

Optimizing Speaking Engagements: 7 Ways to Build a Corporate Speakers Bureau



Ask any VP of corporate communications what she/he is doing to secure executive speaking opportunities, and the overwhelming response will be “not enough.” A savvy communications executive knows the benefits of a successful speakers program: brand development, executive visibility, product/service promotion, thought leadership and lead generation.

One speech can reach an enormous and valuable target audience of clients, prospects, employees, media, business partners and analysts. The audience has chosen to attend the conference and your presentation, so they are ready and willing to listen to your experts and your messages. The conference environment is conducive to networking and deal making. And you can't beat the price. These coveted sales, marketing and PR benefits can be yours for the mere price of a plane ticket.

Yet many companies are frustrated with the process and the results of their existing speaking programs. Why? In our 20-plus years of experience creating and managing speakers bureau programs, we've found the root causes to be a lack of planning and a shortage of resources. Typically, companies assign a junior-level PR or marketing person to establish and manage a speakers bureau program with no strategic plan and no executive support.

If this sounds familiar, know that there are a few simple things you can do to build your speakers bureau program into a highly visible and successful part of your marketing and communications strategy.

1. Create a game plan: Invest the time and effort to determine clear, attainable goals for your program. In addition to

increasing brand awareness, you may want to promote a new leadership team or support the launch of a new product. Creating a program based on these goals will not only help you secure management buy-in, it will enable you to plan, prioritize and execute more effectively.

You also need to work closely with your management team and subject matter experts (SMEs) to determine the most charismatic, effective and willing speakers. Make sure this conversation also addresses their expectations for the program. You need to understand what they want from the program and be able to adjust those expectations accordingly.

2. Prioritize, prioritize, prioritize: With an ever-growing list of business and industry conferences, it is critical to prioritize your efforts. Know your target audience and your business goals and be true to them both when researching conferences and pursuing speaking opportunities. Consider current and past speakers, location and venue, attendee profiles and other important criteria when building a focused target list.

3. Know the realities: Successful speaker placement is a difficult pursuit, so be ready for the challenges. Placement timelines are long (six-to-nine-month lead time), so start early and be willing to track an opportunity for months. Competition is stiff and sponsors get many of the top speaking slots (the unfortunate “pay to play” system). You can work around this system, but it takes perseverance and creativity. Select speakers and topics that are compelling and noncommercial, enlist clients for joint case-study

presentations and spend time building relationships with conference organizers.

4. Invest in your speaker program: Like other key components of your PR and marketing programs, a speakers bureau requires investments of time, money and resources to be successful. It is critical that you dedicate an experienced professional or team (internal or external to your company) to manage all aspects of the program—from abstract development and executive relations to logistics and follow-up. And be ready to invest significant time and energy in doing it right. Follow up regularly on submissions, speaking frequently with show organizers to build relationships that increase your chances of placement and help you identify upcoming opportunities.

5. Prepare before your pitch: Take the time to create a library of speaker biographies, head shots and noncommercial abstracts on timely and compelling topics—this last piece can make or break your placement chances. There's nothing worse than identifying an opportunity at the right event and then scrambling to meet the submission requirements. Having these critical pieces ready will increase your ability to respond to opportunities quickly.

6. Leverage your successes: The speech itself will come and go in less than an hour, and while the impact is significant, promoting your speaker successes and taking advantage of ancillary business opportunities can help you increase the benefits of each engagement. Participate in all available conference marketing oppor-

tunities—brochures, Web sites, press releases and direct mail campaigns. Leverage the conference location to conduct meetings with clients, press, partners and employment candidates.

7. Did we mention follow-up? After the speech is delivered and the conference has come to a close, there is still work to be done.

Look for ways to repurpose the speech for other conferences and other audiences. Share the speech and its impact with your employees, press and analyst contacts, clients and business partners to reinforce your key messages and boost brand awareness and thought leadership.

Conduct an assessment of each speaking engagement. Track attendance numbers and audience profiles, and solicit feedback from both the speaker and the conference organizer. This will help in determining whether or not you should pursue a speaking opportunity next year.

In an increasingly crowded marketplace, a strategic and well-managed speakers bureau program can help your company reach the right audience with the right messages. But, as with other key marketing programs, you have to invest the necessary time, money and executive support to realize the tremendous benefits a speaking program can yield. **PRN**

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