

Living Life on the Edge

The ins and outs of hiring a speaker with whom you've never worked

By David Gouthro, CSP

Screening a potential speaker requires more than just name recognition and flawless delivery. What about a speaker who is not known to you but is an expert in a given field? How do you select a speaker to ensure you get the right one for your event?

I spoke with meeting professionals who hire speakers with fees ranging from under \$5,000 to \$100,000 and up. The following basic truths and recommendations are based on my interpretation of their experiences.

If you aren't crystal clear on what your client wants (expressed and unexpressed requirements), you'll have a tough time finding a "great" speaker for them. Great is relative to their needs.

A speaker with terrible platform skills can be a big hit if he or she delivers the desired results. On the other hand, the wrong speaker with great presentation skills can be a complete bust.

You don't always get exactly what you pay for. Low priced speakers can deliver fabulous results, and \$100k speakers can be a major disappointment.

"Once a good speaker" does not mean "always a good speaker." Like bread or jokes, speakers can get stale, too. And, anyone can have an off day.

A speaker's agent may not always be your best friend. Nothing beats personal observation of a potential speaker. Some speakers have radical personality changes when they get off stage. Usually not for the better!

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A popular author is not necessarily a great speaker. Sad, but true.

The "safe bet" may not be a good bet. People change. Speakers change. Audiences change.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONSIDER

Be clear about what your client really wants before starting your search for a speaker. They may have critical unexpressed desires that will influence the success or failure of your speaker. Is your client looking for someone who can deliver bragging rights, entertainment value, specific content expertise, generate organizational change, make people smile or a combination of the above? Be courageous and look beyond a speaker who has been well received in the past. Some perform magnificently over and over again and, as long as they continue to provide great value, keep using them. However, there are a few out there who haven't had a new idea, experience or story in years. If the speaker only talks about the book they wrote five years ago or the mountain they climbed in their 20s, look elsewhere. If your client wants a popular repeat, go for it; however, you may not be providing the greatest value possible.

Look for fresh faces. The TEDx organizer I interviewed has been seeking less well known (not household name) presenters. Their content expertise appeals to audiences who have heard the big names before and are looking for new ideas from the up and coming leading edge speakers.

If you are thinking of using a speaker you have no experience with (especially a high-priced one), connect with your speaker before deciding to book him or her. I realize this is a challenge. However, if you are blocked from

direct contact by an agent or bureau, insist this be part of your selection process.

All too often, the bigger the name, the fee, the brand recognition, etc., the more reluctance there is for a speaker (or their agent) to consider tailoring their message for a specific audience. If the greatest value your client gets from a speaker is to say "we had Speaker X," then a great deal of potential value has been lost.

Observe your potential speaker in person. Yes, it takes time. However, you get a much better sense of the "whole" person and what they may have to offer if you experience them both on the stage and off. A good meeting planner can recognize great talent almost immediately. I heard of one example where the owner of a bureau saw hidden talent in a \$4,000 speaker and was subsequently able to help that individual climb quickly into the \$20,000 range. Another speaker moved from \$7,000 to \$40,000 based on coaching received from a bureau executive. That couldn't have happened from simply watching promotional videos.

Solicit input from a trusted source whose opinion you value. Someone else who has direct experience with the unedited, unretouched, authentic version of a speaker is always better than YouTube. This could be a client, colleague or friend who has a proven ability to assess talent.

Grow your own! If you (or a trusted colleague) have identified a diamond in the rough, who is a bit too rough for your client, consider offering a helping hand (or at least a bit of well-intentioned advice) to provide some polish. Toastmasters is one route while Dale Carnegie programs have often been described as life changing. Perhaps the fastest way to help an emerging speaker grow rapidly is to recommend a personal speaking coach. One meeting organizer makes platform coaching available to all of her presenters prior to an annual conference. This has made a noticeable difference in the quality of their presentations, thus enhancing participants' overall event experience.

None of these suggestions are ironclad guarantees you will select a great speaker for your event; however they will increase the odds dramatically. Happy hunting! **Sol**