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DIFFERENT IDEAS TO ACCELERATE
EXECUTIVE OUTCOMES



Alas, the highest rated item was the catering...

10 Common mistakes when hiring a key note speaker for your next business conference.

By Paul W.P. Rulkens

Your boss just gave you the assignment to organize the next global business conference of your thriving company. Now what?

Apart from venue, logistics, meals, drinks, banners, invitations, etc., your thoughts will probably quickly go to the backbone of your event: the speakers. How to find an excellent speaker and

even more important: how to ensure that your boss still wants to speak to you after your carefully selected speaker has done his or her speech.

Finding and hiring a powerful speaker for your next business event can be a daunting task. The risk of having a speaker which ruins the day is a major concern for

every organization.

Fortunately, if we learn from the most common mistakes when hiring a speaker, this concern will not only evaporate, but your event will have the potential to turn into an almost guaranteed success.

What we have found is that the success of any speaker in a business event is highly predictable, simply by

becoming aware of the major pitfalls which occur in the process of finding, selecting and hiring a speaker.

In this position paper we will therefore not only explore the most common mistakes in this process, but also describe how to avoid those.

Mistake 1: Not define what success of the business conference looks like

Your business event has a purpose. Many times, we lose sight of this purpose while going all Gung-ho on the nuts and bolts of the event. If we do not meet the purpose of the business event, we have failed.

We can avoid this trap by first identifying the person who determines what success of the event would look like. This is the owner of the event and he or she is usually responsible for the investment necessary to make the event happen. Then ask him or her three questions:

'The ego centered speaker has fallen in love with his or her story, instead of falling in love with his or her client.'

1. What do you want the audience to know?
2. How do you want the audience to feel?
3. What do you want the audience to do?

This is a powerful sequence and is called know-feel-do. Once the answers to these questions are clear,



you can move to the next stage of your quest: finding a speaker

Mistake 2. Not being clear about the outcome of the speaker's presentation.

Different speakers can generate different outcomes. Three common types of speakers are:

- An After Dinner speaker to generate fun and enthusiasm.
- A Master of Ceremonies to glue the entire business event together.
- A Key Note speaker to improve the condition of the audience, usually by inspiring the listeners, transfer of skills and motivating people to take action.

Picking a speaker skilled in only one outcome (for instance delivering a keynote) to create another outcome (after dinner speaking to a tipsy and rowdy crowd) is a recipe for disaster. As Mark Twain once said: 'Don't try to teach the pigs to whistle. They can't...and it annoys the pigs.'

Mistake 3. Hire an Ego centered speaker

An ego centered speaker's aim is to use the stage as a platform to invoke admiration and other positive feelings from the audience towards the speaker. They usually have 'a story' which in the end is designed as a vehicle to boost the speaker's ego. The problem is that 'the story' often has the effect of a can of Red Bull on the audience: quickly uplifting, yet leaving a sluggish and disappointing feeling when the effects wear off. The ego centered speaker has fallen in love with his or her story, instead of falling in love with his or her client.

You can recognize ego centered speakers by their need to squeeze their 'story' in, regardless whether or not the story will help to meet the business meeting objectives.

A key question to ask any business speaker is: 'How is the audience better off, after you have left the stage?': if the answer is only 'they will love my story,' run for the hills...

As a reminder: Be careful with purely 'motivational speakers': every speaker better has to be motivational. What counts for a key

note speaker, however, is lasting positive audience impact.

Mistake 4: Ignore the role of the speaker in meeting the owner’s objectives

A professional speaker aims to achieve the objectives of the meeting owner: For a key note speaker, this means that the speech content is thought provoking, useful and the audience is better off after the speaker has left the room. The audience does not necessarily have to give the speaker a high rating afterwards: if people are taken out of their comfort zone during the speech, there will be no standing ovations and the evaluation scores might be all over the place. What is important though is that the meeting owner is satisfied: he or she is the person who has invested in the conference in the first place.

Always make sure that speakers are very clear on how their talk will address the know-feel-do objectives of the business conference. Outstanding speakers will even work with you by giving ideas and suggestions for the rest of the program.

