

CONVENTION CLANGERS

MARK BLACKMORE considers seven sales conference catastrophes – and how to avoid them

I suspect that the main thought in the mind of most sales professionals when they attend their company's annual sales conference is, "I hope it's better than last year, but at least I'm not working."

It doesn't have to be this way.

Typically, there are seven "clangers" that cause flawed sales conferences of the type that I, and I'm sure you, have experienced or endured.

CLANGER 1: 'LET'S GET EACH OF OUR SALES LEADERS TO PRESENT'

On paper, it looks like the perfect plan. You divide the day into 20-minute segments and the head of each sales department in your business gets an opportunity to tell the world what they've achieved in the last 12 months, and their plans for the next 12 months. What's wrong with that? Well, firstly, heads of department are often good at heading up a department, but might be lousy at public speaking. They tend to stand in the dark, motionless behind a lectern, and all we can see is a relentless stream of dull, wordy PowerPoint slides. And because they are from a different department to our own, most of the content is "for information only". OK, so you like to take a holistic view and are interested in how other departments operate. But as each sales manager vacates the stage, another replaces them. By the time the morning coffee break arrives, you're working out ways you can set off the fire alarms just to break the monotony.

REMEDY: TELL A STORY

Your conference should flow like a story. Who are the main characters? What's the plot? Are

CLANGER 2: 'LET'S HIRE A GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB AND RELAX'

You love your salespeople. What better way to reward them than have a day at a golf and country club? The guys can play golf. The girls can have a spa treatment. Or maybe vice versa. Everyone is happy. Except this isn't a conference, it's a day out. If that is your agenda, then great, go ahead and enjoy, but little value will accrue.

REMEDY: STICK TO YOUR OBJECTIVE

Get back to having a conference – and make it an opportunity to develop and educate your people, communicate your vision, and innovate your sales offerings, bringing lasting benefits.



there some issues to be sorted out along the journey? Does it finish with a happy ending?

Create a sales theme for the day that explains what it is you're trying to achieve and captures the key objectives in an inspiring way. Kick-start interest in the conference by sending out email teasers. You could even create a specific app for the conference, generating excitement (and raising credibility) before it starts.

A one-day conference can realistically cover a maximum of three or four key sessions. Decide in advance what the key sales takeaways from each session should be, and then plan how you intend to deliver them on the day.

“By the time the morning coffee break arrives, you're working out ways you can set off the fire alarms just to break the monotony”

My PICI model ensures that each session has a mixture of learning activities to suit everyone:

P = Purpose – Explain the objective/outcome of the session. What are the key sales messages you want the team to learn and implement?

I = Interaction – Use a fun/interactive session, relevant to the topic, that will engage the salespeople

C = Content – Deliver your theory on what will achieve the key objective. Keep it to no more than 20 minutes

I = Implementation – Facilitate a discussion/role-play around how the theory can be implemented in the real world of sales. Get your audience's feedback using interactive social media (such as a dedicated conference Twitter account). Break into syndicates if appropriate.

CLANGER 3: 'LET'S MAKE IT FUN'

Realising that your previous sales conferences have been as dull as dishwater, you decide to hire a “fun activity company”. Great idea?

No... You have effectively abdicated responsibility for the conference to an organisation that probably doesn't have a clue about your business. For at least half a day your sales team will have a hilarious time playing percussion instruments, juggling, learning a >



◀ dance routine, or building a fighter plane out of matchsticks. At best, there will be a tenuous link to teamwork; at worst, no link to anything at all. If you simply want a fun event for your people, take them to see a comedian – you’ll probably get better value for money and a load more laughs.

REMEDY: DON'T BE FOOLED BY 'FUN'

The fun needs to have a strong link to the purpose of the session. Your salespeople should never be thinking: “What does this have to do with selling widgets?” The same goes for experiential learning and outward-bound courses, by the way. Ensure the link to the learning objective is always made very clear. Yes, make it fun, but also make it relevant.

CLANGER 4: 'LET'S WORK HARD AND PLAY HARD'

The company has had a good year and you've achieved your best ever sales results. What better way to celebrate than to put everyone up in a hotel so they can let their hair down? After all, they deserve to have a good time – they've earned it. It's a free bar, and the bar won't close until the last person goes to bed. And that normally means some people won't quite make it to bed – or not their own bed anyway.

