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To Build Your Business, Speak to Groups!

by Ken Lizotte

Smart consultants well understand the value of relationship building in developing and keeping new business. What better vehicle for relationship building than an event at which lots of high-level business prospects will show up in one place to listen to you?

An added bonus is the promotion you gain by having your name, your firm's name, your bio and your credentials published in the conference brochure, then mailed out to thousands upon thousands of successful professionals.

For all such reasons, speaking must be pursued. Do you value meeting people one-on-one? Speaking multiplies the benefits of such encounters by maximizing relationship efforts. Choose the right topic and the right audience, and you'll frequently be pleasantly surprised at how fruitful speaking can be.

For consulting actuaries, speaking provides value in other ways as well, contributing to you personally, as well as professionally:

1. Preparing a presentation helps you organize and deepen your thoughts.
2. Speaking forces you to think quickly on your feet, economizing and refining how you articulate your ideas and value proposition.
3. Fielding audience questions helps you perceive your own

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concepts in a new light. You may be asked something you hadn't thought about before, leading to new research on your part, or hear an attendee describe a personal experience that bolsters your case.

4. Speaking provokes speaker-audience sharing, spawning new thoughts to be absorbed by speaker and audience alike.

But I'm Afraid to Speak!

It's an age-old maxim that when surveys are taken of the general populace, people report they fear public speaking more than death! If that's you, let's get over this right now. But my ordering you to be brave may not be sufficient to get you there. So review these suggestions for getting you off your nervous duff and up to the front of the room:

- Take a course or join Toastmasters. Find a way to practice speaking in a safe setting. There are public speaking courses galore at college and community adult education centers. There's also Toastmasters International, an informal speaking practice club found in most regions, usually meeting in a library or local hotel. Individuals of all stripes get together to coach each other on their speaking skills. You should also check out the National Speakers Association, which probably sponsors a chapter near where you live. This professional association will get you past your amateur status, so you can fully integrate it into your "thoughtleading" repertoire.
- Speak, speak, speak. Find as many places to speak as you can, not only to audiences of prospects but general business and civic audiences and even your colleagues at the Society of Actuaries (SOA) and other places. You'll experience ups and downs, even times you wish you had never gotten up on that stage. But by keeping at it, you'll turn out a better speaker for it, experience being the proverbial best teacher.
- Recognize opportunities. Notice also how many mini-opportunities abound for speaking, many of which could be easily passed by. Sometimes seemingly mundane situations can be beneficial not only to practicing speaking but to promoting your "thoughtleading" brand as well.

So when a program host invites audience attendees to stand up and give their "30-second elevator speech," you'll want to jump right up and be the first to go. You'll not only be grabbing an unexpected chance to practice, but what you say in those 30 seconds may put you as much in the spotlight as the keynote speaker.

For example, my elevator speech (which I call an "impact statement" thanks to Relationship Capital expert Jim Masciarelli who designed it) typically scores me great attention from an audience because it hits them squarely where they live. My impact statement follows Masciarelli's careful construction as described in his book *PowerSkills*:

"Hello, my name is Ken Lizotte. I'm with emerson consulting group," I begin, then after a momentary pause (for effect) ... "*where we make business experts famous!*"

"We do this by helping them get their ideas published, thereby positioning them as leading thinkers in their field. If you'd like to gain more recognition in your target market as an expert with an edge, see me tonight or send me an email."

Then I sit down as many in the room murmur and plan to approach me later and grab my business card. Gets 'em every time!

Your task then is to plug in your best attention-grabbing initial description followed by elaboration on how you do what you do. You'll wake up those in the room to your business value and to their need to get in touch with you without delay!

What Will I Speak About?

The best speaking topics are those aligned with your business objectives and the reputation you want to cultivate as an expert.

Although most major conferences will require you to fill out a formal proposal document listing your topic's "learning points" and "takeaways" and perhaps an outline of your presentation and other details, less particular situations (such as an association chapter meeting, a Rotary Club, or a civic organization) will more likely request only your topic title and a "short description."

Thus, your "speaking topics list" should merely reflect the same core services that you offer your clientele, but with a less sales-y and more educational slant. Examples: "Five Traits of Great Actuaries," "How Accurate Numbers Can Keep Your Business Strong" and "Mistakes to Avoid When Taking a Business Risk."

A Word About PowerPoint

At a speaking gig in New Jersey, I did my usual thing, which typically involves just talking and interacting with my audience without the aid of charts, slides or overheads. After I finished, one attendee thanked me profusely "for not using PowerPoint."

When PowerPoint first came on the scene, it seemed that everybody

had to include a PowerPoint component to their presentations. And of course as the bells and whistles developed, the PowerPoint parts got glitzier and glitzier. After a while, the whole thing got way out of control.

In fact, Tom Kennedy, founder and president of The Kennedy Group, a speech coaching consultancy in the Boston area, actually refers to the PowerPoint phenomenon as "Death by PowerPoint." he recommends giving up slides altogether, or if you don't feel ready for that, he says, try putting your presentation together first, without choosing slides, then carefully take note whether adding slides will help or hurt you. "If it's not truly a visual aid," he says, "It's your competition!"

So stay away from PowerPoint slides if you can and practice speaking "without a net." You'll learn to communicate more directly with your audience, more clearly, more spontaneously and more comfortably. You'll stop fearing public speaking and start looking forward to any chance to share your expert ideas and show off your value to those who need to employ you.

Ken Lizotte, CMC, is author of *The Expert's Edge: Become the Go-To Authority that People Turn to Every Time* (McGraw Hill) and chief imaginative officer (CIO) of emerson consulting group inc. in Concord, Mass., which transforms professional service firms and consultants into "thoughtleaders," separating them from the competitive pack. A Certified Management Consultant, he is a co-founder of the National Writers Union, a seminar leader at Harvard University, member of the CEO Club of Boston and IMC USA, and a graduate of Alan Weiss's Million Dollar Consulting College. Visit his website: www.thoughtleading.com.



475 North Martingale Road, Suite 600, Schaumburg, Illinois 60173
Phone: 847.706.3500 Fax: 847.706.3599 www.soa.org