



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Public Speaking: Its Many Benefits Can Grow Your Business

by Ken Lizotte

Smart professionals well understand the value of relationship building in developing and keeping new business, and what better vehicle to further such cause than an event at which YOU are the public speaker? Do you value networking with people one-on-one? Speaking multiplies the benefits of such encounters by initiating and solidifying personal connections. Choose a topic that illustrates what you do and what you know and you'll frequently be pleasantly surprised at how fruitful public speaking can be. New prospects and clients will come out of the woodwork.

Public speaking also provides value in other ways, contributing to you personally as well as professionally, including the fact that:

1. Preparing a presentation helps you organize and deepen your thoughts.
2. Speaking forces you to think quickly on your feet, economizing and refining the way you articulate your value proposition.
3. Fielding audience questions helps you perceive your own concepts in a new light, especially when asked about something you hadn't thought of before. You may learn something new about your client base when an attendee describes a personal experience or raises a provocative customer dilemma.
4. Overall, speaking provokes speaker-audience sharing, which *spawns new thoughts* that can be translated into new actions, services and products.

What Do Meeting Planners Want?

If you decide to make speaking a major component of your marketing, one big question to answer is: What are our conference and meeting planners looking for? This is actually not a naive question because professional events typically do have themes. So, unless you review an event's speaker guidelines and past agendas carefully, you could be barking up the wrong tree in your attempt to secure a speaking spot there.

For example, many legal or engineering associations prefer to stress topics that are professional-technical in nature, such as seminars on new regulations, changes in laws, new technological developments or accounting procedures. If you can speak to such issues, you may find yourself in great demand as a

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speaker for such groups.

On the other hand, many other event planners seek broader topics, meaning you must adapt your topics to a wider audience. So "How to Keep Your Business's Books" may end up more of an attraction than "The Latest Actuarial Regulations." You want to be sure your knowledge is tailored to whatever the particular audience is seeking and able to keep pace with.

But I'm Afraid to Speak!

Some people get stymied before they even begin their presentations. However, this is mainly due to the age-old maxim that public speaking is feared—or so survey-takers consistently report—even more than death. If that describes you, here are a few tips for getting past this, so that fear of public speaking won't prevent you from enjoying its many benefits:

- *Take a course or join Toastmasters.* Find a way to practice speaking in a safe setting via public speaking courses at colleges and community adult education centers or through Toastmasters International, an informal speaking practice club found in most regions, usually meeting in a library or local hotel. In such venues, individuals of all stripes get together to coach one another on speaking skills. And you might also check out the National Speakers Association, which likely sponsors a chapter near you. This professional association can help you fully integrate public speaking into your business development repertoire.
- *Recognize speaking opportunities.* Notice how many mini-opportunities abound for speaking around you, many of which you could easily pass by. Sometimes seemingly mundane situations can be beneficial not only for practicing speaking, but for promoting your brand as well, such as voluntary elevator pitches at networking events.
- *Speak, speak, speak.* Find as many places to speak as you can and go use them. You'll experience ups and downs of course, and there will be times when you wish you had never gotten up on your feet. But if you keep at it, you'll become a better speaker, plus you'll be happy with the newfound confidence that speaking creates.

A Word about PowerPoint

Once at a speaking gig in New Jersey, I did my usual thing, which typically involves just talking to and interacting with my audience without the aid of charts or slides or overheads. After I finished, one attendee thanked me profusely "for *not* using PowerPoint." She'd gotten so tired, she told me, of trying to keep up with all the slides that most speakers insist on including.

When PPT first came on the scene, everybody seemed to feel they had to include this component in their presentations so that the PPT portion moved center stage and took control. By now, PPT has gotten way OUT of control!

This development coupled with all-too-frequently just-plain-bad PPT presentations has given birth to a resistance movement to PowerPoint presentations. Tom Kennedy, a speech coaching consultancy in the Boston area, actually refers to the PPT phenomenon as "Death by PowerPoint," recommending speakers give up slides altogether. Of course, you may not feel comfortable with that, he says, so I suggest putting your presentation together first, without choosing slides, then carefully evaluate (be honest!) whether adding

any slides will add any value. "If it's not truly a visual *aid*," Kennedy says, "then it becomes your competition!"

So stay away from PPT slides if you can and practice speaking without a net. You'll learn to communicate more directly with your audience, more clearly, more spontaneously, more comfortably and more confidently. You'll soon actually look forward to any chance to share your knowledge and ideas and to show off what I call your expert's edge. At that point, public speaking will deepen your career, further your contacts and accelerate your business.



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