

Affordable Meetings

Speaking of Value

by [Ruth A. Hill](#)

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Hotel rooms, food and beverage, transportation and meeting space are not the only areas that have a budgetary impact on meetings. Content providers—speakers and presenters—are another important area where smart shopping matters.

Speakers bureaus are among the first to note that planners should explore the variety of services that today's speakers and presenters are often capable of providing. If not, they are leaving money on the table.

According to Gail Davis, president of Gail Davis & Associates, a Colleyville, Texas-based speakers bureau, smart buyers are looking for a maximum return on investment when they shop for a speaker.

"They ask about what this speaker can do in addition to the main presentation," she says. "Will they do a breakout with strategic sales managers, and will they include travel expenses in their fee?"

Celebrities, former presidents and famous athletes may still demand top appearance fees for a keynote, but most content providers are more willing to negotiate both fees and content contributions than they used to be. Savvy buyers expect much more than a 60-minute segment that includes a question-and-answer session at the end.

In today's economy, many speakers are in less demand than they were a few years ago—and, in some cases, have lowered their booking fees. Because of this, buyers are not only in a stronger position to stretch their speaker dollars, but also to engage popular presenters on a short-term basis.

"Some speakers are making more than one appearance or coupling an appearance with coaching and facilitating," says Stacy Tetschner, National Speakers Bureau executive vice president and CEO. "They get a bundled contract with payment, and they are doing speaking, coaching and consulting. Many speakers didn't embrace this model until last year."

Objectives Still Rule

Davis and others note that some things haven't changed with the economic downturn.

"I always ask about what the planner wants their attendees to take with them when they leave," Davis says. "What is the home run that you envision—will your people feel it's worth their time, be stimulated, intellectually charged and so on? If the occasion is an incentive, will they feel thanked and pumped to go out and sell more because you gave them the gift of hearing that speaker?"

According to Steve Auer, CEO of Cadence Inc., a meeting planning and event production company in Wheeling, Ill., the message contained in presentations has become more important than whether or not they are delivered by a big-name speaker. As a result, buyers are as concerned with content value as they are with fees.

"My first question to a speaker is about what they can do to move my audience," he says. "What is your effect, and the business outcome, I ask. When people walk out of the meeting room, what will they do?"

However, he laments the fact that budget cuts and perception issues surrounding meetings have made it much more difficult for planners to higher top keynote speakers. All too often they are missing from today's meetings environment, he adds.

"I miss the good keynoters because they can provide a theme or thread you can hang your hat on and tie everything else to," Auer says.

However, he adds that planners need to remember that today's environment is ripe for productivity and creativity, even in the absence of the most expensive keynoters.



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"I am a firm believer in a lot of group workshops and team building," he says. "Experiential training done well definitely has huge value now because people know they need to justify their existence and provide productive output on the job. If you've seen half of your coworkers disappear, you know you're holding the bag."

According to veteran meetings facilitator and trainer Joan Eisenstodt, chief strategist of Eisenstodt Associates in Washington, D.C., planners should include objectives in their speaker RFPs.

"Rather than naming a specific speaker and what else they can throw in for content, state what you are trying to convey in the meeting, including the theme and overriding objective," she says. "In some cases, people should look into their organization for trainers and speakers. Put your money into training your own people to be better at delivery."

Another speaker resource, Eisenstodt adds, could be a local university, civic organization, association or business. This approach saves on transportation costs and spotlights a local person tied in with the meeting destination.

Give and Take

While speakers may be available at negotiable terms these days, suppliers say buyers should not expect to take undue advantage of the situation.

"Some [speakers] are willing to reduce their fees if the client is willing to pay up front," Tetschner says. "Some ask for an all-inclusive fee that includes travel and expenses. This means T&E is not billed separately and the advantage to the planner is that they know the expense up front and not after the fact."

Planners might also ask for special appearances at breakouts, a meet and greet, or book signings, he adds. More face time often adds value.

According to Auer, the bottom line is that speakers these days are like most other industry suppliers—hungry for work and open to new ideas.

"They want to be a resource, and are willing to take on additional responsibility to get there," says Auer. "Think of a speaker—or any supplier—as an assistant and ask them for small tasks and expertise. Lean on them because everyone is reinventing themselves in today's economy."