



KEEPING UP APPEARANCES: EVENTS THAT GO 'KA-CHING'

by Wendy Lewis

From trendy South Coast Plaza where the housewives of Orange County go to drop their cash and **Jessica Simpson** may be flogging her newest fragrance to Williams-Sonoma where every Food Network star worth his weight in pastry dough goes to plug cookbooks or pots and pans, nothing drums up retail excitement like personal appearances. Even Wal-Mart has gotten into the act with the launch of a new Health & Wellness series held every Saturday and Sunday covering hot topics in health care, weight loss and fitness.

As a longtime veteran of the event circuit, I know firsthand the countless hours and angst that go into planning customer events that make the registers ring. I have appeared at beauty retailers Nordstrom, Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, House of Fraser, Harvey Nichols, and Boots as well as high-end medspas and salons like Anushka Spa, Salon & Cosmedical Centre, Georgette Klinger and Elizabeth Arden Red Door. The challenge is to choose a format that is fresh and memorable and to make it fun.

In-store makeover events that are all about pushing product are old news. To make an event special, it needs to be multi-factorial, educational, and above all, entertaining. Adding a little humor never hurts either. At Anushka Spa in CityPlace, West Palm Beach, we recently held a Saturday event marketed as "Bail Out Beauty Brunch" featuring tips for stretching your beauty budget without losing your looks. Each customer had a complementary skin evaluation with a medical Aesthetician, and left with a cool bag of customized travel-size samples of skincare and hair care brands.

Planning your event is like putting on a show. Visuals in the form of slides or videos, and/or live demonstrations or mini-treatments are popular. Skin and hair analysis clinics usually rate high, as well as expert guests who offer customers the opportunity for a personal consultation. The 'take away' has to be meaningful; something they can't get in every suburban strip mall. The theme should be seasonal, timely and wide enough to attract enough guests but not too wide so that it loses its identity.

Another deciding factor is to select the best location in the store to host a winning event. For example, although a private room in the European designer department may seem festive, there is a distinct logistical advantage to being on or at least near the beauty floor. Another pitfall I have experienced is not having enough staff on hand to answer questions about products or escort customers to the counter quickly enough so they don't wander off into the shoe sale. Light refreshments, although optional, tend to encourage guests to linger.

The theory that if you host it they will come does not fly either. To be successful and generate real sales at the register, events need to be marketed strategically to the target customer and early enough to create buzz. An RSVP by a specified date is de rigeur, as well as the ubiquitous 'Bring a Friend.' There is also an economy of scale that kicks in when you market a series of events at one time. To offset your costs and discourage what I call the "free coffee and cookie crowd," charging a nominal fee per ticket to be applied towards a beauty purchase on the day is reasonable in some circumstances. Another good option is to reward your VIP customers with a private event to make it more special.

Now, more than ever, consumers want information plus an escape from the stress of their 24/7 lifestyle. If you can attract them for just an hour, creative events that are well orchestrated can be a conduit to building lasting relationships with your customers and developing new ones. *BF*