



# Selling Through Seminars

*How seminars can help your business*

*By Greg Wittstock, Founder and CEO of Aquascape, Inc.*

One of the biggest reasons Aquascape, Inc. went from being a mere twinkle in my eye, to a leader in the water gardening industry is marketing strategy. In fact, Aquascape is a marketing machine. Sure, we have quality water gardening products on the market, but what good would that be if we didn't know how to market to potential and existing customers? In order to turn an already successful mail order business into something bigger, we had to promote the company and get noticed.

## **Help Your Customers Help You**

By educating our customers, we help them sell more, and therefore they buy more from us. Since it's such a simple equation, we're not quite sure why more people don't do it. We can't even begin to stress the importance of selling through seminars, whether the venue is at a local garden club meeting or at your very own store. Seminars offer something even better than your products ... seminars offer knowledge.

## **Chris Wilson Shares *His* Knowledge**

Chris Wilson, Aquascape's own seminar guru, has toured the country giving the Growing Your Water Feature Seminars to contractors and retailers just like you. Here are some important tips Chris has picked up during his seminars:

***Have captive audiences*** – People coming and going during your seminar can be a little distracting. Pre-registering attendees so you know how many people are coming will make the talk a little more structured. If it's an in-store seminar and you can't avoid having people shuffling in and out during your presentation, make sure you have written material available so you don't have to keep stopping and reiterating what you're talking about.

***Know your material*** – Nothing is worse than a speaker stumbling around for the right words. If you know what you are talking about, you can lead yourself into your next topic or slide, keeping the presentation rolling and retaining the audience's attention.

***You're the expert*** – Understand that you know more about ponds than anyone else in that room. Make sure your presentation is geared toward the learning curve of your audience. Clue in to the expressions on their faces. If they look quizzical, take that as a cue to do some more explaining. Also, make sure that your seminar doesn't turn into a sales pitch. Pick a subject that addresses the customers' needs – and steer clear of sounding like an infomercial.

***Repeat all questions*** – Even if it seemed as though the person asking the question spoke loudly enough, chances are they didn't. Before you answer the question, repeat it so that the people in the back of the room can hear it. It's better to be loud than have people in the back row wondering what question was asked.

***Break it up*** – If you are giving a long, involved seminar, make sure you give the audience a few breaks. People always listen better when they are comfortable, and what's comfortable about sitting in a chair for six hours straight? Wake them up with a coffee break, or offer pop and cookies. This also gives them a great chance to ask you a question they didn't want to ask during the seminar.

***No question is dumb*** – Chances are if a person does approach you during a break with a question, they may feel it's dumb or that everyone else probably knows the answer already. Let them know that no question is dumb, and answer it. Also, bring up the same question when you continue so that everyone can be aware of the answer. *(continued)*

**Stay on task** – Sometimes a customer will get ahead of you, which is great because that means the wheels are turning in their heads and they are really thinking. If they ask a question that you will be covering later in the seminar, tell them you will be addressing the subject soon and ask them to please hold the question until that topic comes along.

**Introductions are key** – Start off the morning right, with an introduction and an explanation of what you do and why you are qualified to talk about the subject at hand. It's also helpful to give a brief outline of what you will be covering in the presentation, so they can get a feel for the direction of the seminar. Also, don't forget to thank whoever is responsible for having you if you've been invited somewhere to speak.

**Set a goal** – There's a reason why you are doing the seminar, so make sure you give the audience your goal at the beginning of the presentation. You want to have them walk out of that seminar with the knowledge to do something.

**Be comfortable** – If you have a fear of public speaking, try to focus on why you're there – to impart wisdom. Make sure you have water with you. Even if you don't get parched during the presentation, taking a drink of water gives you a break and can help you make a smooth transition to another topic. Also, don't be afraid to bring have notes on hand, whether it's a sheet of paper with an outline, or an index card with a few key words.

Chris also has a few other helpful hints about your appearance during the presentation. He suggests that you steer clear of gum or any other kind of candy while speaking. It can muffle your voice, and the audience will concentrate too much on your mouth and not as much on what you're saying. Also, don't have any pens or other objects that you might fiddle with – they'll distract your audience and may even end up distracting you. Finally, make sure you move around up there so that the audience's eyes aren't fixated on one spot – variety is key to keeping your audience's attention.

### **Do the Legwork**

Of course, there are always outside factors that have absolutely nothing to do with your actual presentation figuring into the equation. Along these lines, there are two very important pieces to the successful seminar puzzle – advertising and follow-up. You'll need to advertise, send out letters to your customers, and find any other way to get the word out that your seminar is taking place (i.e. direct mail, telemarketing, in-store flyers).

Also, it's important to follow-up with your customers after the seminar to see what they liked about it, what they didn't like about it, what they would like to see covered in the future, as well as any other comments they may have. Following up is also a great way to keep your name in front of your customer's face, and it may remind them to come to you the next time they need product.

### **To Charge or Not to Charge**

Should you charge for your seminar? Well, there are a number of factors that figure into that decision. First of all, what are you talking about? Is it knowledge that people would find valuable enough to pay for? The last thing you would want a customer to do is walk out of the store saying, "I paid for *that*?!" Another consideration is how long the presentation is going to last. If your presentation is long and involved, you may want to charge, at least so that you can be assured people will show up. You could charge them to hold their spot and if they show up, you could refund their money or use it toward an in-store purchase – this guarantees your audience shows up on seminar day.

### **Offer an Incentive**

With all of the deals available in the marketplace, your customers are going to want to take away something from your seminar other than just knowledge – especially if they paid to attend. You can give away shirts or some other small gift, or you can offer a percentage off of certain products in your store.

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## **What Seminars Can Do For You**

Seminars may be helpful to a wholesale company like Aquascape, but what can it do for retailers and contractors? First of all, it promotes your business. Second, it shows the customer how knowledgeable you are and, in turn, earns their trust in your business and your products or services. Finally, seminars educate customers on how to make wise buying decisions and urge them to buy your products and services.

Remember, a seminar is only effective if people come away with some knowledge. It has to be the right kind of seminar that really educates your customer. The bottom line is that research, planning, and organization are probably the most important parts of your seminar. So, prepare yourself, prepare your customers, and prepare to reap the rewards of this incredibly useful selling tool!

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