Mistake 5. No follow up strategy

Lasting change will not happen with a stand-alone keynote, seminar or workshop. A professional key note speaker will therefore provide you with options for follow up on how to make any changes stick. Follow up can come in many forms: workshops for smaller groups after the talk, specific consultant hours reserved for participants, newsletters, books, articles, etc. Make sure that your plan incorporates a clear follow-up strategy after the speech.

Mistake 6. Don’t ask for references

There are several ways to find a business speaker: through speaker bureaus, speaker associations, referral, etc. A referral of a business peer is the lowest risk option to find a good speaker.

If you have found a speaker which might fit your business conference, always ask for references and contact these people to get an independent view of the speaker's quality: this will prevent nasty surprises. Be bold and make sure to ask: 'Would you hire this speaker again in the future?'

Also, the quality and source of the references is important: it should come from a peer in business (and no: uncle Steven's glowing endorsement of the dazzling speaking qualities of his nephew does not count).

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Mistake 7: Hire the cheapest speaker

No one has ever asked for the cheapest brain surgeon. You will get what you pay for and this is true for professional speakers as well. A good speaker is the most important investment of your business conference. If a speakers' fee sounds high, keep in mind that many event organizers still invest more in the quality of their catering than in their speakers. Set the right priorities and find the budget to get the highest quality speaker you can afford.

From the trenches: talks gone wrong

‘After extensive briefing, we were convinced that our speaker would meet our objectives and deliver the message which would be enforced by our key executives later in the program. We reviewed his presentation and we believed everything was set for success.

Then the speech started. The key note speaker was 15 minutes into his talk, when he asked to run a short video: we did not screen this part and in hindsight we wish we had. The video was littered with curses and profanity and some people in the international audience started to visibly become uncomfortable. One of our executives stepped in, asked the video to be stopped and apologized to the audience.

Visibly shaken, the speaker continued, yet it was clear he had lost the audience. He finished his talk as fast as possible and quickly left the conference.

This was an important lesson to us: check the entire content and follow up on references to avoid any surprises.

Interesting detail: the speaker was hired as an expert on cultural differences...’



Mistake 8: Focus on lowering the fee

A good speaker will carry a significant fee. It is tempting to negotiate and to try to bring the fee down. Avoid this urge and try to increase the speaker's value instead. If you have chosen the perfect speaker for your event, he or she will create much more value with a very limited time investment afterwards. Focus on extending the follow up (coaching hours, workshops, articles, etc) which the speaker can provide for within the constraints of his or her fee. This is especially relevant for key note speakers and seminar or workshop leaders. Usually speakers will love the opportunity to use their skills to give back even more value while being paid appropriately.

Mistake 9: Getting the speaker in and out, quickly

Some speakers are like seagulls: they sweep in, shower the audience with their verbal brilliance and get out as quickly as possible. Be careful with this attitude. Involve the

speaker in the design of the entire program and ensure that the speaker is a member of the audience in earlier parts of the conference: this will give him or her the opportunity to build on what has been said previously and limits possible embarrassment based on ignorance (retelling stories, inadvertently undermining key executives, etc.). Also, make sure that the speaker continues to be available after the speech: people love to discuss and interact with any speaker who has delivered a powerful talk.

Mistake 10: Hire a speaker, when you actually need something else

Sometimes your conference does not need an additional professional, high investment speaker. If, for instance, your speaker budget is very small, you will almost certainly be better off investing your money in improving the quality of the drinks and the snacks instead. In this case, choose a low cost alternative, such as:

- A forum discussions with panel members from the company or trade association
- Showing videos which are relevant for the audience (TED is a great resource)
- Workshops where smaller groups of participants discuss a topic and report back to the group

Under all circumstances, avoid the temptation of settling for a cheap and often mediocre speaker: your audience will be grateful to you.

Conclusion

A key note speaker has the potential to carry your business conference to great heights, or have participants run for the exits. The success of a professional speaker in your event is predictable though. By avoiding these 10 common mistakes in hiring a speaker, you have set yourself up to create an event which is remarkable, not only in the eyes of the audience, but also in the eyes of the event owner. Provided, of course, that the catering is topnotch...

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