

How to Make Your Open House a Success

PROSPERITY PLUS MANAGEMENT CONSULTING, INC.

By Jim Kahrs

A practical guide for any size business

Take Away Points:

- THE PURPOSE OF AN OPEN HOUSE
- HOW TO PREPARE
- WHAT TO THINK WITH
- GETTING PEOPLE TO ATTEND

Over the 26 years I've been in the consulting profession, I have had the opportunity to participate in and attend many open houses for independent resellers and service providers. I've seen good ones that really build the image of the organization and bring in business and I've seen quite a few that weren't very good. The goal of this article is to outline the elements of a successful open house.

The first step is to understand the true purpose and goal of an open house. Though a successful open house will lead to a tremendous amount of additional business this is not the primary goal. An open house is a public

relations (PR) event. If done properly PR leads to sales but it is not a sales vehicle on its own. The Hubbard[®] Management System defines public relations as "effective cause well demonstrated." In a nutshell this means showing people how well you do the things you've set out to do as a company or how good you are at causing the effects you're striving for. Let's look at an example from another industry. I'm sure most of you have heard of Walmart. This retail giant is pretty clear about the main thing they are trying to accomplish; low prices. So if your PR line is that you offer the best service in your market or you're the most experienced and the most professional resource around or you're the least

expensive, your open house needs to demonstrate this to your customers and prospects. The ultimate goal is that when a visitor leaves your open house they have a thorough understanding of what you do and how well you do it.

Once you understand the purpose of an open house it is much easier to plan for a successful one. Planning is definitely the key word. If I had to name the one thing that all good open houses have in common it would be a strong plan through the entire process. For the balance of the article I will share my observations and ideas on how to make your next open house a huge success.

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Planning for your Open House:

I would suggest starting the process eight weeks prior to the event date. Though I've seen open houses pulled off in less time it adds to the stress level. One of the first steps necessary is to make one person the lead on the project. When you start talking about having an open house you'll be bombarded with lots of "we should do..." ideas. One person needs to take control of coordinating all efforts and receiving all input. He or she should keep a list of all projects that need to be completed and assign a deadline for each one. Having one person as the lead and a list of all actions to be done will allow for regular meetings to track and update progress and keep everyone on target. Having one lead person can also help keep the meetings short. It is the lead person's responsibility to keep people focused and to reel the group in if they go off on a tangent.

Where and When to do an Open House:

My preference by far is to have the open house in your location of course. Remember the PR goal is to show people what you do and how well you do it. What better way to do this than have people come through your office to see the operation first hand. Keep in mind that many of your customers think of your organization as being the sales rep and service tech or techs they see and typically only remember you for the product they purchased. One of the comments heard most often at open houses is "I didn't realize how big you

guys are." It is also common to hear "I didn't know you handled so many products." Though you might not be the largest player in the area I can guarantee that your company is larger and more established than most of your customers think it is.

I've heard many different opinions on when to have an open house. People have asked me what time of year is the best and what day or days of the week are best. As far as the time of year I think that depends on a few key factors, like weather, local customs and target public. If you're located in an area that is affected by extreme weather conditions in summer or winter I would avoid the height of these seasons. A snow storm on your event day can kill all of the hard work you've invested. If accountants are a large part of your target public don't have the open house in the first quarter of the year. When it comes to choosing a day of the week I would suggest Friday. Though I can't give you exact statistics on this I can say that I've seen Friday be the most successful day. I have also been asked if a two-day show is better than a one-day show. Based on observations I've made over the years I would stick with one day. A two day event costs considerably more in both time and money but doesn't seem to draw significantly more people.

Food is a Big Draw:

Having food available at your open house and making this fact well known is critical. I'm not sure why, but food is a big draw at these events. If you

have a local caterer that is well known for having great food use them and publicize it. Make sure to choose foods that are easy to eat while standing if you don't have space to set up tables. Having food throughout the day typically means offering breakfast first thing in the morning. Bagels, muffins, danishes and such work well. Have items pre-cut to make handling them easier. For lunch offer a selection of sandwiches and salads or pasta and chicken. Again make sure to have as much pre-cut food as possible making it easier for people to eat while standing. Spend a little extra money on top-shelf desserts after lunch and through the afternoon. This is the thing people will remember and talk about afterward. Keep the drinks simple; coffee, tea and orange juice for the morning; small bottles of soda, juice or Gatorade for lunch and have small water bottles available all day. Be prepared for people to show up as soon as you open the doors wanting food. Along with having food it's a good idea to hire a waitress for the day. You'll have your attention on customers and prospects and will not want to be bothered refilling coffee pots or danish trays.

