



Making corporate hospitality work for you

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Corporate hospitality is now recognised as one of the most powerful tools for developing long-term business relationships. But if a company is to reap real business returns from what can be a significant investment, such events must be well planned, structured and have a true sense of purpose. In this article, I look at how to combine 'Business with Beaujolais' - to ensure that, as your clients enjoy themselves, you meet your business agenda.

TODAY, pharmaceutical companies have become much smarter in targeting those clients likely to provide consistent, quality business.

As a result, we now talk about multi-level relationships, bonding, and, of course partnership. Yet what is the best way to deepen a relationship with an existing customer or start to bond with a potential new customer?

The answer may be to take them out of the usual business environment - with its sometimes formal and adversarial overtones - and put them in a social setting. Here, by contrast, you can relate to each other much more readily as human beings and your customers can talk about their needs and decision criteria in a low-threat environment.

In the typical multi-level contact environment of our industry however, this has also given rise to a new set of problems. Some of those involved in corporate entertaining for example, such as medical experts and others on the periphery of the sales function, may have had little or no training in selling or influencing. Similarly, those arranging such events may not have a clear understanding of the broader marketing context in which the event is being organised.

When planning an event which involves an element of corporate hospitality therefore, it is essential to

keep the following five key issues in mind -

- **Event planning** - It is essential to position the event within the company's broader marketing strategy or account management plan. At the same time as ensuring it is appropriate to meeting business objectives however, any client entertaining must, of course, stay within industry guidelines and rules.

Key to the success of an event is to ensure that the right audience can attend. This requires targeting the right people early on. A problem for example will arise if marketing organises an event and fails to advise the sales team responsible for inviting clients until perhaps a few weeks prior to the event. Doctors and other target customers are busy people and crowded diaries are likely to reduce the numbers available - and thus lessen the impact or value of the event.

Worse still, if the hospitality event forms part of an industry-wide conference or exhibition, it is likely that major competitors will already have 'snapped up' key clients for their own activities.

Sponsorship budgets typically form an integral part of the annual sales and marketing budget and so are established well in advance. Those

responsible for inviting clients to any event involving corporate hospitality should be made aware as far as possible in advance so they can plan accordingly.

- **Setting measurable objectives** - at one level there are the straightforward 'housekeeping' issues, such as the percentage of attendees, the quality of catering and so on which of course must be right. Yet here, we are far more interested in quantifiable - and realistic - outcomes: it is unlikely for example that at a social gathering an agreement to prescribe would be realistic and so should not be set as a goal. However, establishing appointments, securing follow-up calls, or gaining introductions where access is difficult are achievable and essential if real value is to be derived from the event.

A planning meeting therefore held, say, six to eight weeks in advance should identify what would be a successful outcome with regard to each client or prospect invited. And this should not be restricted to each individual salesperson's own guests. It may well be that someone invited by a colleague may be able to provide valuable information or make a useful introduction: engineering the opportunity to make this happen should not be left to chance.

In other words, the skills and tactics required to achieve these outcomes - by identifying client needs and gaining commitment - can be determined in advance and to a large degree will be determined by where the customers are in their decision-making.

- **Managing interactions** - At the event itself, it is critical to assign the right people to key roles and in each case clearly define responsibilities and expectations. This means ensuring the right people are on hand, from the initial 'meeters and greeters' to the 'statues' - those who should typically stay in one place and to whom invitees are brought.

Everyone involved needs to be aware that, even though the event may appear to be primarily social - or even casual - it is a shop window for the host company. This is especially important for those who have limited client contact day--to-day. The company too needs to recognise the importance of assigning its best people to each part of the event: if it is an evening activity linked to an exhibition for example, it should not simply be a case of 'dragging along' those manning the stand earlier in the day.

- **Persuasion skills** - in training effective social influencing skills, Huthwaite tends to avoid the use of the word 'selling': This is because at a

social event you are not seeking to transact business. What you are trying to do, by contrast is gain information, extend relationships, perhaps give some information about yourself or make some progress in a major deal. The key to success therefore centres on influencing rather than selling.

Yet this is a social event. You can't 'influence' all the time, for that would be crass; it's outside the rules, which are that you have got to have some fun! This is precisely why effective influencers make a conscious distinction between 'social' and 'purposeful' conversation. They devote an appropriate amount of air time to each and switch seamlessly between the two modes of communication. Similarly, they recognise the value of both the 'push' style of persuasion or influencing - that is, giving information and putting forward ideas - and the 'pull' style of asking questions and building on others' ideas, depending upon the topic or situation in question.

- **Working the room** - it is very easy to cause offence by butting into a conversation or leaving abruptly, so many people don't try. As a result, the commonest failing is that those attending on behalf of the host tend to cluster with colleagues, as they feel uncomfortable starting conversations with clients or prospects. And this does not just apply to non client-facing staff; experienced salesmen will often spend too much time with friendly clients or former colleagues, convinced they are networking yet in truth much of it will be of little value - no more than gossiping in fact! Skilled networkers by contrast are constantly proactive, selecting the right targets and adopting appropriate verbal ploys to enter or exit a conversation. The secrets of successful 'intros' and 'outros' can be taught, enabling attendees to work the room effectively, without causing offence.

Though more closely regulated than in many industries, in taking such an approach pharmaceutical companies are exactly similar to any other. By planning well in advance, ensuring you have the right, properly briefed and trained staff attending on your behalf and controlling the event in this way, you can achieve an excellent balance of business and pleasure.

On the one hand, you and the customers will be assured of an entertaining and enjoyable event. At the same time, you will secure a measurable advance in your business relationships - and in a way which is unlikely to be achieved through your more formal commercial dealings with both customers and targets.

