



# 5 Steps to Standing-Room-Only Seminars

By Janet Bigham Bernstel

When an advisor from Texas wrote in to ask for advice on how to turn out a full house for his “Savvy Social Security Planning for Boomers” seminar, we canvassed other advisors in different parts of the country. Here’s an inside look (and comparison chart) on what’s working for advisors to get their seminar seats filled and their marketing messages heard.

**O**ver the past year, advisors have been telling us that their “Savvy Social Security Planning for Boomers” seminars are highly successful. Clients appreciate the event because it’s informative—and there’s no pitching of products.

But great content doesn’t matter unless you’re able to get busy clients and prospects to your event in the first place. One Texas advisor lamented, “I did an unsatisfactory job of advertising my seminar to my target market. I’m searching for advice on how to get baby boomers’ attention and [get them] into my next workshop.”

We decided to take this advisor’s situation—he got zero attendees—as an opportunity to examine the elements of promoting a well-attended seminar. We’ll look at what the Texas advisor got right and got wrong and offer solutions for weak points in his approach. Our tips come from expert consultants and advisors who have had significant success filling the room for Social Security seminars.

The overall picture: good attendance results from a combination of (1) adhering to a few basic rules and (2) discovering what plays well with your clients and your community. Here are our five top suggestions.

## 1. Carefully choose your date and time

You won’t get attendees if they have a conflicting activity scheduled for the same time as your seminar. Always check for any events that might conflict with your seminar date. Holidays, sporting events, community happenings—even popular TV shows—can derail your plans.

Also, some days of the week are proven better for attendance than others. Mid-week and Saturdays are fine. Friday events, however, are not well attended because people are more interested in relaxing and entertaining at the end of the work week. And everyone knows people love to hate Mondays. Our Texas advisor got it half-right when he scheduled seminars on Monday and Thursday.

“I always tell people never do seminars on Mondays,” says Jobie Summer, CFP, an advisor consultant in Honolulu. “On Monday you should be following up on RSVPs for seminars in the next few days.”

Our Texas advisor chose to schedule both of his seminars in the evening. That might work for some attendees, but it won’t for others. Picking an easy time of day can be complicated when you are targeting a baby-boomer audience. With birth dates ranging from 1946 to 1964, your prospects are anywhere from their mid-40s to their mid-60s.

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“When I’m working with retirees, or people who are 60+, I always do it when it’s light outside to get them to drive to the location,” says Summer. “Business owners in their 40s and 50s want to come to an after-work happy hour, but for my retirees I do a 3:30 p.m. seminar with food afterward.”

Try offering two seminars at different times. Hold one for the after-work crowd and another in the early afternoon for those who don’t like to venture out after dark.

## **2. Present the seminar as a special client event**

The “Savvy Social Security Planning for Boomers” seminar was created as a service offering for clients and their friends and families. Our Texas advisor opted to invite a few clients but mostly went for a broader public approach and even invited some estate-planning attorneys and human resource managers.

Marketing your seminar to your clients as a gesture of appreciation will get attention quicker, says Summers. Use it to thank clients for their business, and then invite them to bring a friend.

“You’re saying, ‘Thank you so much for being a client. I really appreciate you, and I want to make sure you and your friends understand how Social Security works,’” says Summer.

The appreciation approach is a core part of the marketing plan for the Center of Financial Planning in Southfield, Mich. The organization is well established in the community, and it relies mainly on referrals from its high-net-worth clients for new prospects. So the management is constantly developing ways to keep in touch with those valued clients.

“This [Social Security seminar] was from our firm to our clients primarily as an educational tool, but it was also a marketing effort,” says Vicki McLellan, CFP and consultant for the firm. “Everything we do is marketing to the extent that we are servicing, educating, informing, and providing assistance for our clients.”

From the company’s proprietary database, seminar planners culled the names of top-tier clients in their 50s and 60s who were not retired and were not taking Social Security. Seminar invitations were sent via e-mail, and RSVPs were requested. E-mail marketing tools by Constant Contact helped the team track responses, so they knew to expect about 80 attendants. “Clients know from past seminars they’ll get good information, and they come,” says McLellan.

## **3. Be a stickler about RSVPs and reminders**

Asking for and keeping track of RSVPs is the best way to ensure you won’t be left standing in an empty room. An RSVP and follow-up plan would have made a difference for our Texas advisor. He received three reservations, but he admits that he did not call or e-mail any reminders.

“Always ask for RSVPs when working in that retirement age group, as they’re used to being respectful,” says Summer. “Sometimes they wait until the last minute, but they do it.”

Or you can set the hook for a response. Sally Ng, a CFP and retirement planning specialist from Walnut Creek, Calif., leaves key information out of the invitation. Her seminars require access codes because she holds them in her office on Saturday mornings, when everything is locked.

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"In the invitations, I say, 'Please RSVP and you will get instructions for access to the parking lot and the building,'" says Ng. "I have to have an RSVP."

