

## How To Plan a Small Business Conference

By Norm Sylvester, Westchester SCORE 306

Westchester County SCORE felt the need to provide leadership and stimulus to small businesses in our community, with the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the negative economic impact that followed.

Last December our chapter began to explore the idea of hosting an event that would help struggling small businesses through education, motivation and the ability to network with their peers. We began planning a conference that would bring together dozens of small business experts to share their expertise on business strategies in this uncertain environment. Our experience can be used as a case study for chapters planning their own local small business conferences.

We organized into several sub-committees for sponsor solicitation, marketing/advertising, speaker development and logistics. We were fortunate to have a key member of Westchester County government on our committee and we were able to secure the County Center as our venue for an event scheduled on June 6, 2002.

### **Sponsor Solicitation**

Crucial to our sponsorship solicitation was an advisory board with connections to potential sponsors, including many local and regional banks. Most of the contacts became major sponsors, who contributed a minimum of \$2,500. We also used a contact list developed by our chapter counselors over the years to bring additional sponsors on board. In the end, we attracted over 30 sponsors and raised over \$30,000. We sent out hundreds of solicitation letters with little, if any, response. Networking proved to be far more valuable.

### **Marketing the Conference**

The primary vehicle used to market the conference was a direct mail piece that was sent to over 35,000 small businesses in our tri-county area. In addition to the basic information about the schedule of subjects and speakers, this tri-fold mailer had a response card that could be returned with check or credit card for registration. We charged \$40 for pre-conference registration and \$50 for day of event registration, which included a box lunch. We also used posters, fliers and newspaper advertising.

Three days before the event we had 120 paid registrants; we needed over 250 to break even. We were nervous about the financial outcome. However, we had a tremendous amount of mail-ins the last couple of days and

over 100 walk-ins on the day of the event. It's apparent that many entrepreneurs can't commit to a weekday event in advance.

### **Developing the Program**

We targeted two types of speakers: successful small business people for morning panel discussions and small business counselors in areas such as finance, personnel, risk management and marketing as afternoon speakers in breakout sessions. We met with our speakers three to four weeks prior to the conference to review adherence to the panel subject matter. We also featured a luncheon speaker—a prominent radio personality who is the small business editor for a major radio station and the *Wall Street Journal*.

### **Bottom Line**

We asked attendees to evaluate the conference in a questionnaire. On a 1 to 5 scale with 5 being highest, no speaker/panel received less than a 4.0 and the conference got an overall 4.4 rating. We had more than 600 attendees and more than 80 individuals signed up for one-on-one counseling as a result of the conference. From a financial standpoint, where we had anticipated a loss of up to \$10,000, we actually broke even.

The bottom line—this small business conference put our SCORE chapter on the map in a commendable, sophisticated manner that we could not have achieved in any other way; we now have credibility and a strong association with an event that we will repeat for even greater positive impact in the years to come.

Norm Sylvester was a co-chair of Westchester SCORE's 2002 small business conference. To learn more about hosting a small business conference, contact the Westchester County SCORE office at 914/948-3907.