

Speakers And Entertainers

The Vital Sparks

Behind Successful Events

By Steve Winston



Jaki Baskow
Chairman/Owner
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“Make sure their act or speech in some way pushes your message or agenda for the meeting. Make sure they’re capable of getting everyone involved and excited. And make sure you get them for the best price possible.”

As a planner, it’s probably no surprise that association meetings still use plenty of speakers and entertainers — even in this difficult watch-every-penny environment in which we’ve found ourselves. And there’s a good reason — several good reasons, in fact. How do you put a price on a successful meeting or convention? How do you put a price on achieving larger attendance, and greater participation by more members? How do you put a price on rewarding people for a year of hard work, and, sometimes, not enough recognition for their achievements? How do you put a price on the increased knowledge interchanges and networking opportunities offered by a larger attendance? Finally, how do you put a price on sending your attendees home energized, reinvigorated and raring to go?

PRICELESS OR PRICEY?

“You can’t, because those things are priceless to a planner and to an association,” said Jaki Baskow, chairman/owner of the highly regarded Las Vegas DMC Baskow & Associates. “What you can do, though, is make sure you get the right speaker or entertainer for your people. Make sure their act or speech in some way pushes your message or agenda

for the meeting. Make sure they’re capable of getting everyone involved and excited. And make sure you get them for the best price possible — because these days, entertainers and speakers have to be flexible, too, just like everybody else.”

For her association clients, Baskow frequently uses Andre-Philippe Gagnon, an impressionist and comedian who can bring a crowd to its feet in a hurry. Gagnon slips seamlessly from Frank Sinatra to Susan Boyle and from Sting to Barry White. He can even transition from voice to voice while singing the 1984 classic “We Are the World,” in which more than 45 of America’s top musicians and rock stars all had bit pieces in one song.

“Finding reasonably priced entertainment or speakers is certainly a challenge,” Baskow said. “You have to be creative. And you have to find people who are willing to recognize that the market may no longer bear what they used to charge.”

Greg Jenkins works often with a different type of speaker — professional athletes. Jenkins is a Partner with Bravo Productions, a Long Beach, CA, event planning firm. He noted that using an athlete can work well if the audience is predominantly male (and, if not, if the athlete is female) — and if the athlete has something to say, if he/she can contribute to the “conversation” taking place at the meeting. Jenkins said there’s both good and bad in working with this type of celebrity. The good, he noted, is that they command instant respect. The bad can sometimes occur, however,



Vernice "FlyGirl" Armour, America's first African American female combat pilot, enthralled the audience during her dynamic keynote address last month at Destination Marketing Association International's Annual Convention held at The Westin Diplomat Resort & Spa, Hollywood, FL.

when the athlete is peppered with questions about sports, rather than about achievement, determination, inspiration or triumph over adversity.

Jenkins also warned planners to beware of the type of superstar athlete he once witnessed who showed up at a meeting with an entourage, had nothing relevant to say, and left quickly after getting off the stage, rather than mingling as promised.

To avoid this catastrophe, Jenkins advised, "If possible, see the speaker firsthand at another engagement and make sure he has the ability to connect with the audience. Always read the fine print. Establish key messages for him to address, and put them in writing. And always — always — ask for references." Jenkins also advised against relying solely on a tape or CD of a previous presentation, because, naturally, the tape or CD will have been one of their finer moments as a speaker. Particularly in the case of an athlete or celebrity who's not a professional speaker, don't expect more from the person than was contracted.

CREATIVITY GOES A LONG WAY

Molly O'Neill is meetings manager at the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), an Arlington, VA-based organization that frequently uses high-profile speakers at its

events. She's used Soledad O'Brien of CNN; Malcolm Gladwell, noted best-selling author/writer for *The New York Times*; Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano; and the fractious and very entertaining Democrat/Republican couple of James Carville and Mary Matalin. O'Neill's annual National Conference on Education typically attracts about 3,200 attendees and an additional 300 exhibitors.

"We feel that a lot of speakers just ask too much money," O'Neill said. "But, if you're creative, there are often ways to get around it. For example, you always have to try and see if there's any flexibility. Or, sometimes we'll make a donation to their favorite charity in their name, in return for lowering their fee."

At AASA, O'Neill said, they generally come up with a theme for the meeting first, then start "blue-skying" about the most appropriate — and desirable — speakers. Once they target a few speakers, they put out the word to the rest of the organization, asking if anyone knows any of these speakers, or has any possible connection. If not, she then contacts speakers bureaus with which



Scott Cullather
Managing Partner
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New York, NY

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Casey Anderson
 Director of Meetings and Education
 National Academy of
 Elder Law Attorneys
 Vienna, VA

“I haven’t seen much loosening up of the purse strings by associations when it comes to entertainment. People are still very budget-conscious.”

she has a relationship. Entertainment, O’Neill noted, is a different story. In light of the economy and the events of the past few years, there’s no room in the budget for professionals. So she’ll generally use talented local students, perhaps from nearby universities.

