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## **AVOID GETTING WEBBED**

*Determining When 'Low-Tech' Is Best!*

Speakers bureaus, like much of the corporate world, have made the leap to the Internet, with robust websites that tout some of today's hottest technology.

These sites often are enticing. Offering video clips of various speakers along with comprehensive forms that help meeting planners narrow their search by entering price, topic, and other variables. Of course, searches on websites can be conducted any time of the day, any day of the week. And planners can get more information about speakers with one or two clicks without having to wait for information to arrive via snail mail. So what's the downside?

A bureau's website alone cannot provide quality service, objective consultation, or in-depth knowledge of each speaker. It cannot give you tailored answers to your specific questions regarding speakers. And it cannot create a proven, trusting partnership with planners, something that is a vital component of any important event.

"The value of a speakers bureau has always been building relationships with speakers and with clients, and then leveraging those relationships to match needs," said Edwin L. Griffin, Jr. CAE, president and CEO of Meeting Professionals International, speaking at a recent MPI chapter meeting in Hartford, CT. "Even with today's advanced technology, speakers and planners are going to have a need for meaningful service from professional bureaus."

The service provided by a good speakers bureau should begin long before any names of speakers are even considered. The pre-planning consultation is key for a bureau to truly understand the objectives, agenda, and scope of each meeting or conference. From there, the bureau also needs to garner a better understanding of the audience and the particular likes and dislikes of the executives involved in the meeting.

For planners who have other roles and responsibilities within an organization, this is where a speakers bureau can add real value, saving the planner hours of staring at a flickering screen trying to match speaker "qualities" with their budgets, and then still not having all the answers. Instead, a bureau will steer the planner toward speaker recommendations that are on-target for the overall goals of the meeting – important factors beyond budget and scheduling availability. Additionally, the pre-planning process clarifies expectations among executives and other internal audiences, and frustration for everyone during the rest of the preparation process.

Once the bureau completes the pre-planning phase with the client, it is ready to conduct speaker research and make qualified recommendations. The speakers bureau will use its expertise in

determining the style, capability, tone, and attitude of today's professional speakers to find the right fit for the client's needs.

In addition to having intimate knowledge of speakers' subject matter, bureaus should be able to recommend other "out-of-the-box" ways to maximize or tailor the role of speakers. For instance, many speakers also are exceptional MC's and may be willing to take on that additional role during a meeting or event. Or a motivational speaker may be willing to lead a group exercise during a different part of the meeting. These types of enhancements may not be something a planner would initially consider, but they may be the very things that make a good event even more memorable.

A meeting planner should always take the integrity of the bureau into consideration before using its services. It is very easy to recommend popular speakers as appropriate for any event, since the name of the speaker alone may impress the planner and attendees, but this may not best serve the true needs and objectives of the meeting. Additionally, some bureaus may be tempted to hold back an honest opinion of a speaker's capability if they are focused only on the size of the speaker's fee. This is where integrity is key.

You can determine the quality of a speakers bureau by its willingness to invest time upfront to understand your issues, concerns, and goals with each meeting. An ethical bureau is more interested in building long-term relationships for ongoing future business, with both the speakers and the planners. Speakers want to trust the bureau they work with that it will find appropriate opportunities for them. And the planners want to trust that the bureau will provide relevant speakers who really connect with the audience.

This type of trust cannot be built through an impersonal scan of a website.

"The Internet sometimes conjures a 'bargain hunting' mentality among online shoppers," Griffin said. "While this may be advantageous for families trying to plan vacations, it really isn't a good approach for professionals trying to coordinate a high-quality sales meeting. Planners traditionally have relied on the expertise of a wide variety of vendors, from AV specialists to resort representatives to speakers bureaus. The dawn of the Internet age shouldn't affect the value of those relationships."

And, speakers' fees typically do not change, regardless of how they are booked through a bureau or any other means. So, in the case of speakers, the Internet does not offer any pricing advantage. In the long run, time and money will be saved when properly utilizing a professional speakers bureau. Since bureaus do the legwork to develop targeted lists of speakers, planners don't need to spend time considering inappropriate speakers. The bureau provides reasons why their recommendations are good choices, and it provides for the planner relevant materials about each speaker.

It is important to know that the information a bureau can provide may not be available on the Internet. On a website, you're at the mercy of what the Webmaster deems "worthy" of actually being posted. At the same time, the right information may be there, but the planner may need to invest a lot of time trying to locate it.

Most speakers bureaus offer websites that essentially assume the pre-planning work is complete and the client knows exactly what he or she needs in a speaker. However, there are no checks and balances on these sites to determine if this is the case. A planner, with the help of a bureau, should focus on the pre-planning process before looking at the specifics of any speaker. Once that is determined, the Internet can be a good place to conduct auxiliary research.