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Speak Your Way to Success

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When you accept an invitation to speak, do you simply assume that speaking will increase your visibility and generate business opportunities? Or do you take concrete steps to ensure that you make the most of the podium?

Even successful actuarial consultants often take the first approach. The assumption is that by increasing visibility (e.g., speaking), business opportunities will automatically come our way. This will sometimes happen, but it's very much hit or miss. And it's not very difficult to take some simple steps that dramatically increase the hit rate!

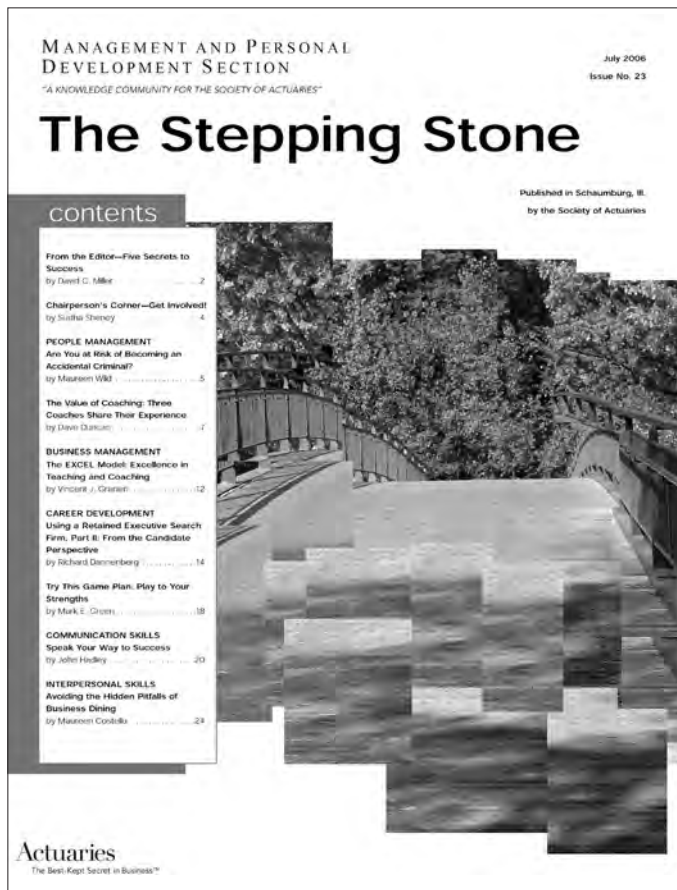
I've broken this down into five stages to ensure that you convert your speaking engagements into business opportunities, which I remember with the acronym SPEAK:

- Setting the Stage
- Preparation
- Execution
- Action
- Kick-Off

SETTING THE STAGE

Before you accept a speaking engagement, think about whether it is the right audience and venue for you. Will the audience be made up of people who might be interested in your services or your company's services—your “target market/client”?

This is one of the most important steps and one commonly given short shrift. The temptation is to accept any speaking engagement because that helps “get the word out.” If you are selective about getting the word out to the right people, in the right way, your engagements will be dramatically more successful, and you will quickly begin to be seen as a focused expert in that area.



Here are some of the questions you should ask yourself about any potential speaking engagement:

- How does the opportunity fit your niche?
- Are you speaking to just your target audience, or is it a mixed audience? And how big is the projected audience?
- Are you sharing the podium? If there are other speakers, are they also marketing products or services and how do those relate to yours? Are they competitive or complementary?
- What are the dynamics? Are people coming specifically to see/hear you, or is it a venue where people come for the event and you happen to be the current hired gun?
- To what extent can you promote your product or services at the seminar? Will you get the opportunity to present your marketing message, company, etc., beyond just having it on a slide somewhere?
- What are the goals of the persons or organization arranging the presentation/venue, and how can you help achieve their goals?



- What are the key problems they face?
- How will the event be marketed and by whom?

Now figure out what you can do to make it draw more people who fit YOUR target market, and to ensure that YOU can build the rapport you need with your targets.

PREPARATION

One of the most important things for you to do as a speaker is to build rapport with your audience. This is absolutely critical to have any hope of generating business opportunities. But why wait until you get up to the podium to do this? That limits you to the time you have in front of your audience. Think about how much more powerful your presentation will be if you have taken steps to build rapport in advance, so that people are already excited about coming and listening to you and hoping to actually meet you!

This is about “pre-marketing” your presentation. Don’t assume that, just because the organizers are going to send out a meeting brochure or flyer, it will automatically drive people to your session. For example, last fall at the local community college, I was asked to do a workshop on “5 Secrets to Getting a Job You’ll Love!” This was an expanded in-person version of a very successful tele-class that consistently attracts 30 or 40 registrants every time I present it. I assumed the community

college was very experienced in marketing these events; it runs a wide variety of career workshops all year long. When I arrived, there were four people in the room. They asked me if I would repeat the session six weeks later. This time I took charge of putting the word out in a variety of ways and 43 people showed up. The college’s comment: “We’ve never had so many people come to one of our workshops!”

