

## Speaking of Speakers

### Choice Can Be the Difference in Event's Success

By **Pete Tinsley, CAE**

**F**inding just the right speaker for a corporate or association event is one of the more important responsibilities of an event planner. The decision to have a professional speaker should begin with a clear mission statement for the event. Is it to motivate? To inform? To inspire?

All functions related to the event should revolve around the mission statement. Therefore, development of it should be carefully considered and include all stakeholders. The mission statement will drive decisions in all areas of the event.

Finding a speaker is an easy process. Simply pick up the Yellow Pages and look under "speakers" and you'll have a list of all those who fancy themselves as having a message to meet your needs. Finding the right speaker, however, requires more work on the planner's part.

#### Speaker's rep or direct

Using a speaker's bureau or representative, or dealing directly with the desired speaker: what's the best approach? And how does one select the right bureau? The answer to both questions usually comes down to whom the planner has the most rapport with. Although many bureaus will specialize in a particular type or price range of speakers, most establish themselves as a resource for any and all speakers. Questions to ask a bureau: How do you set your fees – percentage of the speaker's fee or flat rate? Do you have a catalog or web site that lists your speakers? Do you have sample videos (or clips viewable on the web)?

Many speakers will only book through one of their designated bureaus while others will allow you to book direct. But don't let the savings of bypassing a bureau commission mislead you. The services provided by the bureau may well make it worthwhile to take that approach. Bureaus provide coordination, promotional materials and act as a liaison between the planner and speaker, all of which can save time and effort for the planner.

#### So many speakers, so little time

As you narrow your field of possible candidates, use these criteria to help make your decision: price, message and fit. Is the speaker within your budget? What is the speaker's core message? For example, a general business speaker may struggle if you are looking for someone to talk about the economy. Be very specific about the content you need and don't settle for someone who "sorta" meets your needs.

The same applies for the fit or the type of speaker that most aligns with your audience. You know your audience the best and the type of speaker who can reach them. Are they business-focused and perhaps looking for a straightforward, hard-hitting presentation? Or are they more social and therefore looking for content with lighter delivery? Match your speaker's style to your audience's profile.

#### Negotiating

There's the "asking" price and then there's the "taking" price. Everything is negotiable. If money is tight, check with the local convention and visitor's bureau or the sales contact for your meeting venue about groups that are in town over the same dates. You may have an opportunity to negotiate a "two-fer" by using the same speaker as another group.

Many speakers, when offered this opportunity (with enough advance notice), will be able to adjust their travel schedule. While you shouldn't expect to necessarily have a reduced speaker fee (though you should ask), sharing the travel expenses with the other group is a definite budget saver.

#### Speaker prep

Perhaps one of the most overlooked responsibilities of the planner is preparing

the speaker for your group. Good speakers will take the lead on this and conduct an interview and information gathering session so they can customize their presentation.

If the speaker doesn't take the lead to do this, then you must. It's important for the speaker to know the demographics of the audience – mixed gender? reason for attending? business background? – and the mission statement. As noted above, this needs to be clear and concise.

#### The show must go on

What's your plan if the speaker doesn't show for circumstances out of your control like weather related delays or illness. Your contract should cover the contingencies. Regardless of the contractual implications, the question for you as the planner is: What are you going to do to fill the void?

The time to answer that question is not when you get the call 24 hours before the show. Have your plan in advance and you'll sleep like a baby the night before the big day. (And no, that doesn't mean waking up every two hours crying and asking for your mommy!)

There's no shortage of resources for finding the right speaker for your next event. A good starting point can be the National Speakers Association ([www.nsaspeaker.org](http://www.nsaspeaker.org)). Also, asking for references from the speaker and then calling those references can give you insights. In short, use all your resources because finding the "right" speaker can make all the difference in your event.



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#### INFORMATION LINK

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