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## **Speakers Don't Always Have to be Famous**

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Four years ago, an industry trend landed in my lap. This may be a bit of an exaggeration, but looking back, it was one of the first times I clearly saw the evolution of a need and desire for insurance and financial businesses to hire "expert speakers" -- industry experts and insiders -- in addition to professional speakers to address their corporate meetings.

How did this trend come to me and my lap? I had noticed that more of the clients at my speakers bureau were becoming overwhelmed by the fast-paced changes in the insurance and financial industries. The status quo - that is, insurance companies selling insurance and financial companies selling investments -- was changing. Both arenas were evolving and crossing over into each other as a result of changes in legislation and mergers and acquisitions. Competitors were now becoming partners. New products and services were entering the marketplace at a rapid clip. And consumer demands were changing to reflect new consumer attitudes, the aging population, and a growth in investor savvy.

Meeting planners were being asked by their internal executives and clients to find more appropriate outside speakers who could address these major shifts and emerging issues in the insurance and financial industries. They needed speakers to be able to educate and inform executives, agents and other professionals about all these new changes that affect their business.

One day in the midst of all this, I met with a client -- a meeting planner at a major insurance company -- who asked me to locate speakers who could speak directly and purposefully to her executives about specific industry trends. She did not want a list of traditional professional speakers who could simply tailor their motivational or managerial speeches to vaguely reflect the insurance field. Instead, she wanted experts in insurance and finance who were on the "front lines" of the industry, knowledgeable of the countless changes, and who were willing and able to speak at internal company meetings.

Mission impossible? Initially, I thought it was. She was asking for something very new, and was, in essence, creating a lot of up front work for me to tackle. I gave this assignment great thought and, after mulling over her request, I realized my client had just verbalized a major shift I had been sensing in the needs of meeting planners. She had helped me uncover a new niche for my speakers bureau - servicing the industry insiders who wanted to hear from *other* industry insiders.

Moreover, corporate meeting planners also were also becoming mired in all the massive industry

changes as well, and were expected to be as informed as their internal executives, if not more so. They were being asked to design meeting agendas to meet extensive objectives, with little guidance from inside.

So I immediately saw another business opportunity: assisting planners to expand meeting agendas to include expert speakers to address industry specific issues. These speakers would complement the higher-profile professional speakers and celebrities who focus keynote speeches on broader motivational or business topics.

Expert speakers are industry insiders who are knowledgeable about a variety of topics, including health care, social security, deregulation, changes in legislation, and marketplace trends such as the explosion of new financial products meant to serve an aging population. Their expertise allows them to help others in the field make sense of the large blur that used to clearly defined traditional market segments -- insurance, banking, investing, health care, and financial planning.

Expert speakers are not the same as professional speakers. Not by a long shot.

Professional speakers invest a lot of time and money marketing themselves, and building a career entirely around their public speaking talents. They are easy to locate and evaluate to determine if they are appropriate for any given speaking engagement.

Most professional speakers can fill the role of a traditional keynote speaker, or they can tailor a speech to be more meaningful to smaller, specific groups. They can fly across the country, practically at a moment's notice, to take part in meetings, seminars, retreats or other occasions. Professional public speaking is what they do.

Expert speakers, on the other hand, have "day jobs." They work within the industry, are not always easy to locate and do not make public speaking their ultimate priority. It takes research and diligence to uncover expert speakers who can communicate clearly and who can accommodate a specific schedule for meeting planners.

The benefits of using expert speakers in addition to professional speakers, however, are numerous. They possess a vast industry knowledge base that can be applied directly to fit a meeting's agenda, and they know the industry "language" and can communicate meaningfully to executives on all levels. Based on their particular expertise, they can address various specific areas of importance to meeting attendees, providing substance to their presentations.

In addition, many expert speakers are certified to offer continuing education credits to industry professionals. Since ongoing education is a growing requisite for people at all levels within the insurance and financial arenas, this is an attractive way to maximize time spent in corporate meetings. And their fees are not necessarily as steep as many professional speakers.

Expert speakers can be found a number of ways. They often speak at industry conferences such as the Life Agency Management Program (LAMP), sponsored by GAMA International ([www.gamaweb.com](http://www.gamaweb.com)); the Million Dollar Round Table (MDRT), which is a conference as well as an association of life insurance-based financial services sales professionals ([www.mdrt.com](http://www.mdrt.com)); and programs hosted by the International Association of Financial Planning ([www.iafp.com](http://www.iafp.com)). If meeting planners are given the opportunity to attend these conferences, they can meet and screen potential expert speakers for future use.

Also, experts can be found through personal contacts or industry referrals. Meeting planners can ask for expert speaker referrals from consultants their companies may already be using. These consultants may be able to recommend speakers, or they may want to take on the role of expert speaker themselves.

The question remains: Are they any good?

Planners need to know that the speaker they hire can perform. Again, this is easy to determine with professional speakers who have promotional videos, books, articles, and other marketing materials. A speakers bureau also can provide testimonials of a professional speaker's performance. Can a bureau do the same with expert speakers? It should.

It is indeed more work to invest time to locate potential expert speakers, check references, hear them speak, and ascertain their credentials and areas of expertise. But by adding them to their rosters of professional speakers, bureaus can pursue a full-service approach to their business. In addition to booking the celebrity speaker for a keynote presentation, bureaus can help planners make the overall meeting agenda more relevant, build internal continuing education programs, and improve the role of corporate meetings.

I am confident this "brave new world" of expert speakers provides one refreshing solution for meeting planners to keep on top of the frustrating tidal wave of change within the insurance and financial industries.