



Selecting the Perfect Speaker

When it comes to finding the right keynote for your event, working with an agency helps guarantee a great outcome

You've got the dates set, the venue reserved and the word out about your upcoming event. Now, it's time to settle on a keynote speaker. Where do you start? Who do you turn to? And how do you make sure you get just the right person to the podium?

As anyone who's attended a conference knows, when you sign on the right individual, you can very well turn a good event into a downright amazing one.

"A great keynote speaker plays an essential role in the success of an event," says Theresa Beenken, Vice-President of the National Speakers Bureau (NSB), the country's original speakers' agency, "Especially when attendees are hoping to come away with some new ideas, some education and some new ways of looking at things."

To help sign on the right individual, associations often turn

to agencies like the NSB, which just recently celebrated its 35th anniversary. With a strong history behind them, NSB staff are well positioned to advise associations on the perfect keynote, one that has both drawing power and delivers within budget.

"Speakers are a draw to help ensure attendance and to help people feel that they are going to get a good balance for the money they are investing to come to the conference," says Beenken. "There should be a ripple effect from that. Attendees are excited about seeing who's going to be there and then they go back to their offices and their families and share that."

OUTSOURCING & EDUCATION

It used to be that an association could rely on a couple of volunteers, a blackboard and a few desks to handle all their education needs. Failing that, a good postal system to send out lessons and receive completed tests usually did the trick.

Well, in this electronic age it's not quite so simple. And it's a good thing, because the razor-sharp world of information technology has allowed associations to teach and educate their members in ways they could once only dream of. That's so long as they outsource some of the technical help.

"Twenty years ago, you had to actually go somewhere (to learn). Now, you can reach a much larger spectrum of people if you use the technology that's out there," says Josette Forde, Director, Chapter Relations & Education, at the Canadian Society of Association Executives (CSAE).

By outsourcing the technology component of their education to an outside firm, associations can upload lessons and tests online, as well hold live lectures, webinars and host various chat rooms. There is also software to help automatically correct tests and grade participants.

Regardless of where your members are located, they can learn via the Internet, and often at their own pace. This, says Forde, makes education far more appealing to any group's members. "People learn in a variety of ways," she says. "Using the available technology to offer your education in different formats is important."

CSAE holds live online seminars from its conferences, primarily as audio recordings synchronized to PowerPoint presentations. For its professional certification program, CAE® (Certified Association Executive) Program, comprised of five courses and an exam, members can...do all their learning online and also take part in a discussion forum. Most recently, the association launched live virtual lessons, which are optional because not everyone can take the time to attend.

"It's also about being realistic about people's schedules and budgets," says Forde. "Not everyone can afford to get on a plane to attend a conference. You need to be able to offer something in an electronic format as well, whether it's a pre-recorded session or whether you try to hold a live online session."

A helping hand

Why work with an agency? For starters, it allows an association to find just the right individual, including up and coming names that have yet to be discovered by the masses. According to Kelly MacDonald, partner and senior vice president at Speakers' Spotlight, another Canadian agency, pulling in people when they're on the cusp of stardom is a great

strategy. "Once somebody's name is known, they're not leading edge anymore," she says.

Nonetheless, there are those associations that want the celebrity name – the VIP speaker who not only gives an incredible performance, but can also draw in sky-high numbers of attendees from their star power alone. These are the David Suzukis of the speaking circuit and they come at a steep

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five-figure price.

The cost of signing on a paid Canadian speaker can range from an affordable \$4,000 all the way up to \$25,000, however most speakers fall in the \$7,000 to \$10,000 bracket, says Beenken, with the likes of CBC veteran Rex Murphy and astronaut Dave Williams at the higher end of this range.

Kelly MacDonald of Speakers' Spotlight suggests associations can bring in a well-known, more expensive speaker one year, while easing up for the next year or two. "We will often sign on a 'name' once and then ride on that for a while, making sure that the next, lesser-known speaker is amazing," she says. "That way association members start to trust you. They

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It takes a special kind of person to keep people entertained and to keep their focus. Professional speakers can do that. You can pretty much be assured that a paid speaker is going to bring that value.

will think, “if this association signed on this speaker then he or she is going to be great because their speakers are always great.”

Obviously, vital to a successful outcome is finding the ideal ‘match’ and agencies work closely with associations to pin down the best prospect. Says Beenken: “We go through a questioning process about the theme of the event, what kind of people are in the audience, what they are hoping the speaker will bring, what kind of budget, where is the event going to be held, so that we can help narrow down some of the best recommendations.”

Given that agencies have heard most of the speakers out there, they are well positioned to provide the inside expertise that association staff often lack. They can also suggest which speakers are best suited to start off an event and which ones are better for post-dinner talks.

As well, they coordinate with the speaker to make sure that the information needs of the association will be met. When Globe and Mail columnist Jeffrey Simpson spoke at an event for members of the Canadian Meat Council, for instance, he zeroed right in on trade regulations and other issues of interest to the group.

Working with an agency

Sherry Watson of the Canadian Real Estate Association (CREA), has regularly worked with an agency in lining up speakers for CREA’s events. “They’re the experts,” she says. “Many times I will call my (contact) at the agency and say, ‘Okay, this is our goal. Who do you have out there who can meet our goal?’”

CREA’s keynote presentations often touch on the question of leadership – a relevant topic for the event’s attendees, primarily real estate board and association executives. The

agency not only supplies a list of possible names, but also details what they can talk about and what sort of presentations they generally give. “The agency has used them (before) and has a lot more information on them than I could possibly get from booking them directly,” says Watson.

Sometimes, adds Watson, the agency will suggest she move into another direction, or alternatively, she may feel the agency’s list of possibilities needs to be tweaked to better meet her needs. In the end, it’s a working relationship that has evolved over the years and always results in a successful outcome.

“You get a lot of value for your money,” notes Watson. “It takes a special kind of person to keep people entertained and to keep their focus. Professional speakers can do that. You can pretty much be assured that a paid speaker is going to bring that value.”

“There’s nothing better than when you have the perfect idea (for a speaker),” says one of three major agencies in Canada handling paid speakers for events. “It could be someone who isn’t hugely known but who is an amazing speaker. You can sell that to an association and end up with a winner, and that is one of the best feelings in the world.” ^{CS&E}

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