

On dealing successfully with a professional speaker

By Milo Shapiro, CEO of **IMPRO**Ventures



You're working on an event for a client. Amidst all the talk of food, lodging, and fanfare, one of the following comes up:

- 1) "We'll be needing a good keynote speaker on Topic X. Please make some recommendations and coordinate the details with the speaker."

OR

- 2) "We've invited a keynote speaker named Ms. Z. Here's her office number. Please coordinate the details with the speaker."

Yikes! One more thing to deal with! Okay, take a breath. We're going to make this easier for you here.

Even though there's less work in the latter situation because the selection process is resolved, coordinating with a speaker is as fine an art as managing the wait staff or the décor. It only takes one little problem to make the speaker look bad (whether it's his/her fault or not) and drain the energy of your event. When the speaker comes off well, the whole meeting seems to be better. Your professional preparedness can head off surprises that perhaps the speaker should have taken care of.

After years in the business on the speaker's side, I had an event planner recently confess that she didn't know *what* questions to ask me and was counting on my asking and telling her everything we'd need to be prepared. I appreciated her honesty and shared with her some of the tricks and techniques that would help her – both with me and the next speaker she deals with (who might not be as prepared). I'd like to share them with you now to help you look good in the future.

Let's break down the task of dealing with a professional speaker into its three steps:

- a) How to find quality speakers on the topic of interest
- b) How to interview and select a speaker
- c) How to coordinate the event with him/her

And with all due respect to my numerous female colleagues, I'll be using "he" and "him" in this article for the factor of simplicity.

a) FINDING THE RIGHT SPEAKER



Before the internet, it was almost impossible to find quality professional speakers *without* the help of a **Speakers Bureau**. These companies develop relationships with a number of speakers on a variety of topics, hoping to have all bases covered for your call.

Speakers Bureaus still exist and are happy to provide this service to you, but you should familiarize yourself with the pros and cons of using them.

ADVANTAGES TO USING A SPEAKERS BUREAU:

- ▶ Quite simply, bureaus know a lot of professional speakers and are happy to be of service.
- ▶ Bureaus will not refer someone to you who has burned them in the past. This degree of screening is almost assurance of getting someone of quality who is reliable.
- ▶ It usually costs nothing for an event planner to use a bureau's services. The speaker pays a large commission to the bureau (25-30% is most typical) for the referral. If a bureau tries to charge you for their services, call another!
- ▶ If you have a large budget or you need a celebrity, a bureau might very well be a good way to book the big names. Some of the biggest names, in fact, will *only* book through bureaus so that they don't have to deal with direct calls.
- ▶ Speakers bureaus are in the phone book and you can start the process quickly.

ADVANTAGES TO FINDING A SPEAKER YOURSELF:

- ▶ Bureaus will rarely let you talk to a speaker or look at his website before you sign the contract – and often even after that! They are concerned that you will try to get away with contacting them directly, either now or in the future. This can be frustrating because you lose both the comfort of the personal connection *and* the advantage of hearing the program being described by the person who knows it best. While bureaus often do a good job of describing a program, I know that no one can explain my programs better than I can...nor will the two paragraphs on their site about me tell you as much as my whole website does.
- ▶ Bureaus are in business to make money on percentage. Therefore, it behooves them to only promote highly paid speakers. Sometimes, this might be fine for you; at other times, you might miss out on a quality speaker who would have been in your smaller budget. Most bureaus turn down speakers whose fees aren't "worth their time" for their percentage, so you don't get access to them.
- ▶ Bureaus use who they know. It can be very hard for a speaker, even if very competent, to get a foot in the door. You may not get access to the perfect speaker for you whose video is one of the hundreds that get thrown away unwatched.
- ▶ There are great bureaus and not-so-great ones, so you'll need to shop for a good fit with the right bureau and *then* find the right speaker. Just because they have access to great speakers doesn't mean they are a great bureau.
- ▶ Speakers are happier to take direct clients because they don't have to pay commission. This could affect both their willingness and ability to be flexible in meeting your needs as they draw up

the contracts themselves. Bureaus may put restrictions in the contract that limit what the speaker can and will do with you.

- ▶ Bureaus may not know the *local* market of your meeting. You may be encouraged to use the person they love who is six hours away. While there is nothing wrong with flying the right speaker in for an event, a local person is sometimes desirable because housing, travel expenses, delayed flights, and familiarity with the geographical area are never an issue. Plus, you may want to take advantage of his other local services afterward, if you are impressed!

Nowadays, it's much easier than it used to be to find your own affordable, quality speakers on the topic of your liking without having to use a bureau. Here are a few ideas on this:

HOW TO FIND A SPEAKER YOURSELF:

The internet certainly makes it easy to enter a phrase like "Atlanta professional speaker diversity" or "motivational speaker San Diego" to see some of the local talent. Often, you can get a good sense from his website's content, testimonials, and client lists if this is someone you want to talk to.

If you want a head start on finding experienced people with a good reputation without the contact limitations you'll find with bureaus, a great way to aim yourself toward those individuals is through the **National Speakers Association (NSA)**. This organization pre-qualifies its potential members by checking out their references and experience level. One cannot just send a check to NSA to join; many would-be members spend years attempting to meet their tough professional membership qualifications.

