

On dealing successfully with a professional speaker

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Part 1 - Intro plus "Finding the Right Speaker"

(article 1 of 3 – 1330 words)



You're working on an event for a client. Amidst all the talk of food, lodging, and fanfare, one of the following comes up:

- 1) "We'll be needing a good keynote speaker on Topic X. Please make some recommendations and coordinate the details with the speaker."

OR

- 2) "We've invited a keynote speaker named Ms. Z. Here's her office number. Please coordinate the details with the speaker."

Yikes! One more thing to deal with! Okay, take a breath. We're going to make this easier for you here.

Even though there's less work in the latter situation because the selection process is resolved, coordinating with a speaker is as fine an art as managing the wait staff or the décor. It only takes one little problem to make the speaker look bad (whether it's his/her fault or not) and drain the energy of your event. When the speaker comes off well, the whole meeting seems to be better. Your professional preparedness can head off surprises that perhaps the speaker should have taken care of.

After years in the business on the speaker's side, I had an event planner recently confess that she didn't know *what* questions to ask me and was counting on my asking and telling her everything we'd need to be prepared. I appreciated her honesty and shared with her some of the tricks and techniques that would help her – both with me and the next speaker she deals with (who might not be as prepared). I'd like to share them with you now to help you look good in the future.

Let's break down the task of dealing with a professional speaker into its three steps:

- a) How to find quality speakers on the topic of interest
- b) How to interview and select a speaker
- c) How to coordinate the event with him/her

And with all due respect to my numerous female colleagues, I'll be using "he" and "him" in this article for the factor of simplicity.

a) FINDING THE RIGHT SPEAKER



Before the internet, it was almost impossible to find quality professional speakers *without* the help of a **Speakers Bureau**. These companies develop relationships with a number of speakers on a variety of topics, hoping to have all bases covered for your call.

Speakers Bureaus still exist and are happy to provide this service to you, but you should familiarize yourself with the pros and cons of using them.

ADVANTAGES TO USING A SPEAKERS BUREAU:

- ▶ Quite simply, bureaus know a lot of professional speakers and are happy to be of service.
- ▶ Bureaus will not refer someone to you who has burned them in the past. This degree of screening is almost assurance of getting someone of quality who is reliable.
- ▶ It usually costs nothing for an event planner to use a bureau's services. The speaker pays a large commission to the bureau (25-30% is most typical) for the referral. If a bureau tries to charge you for their services, call another!
- ▶ If you have a large budget or you need a celebrity, a bureau might very well be a good way to book the big names. Some of the biggest names, in fact, will *only* book through bureaus so that they don't have to deal with direct calls.
- ▶ Speakers bureaus are in the phone book and you can start the process quickly.

ADVANTAGES TO FINDING A SPEAKER YOURSELF:

- ▶ Bureaus will rarely let you talk to a speaker or look at his website before you sign the contract – and often even after that! They are concerned that you will try to get away with contacting them directly, either now or in the future. This can be frustrating because you lose both the comfort of the personal connection *and* the advantage of hearing the program being described by the person who knows it best. While bureaus often do a good job of describing a program, I know that no one can explain my programs better than I can...nor will the two paragraphs on their site about me tell you as much as my whole website does.
- ▶ Bureaus are in business to make money on percentage. Therefore, it behooves them to only promote highly paid speakers. Sometimes, this might be fine for you; at other times, you might miss out on a quality speaker who would have been in your smaller budget. Most bureaus turn down speakers whose fees aren't "worth their time" for their percentage, so you don't get access to them.
- ▶ Bureaus use who they know. It can be very hard for a speaker, even if very competent, to get a foot in the door. You may not get access to the perfect speaker for you whose video is one of the hundreds that get thrown away unwatched.
- ▶ There are great bureaus and not-so-great ones, so you'll need to shop for a good fit with the right bureau and *then* find the right speaker. Just because they have access to great speakers doesn't mean they are a great bureau.

- ▶ Speakers are happier to take direct clients because they don't have to pay commission. This could affect both their willingness and ability to be flexible in meeting your needs as they draw up the contracts themselves. Bureaus may put restrictions in the contract that limit what the speaker can and will do with you.
- ▶ Bureaus may not know the *local* market of your meeting. You may be encouraged to use the person they love who is six hours away. While there is nothing wrong with flying the right speaker in for an event, a local person is sometimes desirable because housing, travel expenses, delayed flights, and familiarity with the geographical area are never an issue. Plus, you may want to take advantage of his other local services afterward, if you are impressed!

Nowadays, it's much easier than it used to be to find your own affordable, quality speakers on the topic of your liking without having to use a bureau. Here are a few ideas on this:

HOW TO FIND A SPEAKER YOURSELF:

The internet certainly makes it easy to enter a phrase like "Atlanta professional speaker diversity" or "motivational speaker San Diego" to see some of the local talent. Often, you can get a good sense from his website's content, testimonials, and client lists if this is someone you want to talk to.

If you want a head start on finding experienced people with a good reputation without the contact limitations you'll find with bureaus, a great way to aim yourself toward those individuals is through the **National Speakers Association (NSA)**. This organization pre-qualifies its potential members by checking out their references and experience level. One cannot just send a check to NSA to join; many would-be members spend years attempting to meet their tough professional membership qualifications.

To search for a speaker on a topic, use the "Find a Speaker" page at www.NSAspeaker.org. You can limit the search to a given city or search that whole national database. What's especially nice about this is that NSA's site will usually give you a link right to the speaker's own site for more details, contact info, and sometimes even streaming video.

There is also an accountability issue for NSA member. NSA members know that NSA will investigate any complaints from a meeting planner and the speaker could lose his valued membership if complaints are substantiated. You wouldn't want to use a dentist who wasn't ADA approved; it's the same sort of thing.

Also, keep an ear open for speaker referral groups. Like many business networking groups out there where there is only one person accepted per topic, speaker referral groups speaker referral groups sometimes do this locally. This puts the pressure on the group to only accept those whom they have seen in action and feel will represent the group well. A good example is the [Speaker Source of San Diego](#) who have a number of speakers (from wine to humor to sales marketing) who certainly *will* travel, but prefer to serve events in their area, taking the pressure off you to transport and house them. And a local speaker never misses the flight to your event!

In the next part, we'll look at (b) how to interview and select the right speaker for your group and finally (c) how to successfully coordinate the event with him/her.

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