“The first two meeting-budget casualties in any association are generally speakers and entertainment and then F&B,” said Casey Anderson, director of meetings and education for the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys (NAELA), based in Vienna, VA. “But NAELA does have a few options. For example, we do a lot of things on ‘The Hill,’ and we know a lot of people there. So we often try to reach out to people in government. For one thing, they have a lot to say to our members. And for another...they don’t always charge honorariums.”

Anderson noted that she’s tried to use speakers from “within the ranks” more often over the past year or two, as the economy has deteriorated. She said it’s harder to book entertainers now, because attendees want to know that the money they’ve paid for the event is being spent wisely. When she does need an entertainer, she first determines



Photo courtesy of ASAE & The Center

Computers were the star of the show last year: ASAE & The Center held their first Social Media Workshop, a hands-on lab experience for those just beginning to explore social media/Web 2.0 opportunities at their organizations.

whether anyone in NAELA has connections to that person. And if you do use entertainers, she added, make sure that it’s relevant, in some way, to what your group is all about.

“I haven’t seen much loosening up of the purse strings by associations when it comes to entertainment,” Anderson said. “People are still very budget-conscious.”

Scott Cullather is managing partner at inVNT (pronounced “invent”), an event designer and producer with offices in New York, Washington, DC, and Jacksonville, FL. He calls his staff “inVNTers.” He’s worked with numerous large associations, among them the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), whose meetings can attract upwards of 12,000 people.

What To Do And What Not To Do When Working With Speakers And Entertainers

- **DO** give the speaker or entertainer the demographics of the audience, and the culture of the organization.
- **DO** give the speaker or entertainer time to eat — either before or after.
- **DO** thorough research on your speakers, and their ability to capture an audience.
- **DO** make sure the act is relevant to your organization or that it can be customized to be made relevant to your organization.
- **DO** make sure that your speakers can provide practical information to your attendee — information that they can really use when they get back home.
- **DO** make sure there’s a full understanding — by both sides — of the rider requirements.
- **DO** try to get to know the speaker or entertainer, whenever possible; their needs should be considered, as well.
- **DON’T** book an act without fully accounting for any extras the entertainers might need such as extra musicians, technical people, etc.
- **DON’T** spring last-minute surprises on the talent by asking them right before they go onstage to do something that’s not specified in the contract.
- **DON’T** be afraid to ask the speaker/talent for a reduction in the price; you can’t receive what you don’t request.
- **DON’T** go to a speakers bureau first. Your first step should be to find out if any of your members have any connections to the speaker(s) you’d like.
- **DON’T** forget that there must be perceived value for the attendees in the speaker or entertainer. After all, it’s their money you’re spending.
- **DON’T** hire talent that wouldn’t be effective in your venue.
- **DON’T** let one speaker or entertainer exceed his time limit, especially if it’s going to impact the next presenter.
- **DON’T** forget to have someone onsite specifically dedicated to working with the talent, so that any last-minute crisis can be avoided.

— **SW**

“We worked with Al Gore at the last SHRM meeting,” Cullather said. “And we just used Hall & Oates at SHRM last week. We made sure to work with them beforehand, to customize their act for the association. We briefed them about the organization, the culture, the demographics of the group, etc. You have to tailor any program for the attendees...and you have to make sure the entertainment is capable of conveying key messages to them. There’s no substitute for making sure that the talent is aligned with the audience and with the message.”

For a recent meeting of the Association of General Contractors (AGC) in Orlando, Cullather secured the services of Gary Sinise, who’s best known for his acting on TV and in the movies and is also known to music buffs for his “Lieutenant Dan’s Band” (named for his character in “Forrest Gump”). Cullather explained why this is a good example of a perfect match: The members of AGC are generally very patriotic, and Sinise spends a good deal of his time visiting our military bases around the world.

APPEAL TO THEIR TASTE BUDS

Carylann Assante, CAE, is vice president of development for ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership. In August, she managed the group’s Annual Meeting & Exposition, held this year in Los Angeles, with roughly 5,000 attendees. “Our members do appreciate good entertainment,” Assante said. “But, over the past few years, we’ve tried to be more creative in finding good entertainment that doesn’t cost quite as much. For example, one year we staged a ‘Famous Chef’ competition — chefs cost less than the average celebrity. We’ve also started asking our membership to think about sponsoring some of the entertainment, and they’ve responded. Our goal for the Los Angeles meeting was to celebrate our host city by doing a Taste of L.A. theme. And, for some of the more upscale events, we did charge a fee.”

For the Taste of L.A., Assante had to come up with some unusual ideas to attract people who were willing to pay for the special events. One of the ideas was an Artisanal Cheese, Spirits & Cocktail Pairing Adventure Lounge created and

developed by Barrie Lynn, The Cheese Impresario. Lynn left the corporate world years ago to pursue her passion for artisanal cheeses, wines and other fine foods, and learned how to pair them together. The attendees loved it.