To search for a speaker on a topic, use the "Find a Speaker" page at www.NSAspeaker.org. You can limit the search to a given city or search that whole national database. What's especially nice about this is that NSA's site will usually give you a link right to the speaker's own site for more details, contact info, and sometimes even streaming video.

There is also an accountability issue for NSA member. NSA members know that NSA will investigate any complaints from a meeting planner and the speaker could lose his valued membership if complaints are substantiated. You wouldn't want to use a dentist who wasn't ADA approved; it's the same sort of thing.

Also, keep an ear open for speaker referral groups. Like many business networking groups out there where there is only one person accepted per topic, speaker referral groups sometimes do this locally. This puts the pressure on the group to only accept those whom they have seen in action and feel will represent the group well. A good example is the [Speaker Source of San Diego](#) who have a number of speakers (from wine to humor to sales marketing) who certainly *will* travel, but prefer to serve events in their area, taking the pressure off you to transport and house them. And a local speaker never misses the flight to your event!

b) INTERVIEWING AND SELECTING A SPEAKER



Once you have looked at a few sites and think you have found either the right speaker or a short list of candidates, it's time to pick up the phone.

If you get their voicemail or a staff person, be sure to leave *more* than your contact information. Also leave:

- ▶ the city of the event. This can greatly affect our availability depending where we are the day before and after. If it's a lesser known city, it's nice to hear facts like "That's about two hours north of Seattle" or "By the way, Evansville does have its own airport."
- ▶ the date of the event and the approximate time. I almost said no to a company because I'd already booked that morning and then found out their business meeting wasn't until 7pm in the same city. That was doable!
- ▶ the type of service you are looking for. Many speakers are also consultants, trainers, coaches, teambuilders, performers, etc. so if you just say "event", we don't know what we're calling you back about doing.
- ▶ your time zone. It's easy to forget which zone a middle state is in. And if you're calling from Arizona, with your own unique take on Daylight Savings, always include this! (No one can remember what time it is in Arizona.)

Supplied with this information, we'll be much more fully prepared when we call you back so we're not fumbling to get you the right information while you hold on.

Once you are live on the phone with a speaker, simply ask him to tell you a little about the program you are interested in. Though you are bound to have specific questions, some may be answered in his response and it's your chance to hear the energy and personality of the speaker as he describes what he does. This may be far more valuable in giving you a good or bad feeling than the actual answer to specific questions. Demo tapes become dated the day after they are produced; this phone call may be your best example of what you will get from this person on stage. You're potentially hiring *this* speaker; not how good his videographer or video editor is. Is he upbeat? Does he make you feel interested in what he's saying? Does he sound interested in you?

Now he has described the program and you are still interested in this speaker. Here are a few good questions to include to determine if this person is a good fit or not. Some you may already know from their website.

Regarding the body of the speech and their qualifications, consider asking these questions:

1. Is this program purely lecture, a little bit participatory, or highly interactive?
The answer may please or turn off an event planner, depending on the group type.
2. What percentage is story versus data?
(The more speakers I hear, the more convinced I am that stories hold interest stronger, convey a point better, and affect an audience far longer than data can)
3. How will this program be different from those this group has heard in the past (particularly helpful if you can find out beforehand who has been used or, at least, what topics have been done before).
4. What types of audiences do they find they are most effective with? This can be an interesting qualifier.
5. Is the person a member of the National Speakers Association? If not, why not? You don't want to hear that they don't qualify yet! If they say they used to be, some people may have legitimate personal reasons for having left, but at least you'll know they once met the standards.

Regarding the speaker's specific needs in running the event, find out...

6. Will he be needing PowerPoint? If so, who will be providing the laptop and other AV?
(Typically, the speaker provides the laptop and the client provides the A/V, but I like to request, if possible, that the client provide the laptop. That way, it can be set up before I arrive, putting everyone's mind at ease, and my laptop becomes the emergency backup, which has paid off twice already).
7. Will handouts be involved? If so, as reference tools or will writing be involved?
8. Would a lavalier microphone (the hands-free clip-on type) greatly enhance the performance or is a handheld sufficient?
9. Does the speaker expect or appreciate the ability to sell books, tapes, etc. at the back of the room afterward? While this is a courtesy that usually costs the clients nothing, some clients strongly object and this is something you'll want to clarify immediately if that's the case.

With these questions answered, you can feel more confident trusting your gut reaction to whether you liked this speaker's style enough to choose him or her...*if* the budget is a match.

I recommend finding out a few things about the speech before getting into price (in particular, numbers 1-5 above). There might be options around what packages he will offer and if you don't know what he does yet, the options won't make much sense. Plus, even if the price is not a match this time, you've shown the speaker the respect of finding out about his material, in case it's ever a fit in the future. Once you know the basics of what he can do for you, though, it's worthwhile to discuss fee before delving into the *specifics* of the speaker's needs in case the if the price is out of the question for this event.

c) COORDINATING WITH A SPEAKER



Once you've found the speaker you want, there are a lot of questions left to ask to make sure there are no unpleasant surprises.

