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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR SPEAKER

by Diane Goodman

So, you've hired a professional speaker to deliver a presentation at your company meeting. You've worked diligently with your speakers bureau to find an appropriate keynoter, you've gotten on the speaker's schedule early enough, and now you're waiting for the big day to come.

You've certainly accomplished the basics of your job, but you could be overlooking some key ways of using your speaker to make for an even more successful event. A tip: Consider increasing the role of the speaker you've already paid for to add a greater level of value to your meeting or event.

Here are some suggestions based on our experience that have helped meeting planners add value through their keynote speakers:

- **Planning the meeting.** Speakers know the pitfalls and they know the little things that could have been done to make a good meeting great. Since it's in the best interest of speakers to participate in successful events, they often are willing to spend time advising meeting planners on the actual agenda. They may suggest changing the agenda order, or may recommend a different room layout to facilitate interactive activities or other elements of their speech. They may even suggest a different meal based on the speech's content.
- **Pre-event marketing.** There are some corporate events that are voluntary for attendees, and many professional associations charge a fee to attend an event. In such cases, the keynote speaker really can be the main reason they would invest time and money to come. Speakers who take part in these types of events understand the importance of attracting the largest possible audience, and many are happy to help market the event. They may talk to the press or provide their own marketing materials for distribution prior to an event.

They certainly will have photos and other materials that can be used in advertising and direct mail. Brian Holloway, former captain of the New England Patriots professional football team, has sent out autographed footballs to the press and attendees to generate enthusiasm for his speeches. This sets an upbeat tone, and builds excitement early for the whole meeting.

- **Attend a VIP event.** Many companies and associations coordinate special activities for the VIP crowd. Why not include the speaker? This might be a breakfast, lunch or dinner where a smaller group of executives can have one-on-one time with the speaker to ask specific questions, talk about industry issues, have back-and-forth input, and so forth. This also can help the speaker get more specific information on the company before his speech, which will make it more relevant and have a greater impact on the audience.

- Act as master of ceremonies. Professional speakers are skilled in creating excitement, enthusiasm and energy among crowds of all sizes. This ability can be used throughout the entire event when speakers become emcees. They can introduce executives, hand out awards, entertain briefly during a banquet and more, in addition to delivering the keynote speech.
- Give the keynote and lead a breakout session. Consider asking a speaker to participate in a breakout session either before or after the keynote speech. This can be for high-level executives, the top-performing salespeople, or other targeted segments of the audience. The session can be an expansion of the keynote, or it can be on something entirely different. Since the speaker is already physically at your meeting, he often doesn't mind leading small sessions along with the main speech.
- Consider a longer keynote speech. A common complaint among meeting attendees is they didn't get enough input or information from the speaker. This can be alleviated, for example, by extending the keynote presentation time from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. Or speakers could include more time for the Q&A period so specific issues can be addressed. Again, the speaker has already committed to the event and wants it to be as successful and meaningful as possible. Asking for a few more minutes of his time can sometimes be the difference between a good and a great meeting.
- Bring more to the meeting. Besides bringing themselves, speakers can bring handouts and other materials to an event, if appropriate. This gives attendees something to review after the event and increases the value of what they have invested time in (or, in the case of association members, actually paid for). Many speakers are also authors and will be happy to sign books, videos or audiotapes before or after a speech. Sometimes companies will purchase these materials for the attendees in advance of the autograph session; at other times the speaker will arrange to sell materials.
- Participate in meeting activities. Some meetings can span a weekend or even a week, and can include recreational activities for attendees or their families. Ask the speaker to attend some of these activities, from playing a round of golf with the company president, to taking a swing dance lesson with guests. Attendees often appreciate the extra attention, and speakers enjoy it.
- Book in bulk. Again, for the meeting that can span several days, there may be concurrent sessions that are appropriate for the speaker. Having one person stay on for three or four days can, in the long run, be more economical than flying in two or three speakers for each different event. Steve Rizzo, a motivational speaker, also wears the hat of humorist and hosts a customized game show. This adds a fun and memorable element to the event, which complements the sometimes serious tone of other aspects of the meeting.
- After-event follow-up. Depending on the nature of the meeting, follow-up activity may be appropriate and helpful. This could be a conference call with the speaker and key executives or meeting attendees. Many times, speakers will add attendees to their mailing lists to receive newsletters and other ongoing communication from them.

Speakers always want to give their all at each event. However, some speakers may not be available or comfortable with these suggestions, while others may come to the table with ideas not mentioned here. Knowing which speaker falls in which category is where your speakers bureau comes in.

You should always ask your bureau representative to help you identify speakers who may go above and beyond the call of duty, to help maximize their roles in your event. Some speakers will negotiate their role within their existing fee, and others may have a slightly different fee structure based on what they are asked to do. In either case, the investment your company or association makes in a professional speaker could, and should, be maximized for the ultimate return.