So what's the problem here? Well, *you* are. You scheduled your two-day sales conference with the overnight stay in the middle. This made sense. But now, as your first speaker takes to the stage on day two, they are greeted with a sea of green faces and thumping heads. Are they really in the zone to get the best out of the session? And 10% of your staff haven't made it to the start time. You are furious. The conference has cost a fortune, and it is totally unprofessional for salespeople to still be in bed. You've turned what was supposed to be a celebration into a difficult situation to handle. You are even thinking about taking disciplinary action against the worst offenders. And for the amount of learning that will take place, you may as well send them all home.

REMEDY: KNOW WHEN TO PARTY

There's nothing wrong with having a party. Just do it on a Friday night, or give everyone the following day off.

CLANGER 5: 'LET'S GET A CELEBRITY SPEAKER'

To add a bit of razzmatazz to proceedings you book a celebrity speaker from the sporting world. They won gold at the Olympics, so it stands to reason they're going to be an awesome speaker. Right? Well, no, actually. Like some of your department heads, their ability to engage an audience may be limited. Your people may be excited about meeting a big name, and the star's achievements will mean at least they are credible. But a good speaker needs more – appropriate humour, the ability to connect with the audience and, above all, a message that is in tune with your key sales objective(s) for the day. You could probably save yourself a few bob by simply buying their autobiography and reading it out at the conference, because that's pretty much what they will do.

Some celebrities try hard to be relevant, but often fail. I cringe when a speaker says something like “Selling IT software is a lot like running the 100 metres...” No, it isn't.

REMEDY: ENSURE SPEAKERS KNOW YOUR BUSINESS

Only hire really good guest speakers who understand the nature of the people they are presenting to. They should do their homework: attending the sales conference planning meetings prior to the event; meeting the sales teams in the morning over coffee to get some valuable insight and information that they can refer to later in their session; learning jargon only people in the trade would understand; or referring to popular salespeople in the company by name. If there is a harmless in-joke about one of the directors, they will refer to it. This often gets the biggest laugh of the day, and demonstrates that the speaker is “one of us”.

Make sure that all of the speakers attend the whole day. Often, they fly in, and fly out. Have you ever attended a conference where the afternoon speaker told the same joke as someone in the morning? Awkward. On delivering the joke, the speaker instantly loses credibility. They also feel bewildered as to why their sure-fire gag has just shot a blank.

CLANGER 6: 'LET'S TACK ON SOME SALES AWARDS AT THE END OF THE DAY'

There is no better place than a conference to recognise your high achievers. The bright lights, the rapturous applause, the admiration from the whole salesforce. And when delivered well, such as at the ISMM's British Excellence in Sales and Marketing Awards (BESMA), sales awards are an awesome spectacle. But what often happens is that awards are tagged on to team conferences as an afterthought. One or two individuals get to walk onto the stage, receive a bottle of cheap champagne, and the PA takes a picture on their phone. That's it – a year's hard sales graft over in five minutes. Not only is this an anticlimax for the sales star receiving the award, but the rest of the sales team are hardly motivated to bust a gut to get an award next year.

REMEDY: THINK 'OSCARs'

Give your sales awards the time they deserve. Think like the Oscars. Give each category a build up. Read out at least four nominations for each category – so four times as many salespeople are being recognised. Encourage teams to cheer for their nominated colleague – so everyone feels part of the award. Get the music pumping as they go up on stage. Hire a photographer. Create an area that represents your brand/award theme where the photographs are taken – then post the photos onto your company's social media channels and in your company magazine or newsletter. Salespeople are motivated by recognition. The more you publicise their achievements, the more they will be motivated. You could also raise the status of the awards by making it a black tie, evening event. Conducting a judging process prior to the big night can also build the tension. Publish the names of the nominees in advance, as they do at the BRITs, the BAFTAs and BESMA.



CLANGER 7: 'LET'S GET THE SALES TEAM INVOLVED'

The conference is all about the people, right? So you want to get the salespeople involved by breaking into a series of syndicates and getting them to brainstorm ideas and present back to the room. As ever, this seems a perfectly well-intentioned plan – but the road to hell is paved with good intentions... and a lot can go wrong.

Let's say there are ten tables, so you break into ten groups. The task is to brainstorm "how to improve sales margins". All starts well. There is a good buzz in the room and a representative from each table puts the group's findings onto a flipchart. But then it's time to report the findings back to the room. The first group presents, and is well received. Then the second group presents, and, despite listing many of the first group's thoughts, they do come up with a couple of additional ideas. Then the third group presents, and it is already starting to feel like déjà-vu. There are seven more groups to go...

REMEDY: KEEP DELEGATE PARTICIPATION DYNAMIC

The golden rule is never to have more than three groups presenting back. And, better still, give them different subjects to brainstorm.



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