

TO BUREAU OR NOT TO BUREAU



There are many speaker bureaus and speaker managers across Canada. For this article, **David Gouthro, CSP**, spoke with Carol Brickenden of the Brickenden Speakers Bureau, Perry Goldsmith of the National Speakers Bureau, Karen Harris of cmi Speaker Management and Martin Perelmuter of Speakers Spotlight. “When should a meeting planner use the services of a speakers bureau or agent?” The answer appears to be *anytime, always and everywhere*.

That is the question

Speaker bureaus and managers cover a broad spectrum of geography and specialty. Large national bureaus, often with multiple office locations across the country cover a wide range of speakers and topics (such as the Brickenden Speakers Bureau, the National Speakers Bureau and Speakers Spotlight).

Specialty bureaus focus primarily on specific topic areas such as women’s issues, health, the environment, etc., while others primarily promote authors, (Penguin Canada Speakers Bureau). The fewest and smallest of the bureaus might have a specific geographic focus, such as the Speakers’ Bureau of Alberta. There are also speaker managers who exclusively represent a small number of speakers (such as cmi Speaker Management).

Some speakers are exclusive to one specific bureau (meaning you can only book through that bureau) while others are listed with multiple ones. In the vast majority of cases, the fee for a particular speaker is the same whether the booking was made through any of several bureaus with which the speaker is listed or if the speaker was contacted in person.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The four individuals that I interviewed have quite different businesses and business models, yet their answers were highly consistent.

When is it advisable for meeting planners to use a bureau rather than attempting to source speakers themselves?

Always. It’s hard to find any advantage to *not* using a bureau. Use of a reputable bureau can help meeting planners sleep easier because they know there’s someone on their team who is heavily invested in ensuring a good match between the event and the speaker(s). The bureau’s reputation depends on it.

Meeting planners are spending more time in meeting design these days. As a result, they have less time to look for speakers. A bureau saves them time by suggesting or vetting potential speakers who will help to meet the objectives of any particular meeting.

Sourcing speakers is a full-time job for a bureau. Using a bureau can be compared to using a full-service broker vs. a discount broker to make stock recommendations for your financial port-

folio. You get what you pay for, but you don’t pay extra for a speaker because you used a bureau.

Bureaus can often locate hard-to-find speakers through the connections they have established over many years sourcing new and/or unique talent to make an event sparkle.

If you haven’t decided on a speaker or a theme, the bureau can provide advice and recommendations for consideration.

Good bureaus invest a lot of time in following trends in business, programming and a variety of content areas, ensuring they are aware of hot topics and the hot speakers on those topics.

Because they know the speaking business and the speakers so well, bureaus can often suggest ways to derive more value from a particular speaker. For example, for the same fee, a bureau can often source a great keynote speaker who would also be willing to offer a concurrent workshop, too.

Ever had a speaker fail to show up because they were stopped at the border? Although they are not usually staffed with lawyers, bureaus have often acquired invaluable expertise in the

areas of immigration and international tax over their years in business.

If there is a problem with a speaker who has been hired for a meeting (illness, travel delay, etc.), a bureau has ready access to others who can step in to help at the last minute. The bureau is invested in the meeting planner's success and will do whatever possible to make their event a great one.

In general, bureaus turn down the vast majority of speakers who approach them. They want to make sure their speakers will provide a great client experience and maintain the bureau's reputation. This reduces the risk of a bad experience for the meeting planner.

Bureaus know the "whole" speaker, not just the speaker's YouTube clips. Sometimes, that may be the only information a meeting planner has to go on if they are seeking speakers on their own. Those clips may not be representative of an entire presentation. They may simply be a fabulous two-minute bit from a deadly dull and boring 60-minute keynote.

The bureaus are on a constant search for great new talent, including some as yet undiscovered gems who will provide great value to the right audience

Remember-the #1 job of a reputable bureau is to make the meeting planner a hero!

When might it not be useful to use a speaker bureau or agent?

If the meeting planner personally knows and/or has used a particular speaker before, has access to him or her, and is confident this speaker is the right one for the job, there may not be a need to seek out a bureau's expertise.

Another reason to not engage a bureau depends on whether a meeting is very technical in nature, requiring a speaker who is a paid employee of a specific company, industry or association.

