

Avoid the Duds: 10 Strategies for Selecting "The Perfect Speaker"

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By Susan Friedmann

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Today, more than ever, the success of meetings relies heavily on the strength of program content and presentation. Nothing can spoil a meeting more than hiring the wrong speaker. That's because speakers do more than just convey the overall meeting message. You look to them to provide insights, awareness, and cutting-edge information in an energetic, motivational, entertaining, and professional manner. What more could you ask for? Well, the right speaker can emphasize an important message, offer inspiration, help people cope with new assignments, and lead the way towards change.

Selecting the right speaker for your event is one of the most important, yet daunting elements for creating a successful meeting. Your speaker can often make or break the event. If he bombs, your reputation not only takes a severe nose-dive, but you also have the pleasure of dealing with the barrage of complaints from a disappointed audience. Yet, if he does well, you can walk away with many of the accolades, compliments, and of course, the rave reviews. By now, you probably realize that this massive responsibility is not to be taken lightly.

Raise Your Expectations

The skill to selecting a great speaker is determining what combination of education, motivation, and entertainment best fits your function. Then set out to find a perfect match. But keep your expectations high, since nothing can spoil a meeting faster than booking the wrong speaker. The following 10 guidelines should help you keep your focus and also keep you away from the "duds."

1. Know the program objectives. Before you can start looking for the right speaker, you must know the program objectives. Begin with the end in mind. What are you looking to achieve? Is this an annual meeting, a training program, an incentive get-together, an awards celebration, or another type of event? This will probably be a committee or management decision, rather than one you will have to make. But you may have to make an intangible concept tangible.

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2. Understand the audience's needs. Along with the program objectives, consider the needs of your audience. Does your group need industry-specific or technical information? Will a mix of motivation and entertainment serve your group's purpose? Today's audiences are generally younger, more educated, more diverse, and more sophisticated than in the past. They want content. They want to learn, but they also want it to be fun, so consider the audience needs and exactly what they expect. Consider surveying your audience. Ask them what they want or what skills would most help them in their jobs. For example, sales people may ask for advanced selling skills, but managers may request teambuilding programs.

3. Check for reputation. With countless speakers out there vying for your business, how can you possibly determine which one best meets your needs? Many speakers produce highly professional or glitzy marketing materials to help sell their services. You must look deeper than simply scanning a few brochures and ask pointed questions to find the right fit, such as What experience does this speaker have? How familiar is this speaker with this industry? and, Who else has used this person?

4. "Test drive" your prospects. If you don't have the opportunity to preview a speaker in person, then the next best thing is to request a video or audio recording of a previous presentation. A session that was recorded before a live audience gives you a better sense of a person's real ability.

Watch or listen carefully to how the speaker builds rapport and interacts with the audience. Ask yourself if this person would be right for your group. Is the combination of education, motivation, and entertainment appropriate for your needs? Does the speaker have a message that is appropriate, timely, and relevant to the theme or purpose of your event? Does it conform to your company's philosophy and policy? Do you feel the speaker is genuine and has the expertise to deliver a solid presentation?

5. Don't be star-struck. If you are considering celebrity speakers, make sure they can speak! TV personalities do a great job on the air, but sometimes have little public speaking expertise, and you should be aware that the skills needed for being on TV and for speaking live are very different. However, many well-known personalities make excellent speakers and can add enormous value and clout to your event. Politicians and sports, media, or entertainment celebrities often share life experiences, offer advice, or have an inspirational message to impart.

6. Be wary of grandiose claims. Speakers who claim to be all things to all people are probably desperate for work. Avoid them. True professional speakers, on the other hand, usually have certain areas or topics of expertise. They would much rather refer potential business to a true expert than jeopardize their reputation by trying to do a program outside of their knowledge zone. Also, beware of the charismatic and fluffy speaker as your audience wants good, solid take-away value.

7. Provide and ask for good information. Reputable speakers want to find out as much as possible about the meeting objectives, the audience, industry challenges, and so on in order to tailor their presentation to the group. Share information on your organization and audience to help the speaker design a program to fit your specific needs. Provide them with newsletters, catalogs, or any other publications that highlight industry trends, key people, industry jargon or buzz words, and insider news and views.