Some speakers are great about this and others are not. I recommend that you keep your own check list, using the ideas below as a guide, so you can check off agreements as the speaker asks you questions about the event.

It's wise to say something like, "Go ahead and ask me everything you want to know about the event. I'll get back to you with any answers I don't have right now. When you're done, I may have a few more questions for you." This is wise in two ways. First, it allows him to take his notes in the order he is used to, but you still get to see if any points were left undiscussed by the end of your exchange. Second, you get to hear if he asks you any questions you'd like to add to your checklist for the future (and if you do, write me at IMPROVentures.com/contact so I can add them to mine!)

The following is my checklist and I feel pretty confident that, by the time all of these are answered, I'll know what I'm walking into – ready to do a great job focusing on your audience and not an unexpected dilemma. I've flipped the questions around to be your statement of facts rather than questions since you are the one supplying these answers (even if he didn't ask these questions!). You can just say something like, "I'm glad I was able to answer your questions. Here are some more facts that might be helpful,"...and then finish this list with him. Parenthesized text shows where you'll likely be choosing one of the options I've provided.

- ▶ Our (company / organization) is called _____ and our website is _____ so you can learn more about us before the event.
- ▶ The date of the meeting is _____.
- ▶ The city of the meeting is _____ which is ___ number of hours ahead/behind you
[Yes, the speaker may know this, but don't risk it – especially when dealing with Arizona.]

- ▶ The meeting starts at _____ (am / pm). Your speech will start at _____ (am / pm).
[It's good to know if we're almost at the beginning or three hours into the meeting!]
- ▶ The expected length of the program is _____ minutes. Although exact timing is wonderful, (it's fine if you go over just a bit / it's better to finish a bit early than to run over at all).
- ▶ The fee we've agreed upon is _____. Transportation, lodging, travel expenses, and copying fees will (also / not) be paid by the client.
- ▶ Regarding a meal at this event, (you are invited / you are not invited / there is no meal involved).
[It's always awkward for the speaker to try to guess if he's invited, even though more than half the time he is. Either way is fine...we just need to know.]
- ▶ Seating arrangements will be (tables / rows / U-shape). There (will / will-not) be an aisle up the middle.
- ▶ The approximate audience size will be _____ people.
- ▶ The ratio of men to women will probably be something like ____ to _____.
[Yes, this does sometimes affect how we present things]
- ▶ The age range of the audience will be from _____ to _____.
[A humorous reference to Marlo Thomas fell flat once when I realized that most people under 35 had no idea who she was]
- ▶ There (will / won't) be a lectern for the speakers notes and to stand behind.
[This may or may not be important to the speaker. Also note: Lectern is the right name, not podium. A podium is something you stand upon]
- ▶ The speaker will be (at floor level / on a raised platform / higher up on a stage area) .
- ▶ Regarding amplification, the speaker will be provided (no amplification / a mike built into a lectern / a wired mike / a wireless mike / a lavalier that he can clip on for maximum freedom).
- ▶ The speaker (needs / doesn't need) for the client to provide (a laptop / screen / projector) for a Powerpoint presentation.
- ▶ The laptop will be advanced by (a remote the client will provide / the speaker manually pressing a key on the laptop, which will have to be on the stage)
[Whenever possible, do provide a remote. Even if the speaker doesn't ask for it, no speaker looks better when they cannot move because they have to hover over their laptop. Remotes are now under \$20 on eBay, can run on one AA battery, and last for years. It's a great investment.]
- ▶ Regarding handouts, they will be (copied by the client / copied by the speaker / unnecessary).
- ▶ When the speaker arrives, he should ask to meet _____ from the group.
- ▶ In terms of set-up, the speaker (will / won't) have access to the room before going on because the general session (will / won't) have already started.
[This can be critical in terms of set-up! It can be a nightmare to set up equipment or pass out handouts while the previous speaker is still on. Knowing this may motivate the speaker to come earlier or have certain aspects set up by whomever from the group will prepare the room for the day]
- ▶ The speaker's introduction will be given by _____ and he will be made aware of the proper pronunciation of the speaker's name
[it's always an effort to smile when I'm introduced as Mee-lo Shay-pyro.]
- ▶ It would be (okay / unacceptable) for the speaker to offer related products for extended learning and support at the event from the back of the room.
- ▶ It would be (okay / unacceptable) for the speaker to camcorder the event .

- ▶ It would be (okay / unacceptable) for the speaker to bring up to _____ number of guests to hear the speech.
[While this may seem odd, you might really win over a speaker's loyalty if he knew he could have three or four colleagues, staff members, or potential clients see him in action.]
- ▶ For more information about the event , you may contact _____ and _____ from the group. Here are their phone numbers, email addresses, and job titles: _____

OR Please refer all questions to me and I will see that you get your answers.
[When possible, it's very nice for the speaker to be able to hear facts and bounce ideas directly off the person who cares most about the meeting, but we know it's not always possible])

While there will always be some needs that are specific to a given speaker, this checklist should give you a solid start on knowing that the speaker portion of your event is well in hand. Feel free to email me any comments, ideas, and horror stories from the past.

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