Finally, you may wish to attempt to negotiate a lower fee by contacting a speaker directly. The vast majority of speakers listed with a bureau have the same fee, regardless of whether they are approached directly by a meeting plan-

ner or through a bureau. There is no additional cost for using a bureau and a speaker's fee has not been "inflated" as a result of having been listed with a bureau.

What is the most effective way for a meeting planner to work with a speaker representative/bureau?

The short answer – provide lots of information. Here is a sample of the questions a bureau will ask to enable them to make the best speaker recommendation(s) possible:

- What is the theme of the event?
- What is the makeup of the audience (demographics, roles, etc.)?
- What speakers have been used before and with what audience reaction or result?
- What are the desired outcomes of the meeting, conference or workshop?
- What is the budget or range set aside for a speaker (or speakers)?
- How long will the speaker be presenting?

- How will the effectiveness of the speaker be measured?
- Is the presentation to be educational, inspirational, simply entertaining or a combination of these?
- What are the organization's values and how important is it to understand them?
- Are there any organizational or industry-specific sensitivities to be aware of? There may be a desire to avoid them, or address them head on.
- What are the pain points/challenges the organization (or industry) is facing?
- What support can the bureau provide to help the meeting planner "sell" a recommended speaker for a particular engagement.
- Are there other people in the organization with whom it would be helpful to have a conversation?

Sometimes meeting planners are not able to answer all the questions. The more accurate the information, the better the bureau's recommendation will be. In addition to providing as much

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information to the bureau as possible, here are some tips on how a meeting planner can work most effectively with a bureau.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Err on the side of overdoing it. Do whatever it takes to build a two-way trusting relationship with the bureau. This will enable you to be as open and transparent as possible in providing the information required for a bureau to really go to bat for you.

Look at the bureau and its representatives as members of your team – partners, rather than simply order takers or suppliers. They want to bring as much value to you and your event as possible.

It may be best to work with one bureau at a time, rather than asking several to recommend speakers for the same event. A bureau will likely work much harder for you if they know they are the only one with which you're partnering. Some planners use a "spray and pray" approach on the misunder-

standing that bureaus work harder for them if there is competition to provide a speaker. If you do decide to engage multiple bureaus, consider letting the bureaus know you are doing so. Occasionally, several bureaus (who are unknowingly working for the same client) recommend the same speaker for the same engagement. This can get really awkward for the speaker, the bureaus and the client.

If you are happy with a bureau, stick with them for at least three or four years. The more they get to know your organization, the more value they can bring to the meeting planning table.

If you have asked a bureau to reserve a speaker for your event, please be reasonable in the length of the time period for the hold request. Firm it up as soon as possible, especially if you have chosen to go in a different direction. This is not only helpful for the bureau to know, but critical for the speaker as it has a direct impact on their ability to put food on their table.

Don't let money be the only factor in selecting a speaker. If a reputable bureau recommends a speaker beyond your initial budget range, it is because they feel it is the right choice based on all the information provided to them.

How can a meeting planner choose a bureau with which to work?

Just as anyone can call themselves a speaker by declaring themselves one, so too can a bureau come into being. Here are a few recommendations on selecting a bureau to partner with for your event.

Do your due diligence. Check out the bureau's reputation with your meeting planner colleagues to find out about their experience with particular bureaus. Good and bad news travels quickly in this industry. Keep your ear to the ground with respect to bureaus and the speakers they recommend. Check out the good and the not so good news. Both may be inaccurate!

Pay attention to how bureaus speak about their competition. This is a window into the character of the bureaus and their employees. Check out the bureau's reputation for fair business practices. Are they consistently fair, flexible and honourable in the way they work with their clients, speakers and industry partners?

Determine if the bureau is a member of IASB (International Association of Speakers Bureaus). The association has professional standards to which it holds its members accountable. Confirming membership in the IASB is one way to increase your confidence in the bureau with which you choose to work. That being stated, working with non-members can be rewarding, too, but more due diligence might be appropriate.

In the final analysis, the best way for a meeting planner to get the most value from working with a bureau is to build a relationship. This virtually guarantees that everyone in their organization will do their absolute best to ensure you get the best speaker(s) for your event. In so doing, everyone wins. **SOI**

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