WHAT MEETING PLANNERS WANT

& NINE THINGS THAT DRIVE THEM CRAZY ABOUT SPEAKERS

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Meeting planners have spoken, and we listened. On the subject of the selection and investment of a keynote speaker and what matters to them and their audiences, meeting planners are clear: it’s about substance, less about showmanship.

The specificity and knowledge that a speaker has, and can convey to an audience in an understandable, meaningful way, matters more than any other factor. Two-thirds (66%) of meeting planners cited “demonstrated expertise” as the number one thing they look for in a speaker, followed by 51%, who said “specific knowledge” was on their list.

In the 150 professional speaking planners surveyed, here are the results and our analysis.

“What Are The Top Things You Want In A Keynote Speaker?”

(Multiple Answers Allowed)

1. Demonstrated Expertise 66%
2. Specific Knowledge 51%
3. Inspirational 45%
4. Funny 32.6%
5. Name Recognition 31%
6. Unique 27%
6. Approachable And Drama-Free 27%
8. Easy Pre-Event Process/Paperwork 11%

“There’s riches in the niches.”

(Speaking Industry Adage)

Our data shows that the old speaking industry adage is true.
TO PUBLISH OR NOT TO PUBLISH

Speakers often wonder whether having a book is important. Our data points to yes. It’s also important to have specific knowledge of the industry, or of the clients’ circumstances.

This is interesting, because even when a speaker has demonstrated expertise, it doesn’t necessarily mean they have demonstrated expertise as a speaker. So, this idea that speaking is an art form or a performance is somewhat invalidated by these findings. Yet, being knowledgeable doesn’t necessarily mean being the best speaker.

EXPERTISE MORE IMPORTANT THAN PERFORMANCE, BEING INSPIRATIONAL

Some of the more performance-related aspects that we expected to rank higher, did not fare as well as expected.

Inspirational ranked at number three (45%), funny at number four (32.6%), and unique came in at number six (26%). Those elements are more rooted in performance, and they are further down the list in comparison to the things that are rooted in expertise. In the Mars vs Venus of the event world, fewer female planners (42.5%) want keynote speakers to be inspirational, compared to their male counterparts (51.5%).

Specific knowledge, which was ranked as the number two quality by half (51%) of the respondents, is even more important for planners who have been in the industry 21+ years (60%). Perhaps, similar to their sentiment about name recognition, they have come to recognize that there’s no replacement for specific expertise.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Name recognition is of modest importance overall (31%), but even less important (25%) to meeting planners who have been in the business 21+ years. This may reflect that their experience has taught them that “known” speakers aren’t always the “best” speakers.

SAVE THE DRAMA FOR YOUR SCREENPLAY

And, just 14.8% of male planners want their keynote speakers to be approachable and drama-free on site, but that attribute is desired by 30% of female planners.

Percent Of Planners Who Desire An Approachable And Drama-Free Speaker
The A-List That Speakers Don’t Want To Be On

THINGS THAT ANNOY MEETING PLANNERS

Generally, people don’t aspire to be annoying, but sometimes you don’t know until you ask. The same 150 professional meeting planners were surveyed for this, and here’s what they had to say.

“What Annoys You About Keynote Speakers?”

(Multiple Answers Allowed)

1. Content Not Tailored — 77%
2. Content Doesn’t Match Expectations — 74%
3. Over/Under Time — 32%
4. Profane/Inappropriate — 31%
5. In And Out — 29%
6. Disorganized — 21%
7. Unusual/Expensive AV Equipment — 13%
8. Super Specific Contract Terms — 11%
9. Doesn’t Promote — 6%
THE BOILER-PLATE SPEECH

The “boiler plate” keynote appears to be a no-no, as lack of customization is viewed as annoying by more than three-quarters of meeting planners (77%). Male planners are bothered less by this (66.6%), compared to female meeting professionals (79.1%).

THE BAIT AND SWITCH

The only other attribute that’s anywhere close to being as problematic is the intentional or unintentional bait and switch, where what’s presented on stage doesn’t sync up with what the planner expected.

Nearly three-quarters of meeting planners (74%) are annoyed by this. This is more of an issue for female planners, at 75%, vs. their male counterparts, 66.7% of whom are bothered by this.

DON’T LOVE ‘EM & LEAVE ‘EM

Overall, about one third (31%) of pro planners have issues with speakers that are in and out and don’t mingle with attendees. Male planners (37%) are more annoyed by the love ‘em and leave ‘em approach than their female counterparts (27.5%).

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL DANCERS, FOG MACHINES, & ORANGE M&Ms – NO WORRIES

Procedural elements like contract terms, AV, and event promotion aren’t viewed as annoyances by the preponderance of meeting planners, just 11% overall.

However, annoyance with unusual or expensive AV requirements is three times as more problematic for male planners (25.9%) than it is for female planners (only 8.3%).

Super specific contract terms are less of a problem for planners with more experience, as just 7% of those with 21+ years of experience are bothered by it, compared to 14% of planners with 11-20 years of experience, and 22% of planners with zero to 10 years of experience.

DISORGANIZATION

Similarly, perhaps because they have fewer notches on their event belt, less-experienced planners are also more perturbed by disorganized speakers, as 31% of planners with zero to 10 years of experience said they were bothered by this, compared to just 18% of respondents with 11 or more years working as a meeting planner.

POTTY MOUTH

Conversely, while profanity isn’t a big issue (31%) for planners at-large, it’s even less of a concern for less experienced – and presumably younger – planners, with only 11% bothered by inappropriate on-stage behavior. Perhaps most notably, 40.7% of male planners are bothered by profanity onstage, compared to 29.7% of female planners.
SUMMARY

When selecting a keynote speaker, meeting planners want substance, not showmanship. One half to two thirds of professional planners cite specific knowledge and demonstrated expertise as the top two criteria on which they base their hiring decisions. More important than being inspirational, funny, unique, a celeb or anything else, they want the real-deal speaker who is smart about their subject.

In addition, they want their speakers’ content to be tailored and to match expectations. Boilerplate speeches and bait-and-switch presentations are cited by three-quarters of meeting pros as the top two things that annoy them about keynote speakers. Speakers don’t need fancy laser shows, tech riders, or to be big promoters—rather, do what you say and talk to their people. A little personalization goes a long way.

This report reflects the results and analysis of 150 professional meeting planners surveyed to determine what they like and dislike about working with keynote speakers in 2020.

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SpeakInc is the largest non-exclusive speakers bureau in the United States, and connects event professionals with keynote speakers and entertainers aligned with their individual event objectives.

Michelle Joyce Speakers is a speaker management agency that supports leading keynote speakers in the areas of marketing, customer experience, leadership, personal development, and business growth.