sure you have another list or at least ask for business cards.

At this seminar, the AIA/CES sign-in form was passed around but no one was asked for any contact information of any kind. This was an incredible blunder. I actually almost made it out of

the showroom without leaving a business card. If I had not stopped to offer a couple of suggestions to the presenter, no one would have ever known I attended. How in the world are you going to be able to follow up if you don't have any contact information?

Socialize: Don't Sit In Office While Waiting For People to Show Up

Another item that really surprised me was that the director of the showroom and staff member did very little socializing. For most of the cocktail time prior to the presentation they sat in their offices or talked to each other. Never once did any of them attempt to talk to the attendees. I thought it was incredible rude and unforgivably stupid.

They were dozens of opportunities to mix with the design professionals, to demonstrate products that were displayed, to walk around and offer refills, or to just introduce themselves and find out who was going to be in the audience. As an architect friend of mine from Alabama says, "What were they thinking?"

Introduce Staff & Local Capabilities

Prior to the presentation there was some simple staff introductions and recognition of who had gotten the food. Otherwise, staff was not introduced to the attendees. Worse, the showroom manager never discussed the local capabilities or services that were available.

Again, this was a gross oversight on the manager's part. Generally, I am not interested in having product reps give me the never-ending capabilities discussion when they call on my office. However, when I visit a showroom I expect to be informed on everything available that can help me do my job or solve my design problems.

Have a Specific Display

When offering a program on a specific product type or system in a showroom I believe it is very good practice to have a display that demonstrates both product and system operations. If done appropriately, you can even incorporate the display into the presentation.

A display of the product system was there but it was just a bunch of product sitting on a table. There was no one there to demonstrate or explain. It was amazing. They invited us to a seminar on the product system but never demonstrated it or even talked about it before or after the AIA/CES program.

Presentation Issues

The presentation itself incorporated plenty of no-nos. The showroom manager read his part of the PowerPoint slides and could not be heard at the back of the room. The main presenter did a good job but his projector controller kept jumping around to different slides.

This was a very small showroom and a small audience. Just using a handout and some simple diagrams would have been much more effective.

Handout Materials

One of the key opportunities missed was that of a handout and related collateral materials. There was no product literature anywhere that I could see and the primary product binder for the showroom was just mentioned in passing at the end of the seminar.

In my view, there should have been product literature on every seat along a program handout. Just indicating that if you leave a card we will send you something is not acceptable. If it was up to me, the showroom binder should also have been at every seat.

Closing & Follow-Up

Time management is always a challenge in giving a seminar. In this particular case they ran overtime, some people left before the end of the program and it basically fell apart at the end.

In any sales situation a strong, positive close is essential. Make certain that there is time to thank people for attending, make sure those sign-ups are complete, and that you have everyone's contact information. Let attendees know that you will be following up with something of interest and that the showroom is available for design support. Finally, make sure they leave with your business cards in their pockets.

An education program hosted in a product showroom can be a very effective and efficient method of making and keeping contact with local design professionals. However, it does take more planning than just making sure the food and drinks show up. There is no substitute for good planning when hosting this type of event. Make sure you know what you want to accomplish, plan for it, and most important, execute the plan with some style and grace.

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