And even if the organizers will do a great job of marketing the event, you should still think about what you could do to encourage more people in your niche to attend, including ways you might promote the overall event (if your program is part of a larger event)! Some ways you might do this:

MARKETING THE EVENT

- Post announcements to your newsletter and to others’ newsletters.
- Ask friends and business associates to forward an e-mail announcement that you provide to them.
- Alert people who have attended talks you’ve given in the past.
- Put announcements out to relevant Yahoo or other networking groups.
- Put up flyers in libraries or businesses near the location of the event.
- Hold tele-classes or webcasts that give a taste of what people will get from the event.

PRE-MARKETING TO THE EVENT ATTENDEES

- Survey pre-registrants about key issues or alternate points that you might address in the talk.
- Call people who pre-registered—this could be to remind them to come, or to ask about one or two key issues they would want to see addressed. (This also gives you valuable information for any follow up you might do afterwards.)
- Send out postcard reminders, including a simple testimonial or key point attendees can look forward to getting from the program.
- Give a simple “homework” assignment.

People appreciate a speaker reaching out to them. Just a simple step like this can substantially decrease the number of no-shows. (One of the people I called for a tele-class I was running told me he was very sorry he wouldn’t be able to make it. I asked if he’d like to set a time to just talk about some of the issues he was facing. He did and then became a client.)

EXECUTION

Execution is about how you deliver your presentation to build rapport and encourage follow up.

- Ask questions.
- Identify challenges and get your audience thinking about them.
- Don't make your focus to answer all of the possible questions people might have about the subject. Yes, give them good information. But if you spend most of your time giving me all the answers, I may recognize that you are very knowledgeable, but I will also likely conclude that I don't need to hire you now. I'll see what I can do on my own first with the information you provided.
- Make it interesting and involving; get as much audience participation as possible!
- Don't hand out printouts of the slides up front; you want people focused on you and what you are saying, not reading the information on the slides in their lap. Use a handout, with highlights, or modified/simplified versions of the slides, so that they need to pay attention to you.
- Make sure you incorporate time for responding to the audience's specific questions. Many in the audience will consider the Q&A period the most valuable part of the presentation!

ACTION

You need to be very intentional about creating a **Call to Action** in your presentation. This is the best way to ensure that speaking generates business opportunities, and is one of the most commonly overlooked steps. What are some ways you can do this?

- Offer some form of special deal—a way to take what they have learned to the next level. If you have a product or service you can offer on the spot, you could offer a special price or additional bonuses for signing up right away.
- Invite audience members to sign up for a free consultation.
- Offer to provide additional information on the topic.
- Provide a special report, the results of a survey, a newsletter or report or send a copy of the complete set of slides.
- Raffle off a copy of a product, recording or other item of value.

When you are offering something tangible such as a report, it is particularly powerful to hold a copy up and show it to the audience, describing key elements. But resist having copies there to

hand out. Instead, offer to send it to anyone who hands you a business card or fills out an evaluation form (with contact information). This ensures you get contact information and provides a convenient excuse for your post-presentation follow up.

One more point: To help you market your next event, why not ask the audience to fill out your own evaluation or testimonial form? This can provide you valuable testimonial clips to use in your next marketing letter or to provide to event organizers. And then the special offer you are going to make can be positioned as your thank-you for their feedback—an exchange of value for value.

KICK-OFF

What is this last step I call the Kick-Off? This is perhaps the most critical step, where you now build on the rapport you hopefully created during the presentation. This is where the “sale” really gets started.

You need to follow up with everyone who came to the seminar! You need to add them to your ongoing, keep-in-touch strategy—e-mails, newsletter, mailing lists, etc. You need to take immediate action to continue the relationship building.

For example, if you offered a free report, follow up by e-mail with each person who requested it within 24 hours of the presentation. Then put them in your tickler list to follow up again a week later to make sure they received it, to see if they have any questions or to set up a phone appointment to answer any questions they may have.

And if you have a broader list of people who came to the presentation, e-mail everyone who didn't request the report and offer to send it to them as well.

If you follow these simple steps, I guarantee your speaking engagements will generate many more business opportunities! ■



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ENDNOTE

- 1 For most of this article, I'm going to assume you are a consultant or marketing-oriented professional whose ultimate goal is to promote your services or products. The same concepts apply to actuaries who are simply trying to raise their personal visibility. For example, if you are an interest sensitive product actuary, think in terms of how to communicate the value you bring to the table in that role, and your target market/client would be those whom you would want to have hear about that value—for example, people of influence who might one day want to hire someone with your talents.