

Picking the Perfect Speaker

How doing your homework stifles yawns and generates applause.

By LEE AIGES

This meeting has cost a fortune. Your fast-track managers arrived last night from all over the country. The kick-off speaker has been at the podium for a half-hour, taking a direction you don't recognize.

How did this happen?

Here's a primer, based on firsthand experience, to help you avert disaster. Whether you recruit speakers directly, delegate the process, or use the services of an outside resource, the same principles apply.

Laying the groundwork

Before you start looking for a speaker, ask yourself some key questions: Why do I want a speaker? What do I want the speaker to accomplish? What am I prepared to spend?

Sharply defined goals will focus your search, help you evaluate candidates, and

cuffed. When considering alternative themes, keep in mind your meeting's key topics. Think about how well speakers will fit in. Generic themes offer speakers more latitude. Resist the temptation to draw out goals by circulating around the office a list of speakers. This only creates confusion and gets you going in different directions. Instead, probe the decision maker for information. Once you've narrowed the field of subjects, your speaker search will be more directed and considerably easier.

Next, find out what you can afford. It makes no sense to undertake a speaker search without some spending parameters. Motivational speakers, for example, may charge as little as \$1,000 or as much as \$15,000. Without knowing your limits, you may pursue a high-priced speaker only to learn your management will not authorize a hefty fee—an embarrassment for you, your company, and the speaker.

Begin your search early and make the speaker an integral part of your program

keep you from going off base. Laying the groundwork includes several steps.

First, clear your goals with the key decision maker. Up-front agreement on purpose, topic, and budget will save wheel spinning and precious time. When you need a speaker, start the process by proposing three or four subject areas for consideration.

Keep the themes broad. People who spend weeks developing a very specific conference theme often end up hand-

You don't always have to spend a lot to get an effective speaker. But some situations generally will command higher price tags. Senior-level audiences may want someone with stature and blue-chip credentials. Programs for very large audiences require experienced speakers with special podium skills. And well-known personalities will trade on instant name recognition. Expect to pay extra for all these bonuses.

Don't let the speaker be an afterthought. A late search robs your event of coherence and significantly reduces your options. Begin your search early and make the

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speaker an integral part of your program. Too many meeting planners consider speakers after everything else is in place. Suddenly, a hole appears in the agenda and someone wants to plug it with a presentation of some sort.

Interviewing a speaker

If you can't see a speaker in action, the next best thing is a phone interview and reference check. An interview works better than relying solely on audition tapes because poor tapes can disqualify even the best speakers. You'll know you've found the right speaker when the person on the other end of the line makes you a real believer. You should come away excited and convinced the speaker will do an outstanding job.

Start off the interview by describing your needs, and be honest about them. Think about those needs as you cover these important considerations:

- Find out the speaker's favorite topics. If they don't match your needs, move on to the next candidate. Don't try to force-fit your objective simply because of a speaker's good reputation.

- Ask your speaker how he or she stands out from others in the same discipline. Look for a fresh perspective.

- Ask if the speaker will adapt material to your needs. Assure yourself you won't be getting a canned speech.

- Find out about presentation techniques. Reading from an outline is fine. But reading from a prepared script is the duller form of presentation.

- Finally, make it clear that you can't let your event be a selling platform. If you are considering a speaker from a service organization or consulting firm, determine if the speech's main focus is appropriate. Don't set up the audience for a long commercial pitch.

During the interview, you may hear

some things that send up caution flags. Be wary of speakers who ramble on the phone or who can't summarize their talk in a clear, persuasive manner. Watch out for too much emphasis on humor; jokes can overshadow content. You should also remember that no one can be an expert in everything. Speakers who offer a broad menu of specialties may lack sufficient depth.

A final caveat: Think twice before hiring speakers unwilling to provide references. The same goes for those who can't make time to arrive early for the conference or call in for a preconference briefing.

Briefing session

After you've selected a speaker, leave nothing to chance. A preparatory briefing session lets you and the speaker agree on content and expectations. The briefing can take place in person or over the phone,

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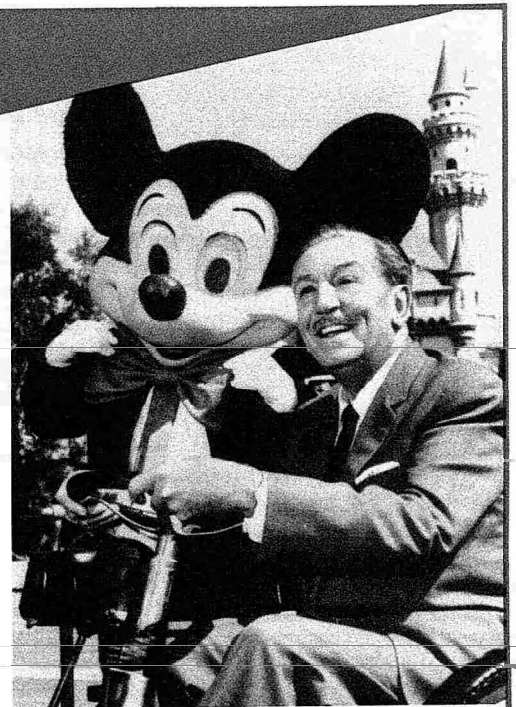
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but it must be thorough. Guarantee there will be no surprises.

Cover the message first. You and the speaker have to plot the presentation's course. Be very specific about the allotted time for the presentation. The rule of thumb: less is more. Agree on an overall outline, list the key points to be made, and agree on the impression the audience should receive. If you want your speaker to refrain from covering certain issues, state them clearly.

Remember that public speaking is a medium for showmanship. Pictures tell a story, so encourage the use of visuals. But keep it simple; lots of numbers or complicated graphs turn people off. Invite humor to enliven the message and real-world examples to make it more believable. Several examples are better than one, but don't overdo it. Long case histories can become boring.

The speaker will be grateful if you can

provide an accurate picture of your audience. Profile the participants and their morale, and describe what has worked well and poorly in the past.

The preconference briefing is also the time to take care of administrative details. If the program is to be interactive, find out what specific exercises, role plays, or other activities the speaker will include. Discuss any audiovisual requirements. If you'll be taping the talk for internal use, advise the speaker and get written consent—many speakers prohibit taping. Don't forget to request biographical information for introductory remarks.

Follow up the briefing session with a letter summarizing your agreements. Include a packet of information—annual report, the latest company newsletter, and a copy of the program agenda—to help acquaint the speaker. Ask him or her for ideas on how to improve the program. These people have enormous exposure to meetings

and have a good feel for what works and what doesn't. Finally, invite the speaker to join the session early. Most speakers appreciate the chance to pick up on your language and personalize their presentations.

People who consistently engage winning speakers generally do their homework. A good speaker will rivet the audience's attention and participants will go away saying, "I never knew that before!" The odds of that happening at your meetings increase if you start with complete, reliable information and know where you want it to lead.



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