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The most successful dealerships have a strong organizational integrity.

Setting up the Office:

Setting up the office is very important to the success of your event. You want to utilize the entire location; not just the demo or show room. The most successful arrangement I've seen is setting up stations throughout the office. You can break your product offerings into groups and spread them around. For example a copier dealership can have black and white copiers in the demo room, printers in the admin area, scanning software in the conference room, color copiers in the shop and supplies in the warehouse. When you set up the different stations in the office make sure to provide additional information on the departments of your organization and what makes them great. For example you should have service awards posted on the shop area for all visitors to see.

By spreading the product offerings throughout the building you accomplish a few key things. First you get people to walk through the entire site to view the full scope of your operation. In addition you improve the flow by spreading people out. It also gives you the opportunity to create a game for attendees to play. Each person is given a card when they come in. The card lists the stations that you've set up. When visiting each station the attendee has to have the card punched. If they get the card punched at all stations they receive a gift when leaving. The gift can vary, I've seen golf shirts, pies, cheese cakes, gourmet desserts, gift certificates, etc. The gift is less important than the game.

In addition to having a gift you can raffle prizes at an open house. If you are going to have a raffle it helps to have the items to be raffled on display. Popular raffle prizes are things like iPads, TVs, computers, etc. You can also require a fully punched card to be entered into the raffle.

Getting People to Your Open House:

By far the most important job in the process of having a successful open house is getting the place full. There is nothing worse than an open house that isn't well attended. They tend to drag on as you sit and wait for people to arrive. The primary responsibility for getting attendees there falls on the sales team. The first thing I would do is assign an attendee quota to each rep and create a progress board to show confirms for each rep. Next send out invitations and start calling customers and prospects. Tell customers and prospects that they need to confirm their attendance so that food can be ordered.

Though this doesn't guarantee they'll show it helps. You should also make sure that the technicians and admin staff know the show date and have invitations. They can be a big help in getting your customers there.

As the event date approaches it's important to re-confirm with each attendee. Starting two days before the show, call each one to make sure they are still coming. When this approach is used you can expect to get around 60% to 70% attendance rates. The better you do the higher the

actual attendance rate you'll get. It is important to follow up with all no-shows. Anyone who doesn't show up after confirming twice should be scheduled to come in for a private walk through. Getting prospects into the office can be difficult, so use the leverage you get from a "no-show" to get them in.

Odds & Ends to Consider:

As you go through the planning of your open house there are several smaller issues to consider so that they don't become big issues:

- Make sure you have enough parking
- Provide directions to the office
- Provide limo service for key prospects if needed
- Have name badges for all attendees and your staff
- Have plenty of garbage cans available by food areas
- Have space set aside for people to eat and talk
- Make sure air conditioning is available even in winter
- Notify neighbors and invite them to minimize conflicts

A successful open house can be a huge benefit to your organization. They very often lead to future sales spikes and can really solidify your relationship with a customer. The key to pulling off a successful show is having a strong plan going in and implementing that plan flawlessly. Hopefully I've given you some ideas for your next open house. If you haven't done open houses in the past I strongly encourage you to try one. They are a great PR tool and one that will help build your business.

About the Author, About the Company



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Prosperity Plus works with companies in the business systems industry building revenue and profitability and improving organization structure using the Hubbard Management System. Jim can be reached at (631) 382-7762 or jkahrs@prosperityplus.com.

Prosperity Plus Management Consulting provides consulting and seminars designed to improve everything from cash flow and profits to organization and people issues to sales and marketing. Our comprehensive approach to business consulting focuses on teaching the business owner to get a better handle on the business.

Clients get tremendous results from our financial benchmarking programs. We work with you to determine exact financial goals and help you put the plans in place to achieve these goals. The results of our financials programs have been tremendous improvement in cash flow, significantly increased profits and stabilizing business.

Our organization programs have helped get principals themselves out of the day-to-day grind. One of the common goals here is to have the structure in place that allows the owner to take a two or three week vacation without the business crashing.

To learn more about our products and services, call 631-382-7762, or visit us online at www.prosperityplus.com