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Also include as much information as possible about the size and demographics of the audience such as age, gender, and positions.

8. Ask for an outline. Ask prospective speakers for an outline of the presentation to make sure they will be covering the material as you discussed. This will clearly lay out what's expected as verbal communication is subject to being misunderstood or misinterpreted. Seeing exactly what speakers plan to cover in the sessions should help to ensure that the material is tailored to your specific needs.

9. Maximize opportunities. Look for ways to maximize opportunities with your speakers. Discuss different ways they can add extra value and be a significant resource to help improve your meeting's success. Brainstorm ways that you feel they can assist you in planning, preparing, promoting, and presenting. Some suggestions include serving as an emcee, conducting special sessions or roundtable discussions about current issues for select groups such as company executives or the board of directors, and participating in a spouse program.

10. Trust your instincts. Through your communication with the speaker, you will quickly form an opinion or have a feeling about this person. First reactions count here. "I like this person" or "I don't like this person," or "I feel comfortable or uncomfortable working with this person," are strong indicators. These

responses usually comes from your gut — a very trustworthy organ. Have confidence in your instincts and trust that so-called sixth sense. If you experience any kind of negative feeling, think about looking for someone else or get another opinion from a colleague. You want to make sure that you can work with this person and that both of you are on the same wavelength.

The true objective of hiring a professional speaker hinges on establishing a partnership where a mutually beneficial relationship grows and flourishes. When this happens, you know you've chosen well.

The Perfect Match

Overwhelmed with the plethora of speakers to choose from? You may want to turn to a speaker's bureau for advice and guidance. A good bureau should act as a consultant and partner to help your event succeed. Even though many hundreds of bureaus are out there, the numbers pale in comparison to the thousands of speakers. A bureau's sole purpose is simply to make your job easier and provide you with solutions. They want to find the best possible match for your event within your price range. So, where do go looking for one of these bureaus? Here are a few places to start your search: the phone book, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, the Internet, industry colleagues, and friends.

A Final Note:

Look for CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) or CPAE (Council of Peers Award for Excellence) designations. Both these are conferred by the National Speakers Association and are considered the speaking profession's international measure of professional platform skill (<http://www.nsaspeaker.org>).

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Armed with these guidelines and resources, your search for the perfect speaker will be more fruitful. And with a little effort and some time, you will connect with a speaker who will fulfill your goals— one that will be both inform and enlighten. Your audience will thank you.

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Acoustic Research Speaker May Just Be The Right Choice For You!

By Glen B. Porter

I have been an audiophile for a long time, but surprisingly, I never had really good sound that I could count on until I got my first Acoustic Research wireless speaker. Before the Acoustic Research speaker, I was using inferior equipment. Although I did not go straight from my first, big, clunky second hand bass speakers with broken cones to the Acoustic Research speaker, the difference was almost as pronounced. Nonetheless, the Acoustic Research speaker was just the last step in a string of slowly improving audio equipment that I had been acquiring since I was very young.

Before I ever saw an Acoustic Research speaker, I tried many other brands. I thought Bose were pretty good, and for a long time they were my favorite. Even now, when I am listening to music quietly to avoid disturbing my girlfriend, I turn off the Acoustic Research speaker and plug in my Bose headphones. But still, nowadays my whole house is wired with Acoustic Research speakers which pipe music to any corner that I want, any time.

It started when I was a teenager growing up in the 70s. This was a long time before there was such a thing as Acoustic Research speakers, or many of the other brands that are popular today. What I had was a pair of second hand speakers which I had inherited from a friend, when he bought his new stereo. He seemed to not think that they were good enough for his use anymore, but for me they were amazing. They had all of the bass that a teenager wants, and a mellow tubey sound that I still find tasteful. Unfortunately, they had many weaknesses including a torn speaker cone that buzzed, and very low treble fidelity. But still, I did really like them, and they did a good job for me all the way through college.

You can even use an Acoustic Research speaker to hear sound outside, as I have done. I have a wireless Acoustic Research speaker which plays music to the patio whenever I am entertaining. It saves me the trouble of having to bring out a boom box, and the sound quality is simply sensational. All of my guests have complemented the good fidelity that an Acoustic Research speaker provides, and many of them have gone on to buy them themselves. I say that they have good taste in sound.

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reviews for

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