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Achieving Balance

Speakers that strive to blend work and life

By Diane Goodman

Get up. Go to work. Come home. Eat. Sleep. Get up.

Sound familiar? While this may be a daily routine for much of the nation's workforce, it is not conducive to a well-balanced lifestyle – one that contributes to better health, better family lives, more time for creative endeavors, and more personal satisfaction.

In today's fast-paced work and home environment, more and more professionals are seeking ways to improve their lives by finding a better balance of work and "play." From turning off cell phones at home to minimizing hours worked overtime, people are realizing they need to carve time out to fulfill personal goals as well as professional ones.

With each meeting, companies have a wonderful opportunity to help attendees achieve balance in their lives. This can be done through the use of professional speakers who address issues such as how to balance work and "down time," better time management, better ways to handle or reduce stress in our lives, and learning about wellness or health issues that all affect job performance.

When companies invest in speakers of this nature, they are adding balance to the more informational-based meeting. For the most part, attendees, in turn, feel a greater sense of appreciation towards companies for bringing in helpful speakers. Additionally, this approach most likely will keep meeting participants more energetic, enthused, and attentive – which increases the return on any investment in a company meeting or conference. And, when balance is achieved in the workplace, productivity and job satisfaction increase as well – to the benefit of all.

Planners should consult with a speakers bureau to brainstorm the keynote speaker selection as well as different ways to utilize the speaker. Planners and the bureau should review the entire scope of the meeting, conference, or retreat, as the bureau needs to understand the whole meeting, the purpose, tone, role of speaker, time of day, if families are in attendance, what free time is scheduled, etc. From this, a bureau and/or a speaker may make recommendations to create a more balanced meeting. This could be anything from suggesting a speech topic, recommending the best time of day to speak, adding networking exercises or workshops to the mix, or having a speaker act as an MC for the whole meeting.

Speakers bureaus have been working with meeting planners to show how speakers can have a more positive impact on meetings – from improving the “flow” of a meeting, to providing better networking opportunities, to addressing multiple audiences including spouses and families who may attend a meeting. Many professional speakers agree that when a meeting is structured with balance in mind, attendees have more fun, are willing to attend more sessions, and retain more information discussed at the content-oriented parts of the meeting.

Amanda Gore has been a professional motivational speaker for more than 15 years, speaking primarily about “the balanced lifestyle.” She notes, “When I started speaking, I was seen as a ‘filler’ in conferences, and was never taken very seriously. Over the last 10 years, however, there has been an enormous shift and I’m now positioned as a keynote speaker - as a ‘serious’ part of the general program.”

Bureaus and speakers also can make recommendations concerning the meeting schedule to maximize when and where the speaker addresses attendees. Because of the nature of her topic and her presentation style, Gore is usually scheduled to “kick start” a conference to pull the people to a high-energy state which they maintain for the whole meeting, or to close the meeting on a high. “It doesn’t make sense to have me speak about motivation and inspiration before a 2-hour technical debriefing,” she says. “In those cases, my message can get lost or washed over, and the whole point of my being there is slighted.”

John Powers, a motivational and inspirational speaker who talks about achieving personal goals and living a more passionate life, agrees about the importance of letting speakers have input on meeting schedules.

“A client once asked me to speak just before an afternoon golf outing, which is typically an ideal time for me to deliver my message and for attendees to have some absorption time after I speak,” Powers says. “Of course, we fell behind schedule for the day, so I recommended shortening my speech slightly to let the audience go out as planned. But then, the company president insisted on getting up to speak when I was done, which kept the audience in their seats for another 45 minutes.”

In reality, a lot more than 45 minutes was lost from this one impromptu act. The audience probably remembers being late for the golf course more so than anything the professional speaker or the president said. Additionally, by speaking after the professional speaker, especially one who successfully built up the crowd’s energy and enthusiasm, the president really minimized the speaker’s impact and probably annoyed the audience.

Over recent years, Diane Robinson, an incentive meeting planner for Lincoln Financial Advisors in Connecticut, has used professional speakers to tweak the structure and format of her meetings with an eye on achieving balance.

“I try to schedule speakers during the most logical times of the meetings – typically mornings and early evenings – to give attendees a break from the more serious parts of any meeting,” she says. “Use of speakers also makes a good segue to end or start a session after any ‘free time’ afternoon – helping attendees get back on track after being outside or with family and spouses.”

Robinson works with bureaus to target speakers who achieve balance as well as meet other goals of the event, including attendance. “When you hire a good keynote speaker, you more often than not get a higher attendance for the entire meeting – beyond just for the required meetings,” Robinson said. “I like to utilize a draw speaker to address our general session, mingle with executives and

attendees, and host a Q&A session. This keeps management engaged and maximizes the investment in a professional speaker.”

In 2001, Robinson is utilizing speakers such as Tommy Lasorda and Doris Kearns Goodwin, expecting them to be a draw. They have good message, which is critical for balance and affects attendance, and they appeal to the different audiences in the group. Additionally, Robinson is scheduling her meetings at more “family-friendly” locations and setting up recreational and leisure events for spouses, children, and others who join attendees at weekend retreats or week-long meetings. This all contributes to building a sense of respect for achieving balance between work and home life.

Speakers can deliver tailored speeches to spouses, family members, etc. Or, they can act as an MC to tie the event together and make it more entertaining for everyone in attendance. Gore thinks this is a great tactic, since MCs really can get the flow going, keep the tone upbeat, get people physically moving around, and inject humor in appropriate places. In other words, they can “transform” a meeting from the regular routine into something memorable.

Speakers bureaus that are willing to invest time and resources getting to know a corporate culture can work with planners to help “sell” the concept of balance to internal executives and decision makers. Based on the relationship the bureau and planner share, the bureau should be able to illustrate the benefits of using speakers for different roles in a specific meeting. This strengthens the trust and relationship between the company executives, the company meeting planner and the speakers bureau.

“I believe balance in any meeting can, and should, be achieved on two levels – by the use of humorous, professional speakers and by the actual structure of the meeting,” Gore says. “When work and free time is balanced – that is, early-morning and late-day activities, indoor and outdoor programs, adding games, having music, and utilizing a good MC - the delegates are more likely to be kept alert. And when the learning and serious discussions are mixed with fun, the meeting will have achieved a balance designed for success.”

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