“I created a one-of-a-kind experience for about 1,100 VIPs, at the association’s Food & Wine Classic event,” Lynn said. “And while people really enjoy what I do, I’m very keen on including educational aspects about pairing cheese and wine or liquor. For example, I paired a single malt Scotch whisky with a tri-milk cheese — cow, goat and



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Barrie Lynn
The Cheese Impresario
Los Angeles, CA

sheep’s milk. And I paired a dark sipping rum with a Gouda. As the evening went on, word spread about what was going on in my area, apparently because more and more people started coming.”

This year, Lynn was asked by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences to prepare her Artisanal Cheese & Wine Tasting Adventures for gift baskets given at the Oscars, and she was asked to do the same for the Emmys and the Golden Globe Awards.

“People are looking for something new,” she said. “They want to be educated now, as well as entertained. And associations are looking to provide these things without spending an arm and a leg. If you get someone who can engage attendees in a creative new ways, it ends up costing associations much less than they’d spend on celebrities — who would probably never even engage one-on-one with the attendees.”



Carylann Assante, CAE
Vice President of Development
ASAE & The Center
Washington, DC

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CONNECT WITH THE AUDIENCE

Dayna Steele recently spoke before the 1,000-member Institute of Real Estate Management, and the 1,000-member Independent Insurance Agents Association. She has a rather unusual background for a speaker at association events because, for many years, she was the most popular rock ‘n’ roll radio disc jockey in Houston. She’s worked events with many famous rock stars. And she’s written a book called *Rock to the Top: What I Learned*

About Success From the World’s Greatest Rock Stars (Brown Books Publishing Group, 2008). She applies those lessons to her speaking engagements, and she says that attendees are instantly interested because of her unusual background. And she starts off her addresses in a most unusual manner.

“I start all my speeches by giving them my Twitter name and my Facebook address,” Steele said. “Let’s face it; many of them are texting or tweeting, whether

we (speakers) want to believe it or not. This connects me instantly with the audience, in a light-hearted way. And the tweets and Facebook entries

I see afterward are always useful to me, because I can see how people are reacting — in real time.”

Her theme is generally “Check Your Foundation: The Four Corners of Your Rock Band Stage,” customized for each client. “I’m often the last one to speak, at the end of the conference,” Steele said. “I’m the get-them-to-stay-until-the-bitter-end speaker. So I have to be interesting and engaging.”

Tom Ferry’s not a rock star. But he is a noted speaker and presenter out of Los Angeles, and CEO of Tom Ferry Companies. And he brings a message of practical experience to any group at which he speaks — he’s founded 11 companies. In addition, he’s a highly accomplished business coach who has solved myriad problems for both companies and associations. Ferry believes there are two basic types of speakers: prima donnas and those who are there to contribute and connect.

“I get most of my engagements by word of mouth,” said Ferry. “Meeting planners refer me to other meeting planners. I think people at these events — especially now — really want to come away with some knowledge they can put to practical use once they get back home. And it hasn’t always been that way. When I started out as a ‘coach’ back in 1993, I was often asked ‘For what team?’”

The focus of many of Ferry’s speeches is about



Photo courtesy of Tom Ferry Companies

Tom Ferry, a noted presenter and speaker based in the Los Angeles area, suggests that getting attendees fired up is just one part of the job. Ferry sends them home with concrete and practical advice that they can put to work to create passion and purpose in their lives.



The natural backdrop at Puka Beach, Boracay Island, The Philippines, provided a magnificent setting at sunset for the entertaining cultural performance at the final-night gala and closing ceremonies for Event Asia 2010.

how to shift from living by default to living by design, and how that knowledge can be transferred to business or organizational matters. His book *Life by Design* (Ballantine Books, 2010) was No. 4 on *The New York Times* best-seller list.

“Just getting people fired up is the type of thing that fades away quickly,” Ferry said. “You need to give them something concrete, something practical.”

Something “concrete and practical” would seem to be the last thing that toy designers could talk about. But Creativity Central’s Maria and Charlie Girsch use the creative experience they

gained during their 25 years as toy inventors to reawaken the creative spirit of individuals and organizations and spark the kind of inventive thinking that breeds success. Charlie and Maria perform a variety of interactive creativity exercises with attendees based on their ACT program: attitude, commitment, tools. The goal is to get attendees to realize that they have the innate tools necessary to be more creative, and that they can call upon these tools on an everyday basis.

“We seem to have hit a big need with this,” Charlie Girsch said. “Let’s face it. What organization doesn’t need more creativity in these difficult times? What organization doesn’t want its people to learn how to do more with less by enhancing their creative skills? And what organization isn’t searching for new ideas and new ways of doing things?”

AC&F



Tom Ferry
CEO
Tom Ferry Companies
Irving, CA

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