If you're also targeting local business professionals and their clients, don't wait for a response to your invitation. Follow up with phone calls to establish or strengthen relationships.

"You send out the letter as an excuse to call," says Summer. "I've sent out DVDs on long-term care or 401(k)s with popcorn. When I call them, they say, 'Oh you're the one who sent the popcorn—thank you.' They remember me, so I can schedule the appointment, but it is so rare for them to initiate the call, so you need to be proactive."

## 4. Exclusively emphasize education

There is a high level of skepticism among people who have attended seminars only to experience a sales pitch disguised as a learning event. An educational seminar is for sharing information, not selling, so make sure your message is clear.

As noted above, McLellan's firm uses the educational event as a marketing tool. Ng, too, says she always promotes her Social Security seminars as educational.

"This [seminar] works because I'm doing the presentation and I am bonding with the audience, not some vendor-sponsored speaker," says Ng. "I'm not selling anything, not even my services."

She sends out her e-mail invitations one month before the event. Two weeks prior she'll send a follow-up e-mail with the building instructions and a reminder. By that time she'll even have RSVPs through client referrals.

Peter D. Murphy, a retirement and estate-planning specialist and American Prosperity Group franchisee in Santa Fe, N.M., was struggling to get exposure in his community. What worked for franchisees in the East, such as dinners and lunch-and-learns, was not working in the West. He felt the stigma of sales was killing participation.

"It's also a very referral-based, networking community," says Murphy. "So we've had issues with our advertising and running our workshops."

To get beyond the "salesman" reputation, Murphy teamed up with a nonprofit educational speakers' bureau, the Society for Financial Awareness (SOFA). The SOFA rule is that speakers can't pitch products during their free financial seminars, although they are encouraged to offer free personal consultations.

Through SOFA, Murphy promoted the Social Security seminar in local newspapers in Santa Fe and Taos. Each advertisement included an RSVP e-mail contact and phone number. He was astounded at the success.

"I had people come who didn't even sign up. I had one woman call and complain that I wasn't offering it enough. I got an ovation in two of the presentations, and everyone who signed up for consultations came—not one no-show," says Murphy. "These are things I had never experienced before."

Murphy's success prompted him to immediately schedule two more months of seminars. He's confident that the ensuing consultations will generate business income. "Taking all the sales out of it, I felt, had the biggest impact," he says.

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## 5. Follow up after the seminar

After the seminar, have people fill out a short survey on what they liked, didn't like, and whether they'd like to attend future events. Ng uses her four-question survey to ask for referrals, too. It generates leads and gives her another opportunity to reach out to clients.

Within 24 hours of your seminar, send a note to each participant. Thank them for coming, and highlight some key facts from your seminar. If you had new attendees due to a client referral, be sure to send the client an additional thank-you note.

## Persistence pays off

For your next seminar, develop a plan to make sure you cover the basic steps like choosing good dates and times, tracking RSVPs and reminders, and following up after the event. Market your seminar to your own clients first; a good presentation will generate referrals for future workshops. Trial and error will help you learn what works best in your market. It may take some extra effort, but you will gradually build recognition in your community.

## What's working comparison

Here's a comparison chart that reveals what the Texas advisor did and how it differed from those who found success.

Bringing In a Seminar Audience: What's Working				
	Seminar host: Texas advisor	Seminar host: Peter Murphy Sante Fe, N.M.	Seminar host: Sally Ng, CFP Walnut Creek, Calif.	Seminar host: Vicki McLellan Southfield, Mich.
<b>How was event promoted?</b>	Educational Seminar: "Savvy Social Security Planning for Boomers"	Educational Seminar: "Savvy Social Security Planning for Boomers"	Client Education Seminar: "Savvy Social Security Planning for Boomers" (Invite a friend!)	Client Education Seminar: "Savvy Social Security Planning for Boomers" (Invite a friend!)
<b>Invited clients</b>	Some	No	All	Top-tier only
<b>Invited general public</b>	Yes	Yes, but only through SOFA, an established nonprofit speakers' bureau	No; client referrals only	No; client referrals only
<b>Invited professionals</b>	Yes. Estate-planning attorneys and their clients Human resources managers	No	No	No

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## Bringing In a Seminar Audience: What's Working

	<b>Seminar host: Texas advisor</b>	<b>Seminar host: Peter Murphy Sante Fe, N.M.</b>	<b>Seminar host: Sally Ng, CFP Walnut Creek, Calif.</b>	<b>Seminar host: Vicki McLellan Southfield, Mich.</b>
<b>Invitation method</b>	Newspaper ads and print invitations	Newspaper ads and inserts	E-mail	E-mail
<b>Used RSVP</b>	Yes, recommended	Yes, required	Yes, required for instructions on accessing building for seminar	Yes, required
<b>Sent follow-up reminders after invitation</b>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Attendance re-sults</b>	No attendees	10 per session	8-16 per session (16=max. capacity)	60-80

Source: Horseshmouth

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