

Free Samples to Woo Paying Clients

FREE legal advice? Gratis tax hints or medical tips?

Consumer products companies have long known the benefit of giving samples away in order to create a market. And now professionals are doing the same thing, via seminars. Their hope is that a sampling of their expertise will create a craving for more.

For example, Landsman & Laster, a Washington law firm, recently held a workshop on preparing wills. Several people "later came into our office" for legal advice, said John Laster.

Lately, professionals from different fields have been co-sponsoring seminars that can showcase them both. Co-sponsorship spreads the costs of renting auditoriums or conference rooms and of offering refreshments and meals. Since the co-sponsors are generally in non-competitive businesses, they can combine mailing lists and generate potential clients for each other.

That can be especially valuable for lawyers who, with their profes-



sion's ethical rules, cannot directly solicit clients, but can make it very obvious that they are interested in new business. Earlier this month, for instance, accountants Goldenberg/Rosenthal and lawyers Fox, Rothschild, O'Brien & Frankel co-

sponsored a seminar on the future of real estate tax shelters. "We have had some inquiries from new people since then," said Norman Leibovitz, a lawyer with Fox, Rothschild.

Most seminars have plenty of built-in time for meeting potential clients. "Cocktail receptions afterward give the chance for one-on-one contact," said Miss Congram of Touche Ross. She also favors post-seminar surveys, in which guests are called several days later and asked to evaluate the seminar, and offered more information on the topic.

The seminars can be a welcome adjunct to other promotional tools, too, notes Mr. McCrensky, the consultant. For example, it provides names of potential clients to be put on a newsletter mailing list. "Maybe they don't have new business right away, but they will in eight months or a year," he said.

The seminars need not be formal. Physicians, particularly, have grown adept at the ad hoc

forum. They regularly volunteer to set up cancer screening clinics or blood pressure clinics if a local shopping center, factory or community group will publicize them and provide space. "Done skillfully as a public service, it gives the doctors visibility with a huge base of potential clients," said Mr. McCrensky.

But forums for free advice must be carefully matched to their audiences. Doctors generally know better than to offer an obstetrics clinic in a retirement village. But lawyers and accountants often slip up in their audience assessments.

One executive from a non-unionized industry was recently invited by his regular law firm to a seminar on labor law. Not only did he not attend, but he was offended by the invitation. In his mind, he had been included in a mass mailing by a firm that simply wanted to show off its expertise, not help him with anything. "They didn't check their mailing list and probably invited everyone," he said. ■