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Speaking Attracts More Clients and Referrals

Speaking brings you instant credibility. You may get business even from people who didn't hear you speak.

—Miriam Otte, *Marketing with Speeches and Seminars*¹

Speaking on topics of interest to your audience can be a great marketing technique. The only drawback to it is that many people rate fear of public speaking *above* fear of death! The benefits of speaking can be terrific. You establish yourself as an expert. You test topics for audience interest. You give people a sample of your services. You gather feedback. You obtain referrals. People come to you. These benefits can be yours if you're willing to risk "death by speaking." Actually, it's possible to use seminars to promote your firm and get *other people* to do most of the talking. For instance, you can do a joint seminar with an attorney and a business consultant who are referral sources. And your "talk" can be a question-and-answer session where you don't have to give a speech at all.

Seminars enable you to communicate your knowledge, demonstrate your creativity, and generate chemistry between you and a prospect. A carefully planned program can enable you to leverage your "selling" time and use group dynamics to motivate potential clients to hire you. Jeff Everly, whom we met in Day 4, says, "The speeches that David Frazier or I give to banking organizations position us as experts in a particular field. We both believe this has been one of the most important activities we have used to attract clients to our firm."

Speaking can vary from the local Rotary Club, to seminars in your office, to industry meetings. You'll want to do most of your speaking to audiences who could be clients or referral sources. That means talking less to other accountants and talking more to client-related groups. If the Lions or other local groups are appropriate for you, you're in luck. Usually there are dozens

of such groups in any urban or suburban area. You can start with your personal contacts and the local phone book and contact Pilots, Soroptimists, Moose, Chambers, and many more such groups.

Greg Anton tells about his speaking experiences: “Sales training has taught me that becoming a ‘famous’ person is valuable. I mapped out a methodology to use to become famous within an area of expertise. I really set out to become a knowledgeable SEC and assurance expert within our local office.

PORTRAIT OF A SALES LEADER

DEBORAH BAILEY BROWNE graduated from The Rainmaker Academy in 2003. She has always been interested in developing new business for her firm, but she felt like she needed more tools and better skills to grow to her full potential.

Browne just opened her own accounting firm after many years as a partner with a major New York accounting firm. For many years, she was the leading business developing partner for her firm, so she decided to start her own business. “Blonde and smart” is how one of her fellow Rainmakers described her. She holds an MBA from Fordham University in New York and a BA from Pace University. She graduated summa cum laude and received Beta Gamma Sigma honors.

Browne grew up in a very competitive family. Many of her relatives were involved in accounting, so the influence of finance was overwhelming. She considered becoming a professional dancer, but her mother convinced her to pursue a career in business. This decision was very wise, as Browne has become a very sought after public speaker on important business topics. Her performance training has enabled her to better connect with her audiences.

In her first year, Browne expects to bill over \$1 million in gross volume to clients. She is building her firm as a full-service firm, offering audit, tax, and business consulting services.

I began teaching SEC-related courses for the AICPA [American Institute of Certified Public Accountants]. I teach an SEC course twice a year, and the majority of the public companies send their controllers and accountants to these courses. This gives me an opportunity twice a year to be in front of good prospects as a ‘somebody.’ People naturally gravitate to me to talk about their issues, problems, and opportunities.”

Six Steps to Speaking Success

When you speak before an audience, even a small one, the attendees perceive you as having a high level of expertise. Positioning yourself as an easy-going, articulate advisor is a great way to attract prospects to your accounting practice. I have found that there are six keys to success in becoming successful in seminars and speaking engagements:

1. Select the right target audience.
2. Select a topic that communicates benefits.
3. Select a topic that interests you.
4. Cover all of the logistics early.
5. Remember the element of theater.
6. Follow up with every invited guest.

Bill Fingland, managing partner of BKD, says, “I think doing presentations and then following up with audience members is a good use of people time. Any time you prioritize a list, people involvement is number one. The key thing in presentations is the follow-up. Don’t just go give a speech and then walk away. Give a speech and make sure that you interact with the group either during the breaks or after the speech. Collect business cards and follow up with phone calls. I want to know who’s asking questions, and then I follow up to make sure that I explained it well in the seminar. ‘I’m going to be out in your area—why don’t I stop by and talk to you about it?’ Do those kinds of things.

“Any marketing activity that involves people that’s well done has a higher priority in my mind than just the written kinds of brochures and newsletters and advertising.”

Select the Right Target Audience

To make your investment in seminars worthwhile, you should target an audience that has the potential to produce profitable business for you. A good way to focus your selection process is to invite or solicit those prospects with the same characteristics as your best clients.

Of course, some CPA firms use seminars to attract prospects from a new market segment. A seminar is a good way for you to acquire visibility and establish expertise. Last year a California CPA firm developed its manufacturing practice in spite of intense competition. Utilizing a seminar program as the centerpiece of its marketing efforts, this firm added over 10 new clients in one year.

Mike Kruse's office specializes in construction clients and gives seminars for them. He says, "When one of my partners appears before a construction trade group, we almost always come away with prospects. Most of our business comes from serving construction businesses and being in front of a group of construction firms is the right audience for us. We have developed a semiannual program for insurance companies and surety agencies. This is where we get most of our referrals. It is very important that you speak to groups that can help you."

Bill Jenkins on the Value of Educational Programs

Bill Jenkins is a big believer in educational programs. He says, "Several things happen in a good education program. One, the people within your firm are being trained—they increase their knowledge and become more sophisticated. Invariably the person who learns the most in any kind of educational setting is the person who is delivering the education, not the person in the audience. The educators not only learn more about the subject, they learn more about how to talk about it, how to express themselves—so it's a great learning experience for the people in the organization.

"From a marketing standpoint, it creates the opportunity for you to show off your knowledge. And, if you do it the right way and people feel like they are learning something from you, then they respect you and your firm. Heck, we all want to learn, and when we learn something from somebody, we hold that person in a higher regard. Educational programs are a natural way to open up doors for people to seek your advice. I still run into people every so often who will refer to something that they heard me say at a seminar several years ago. I want to keep an environment within our client base of 'We need to go to that Kennedy and Co. seminar because we learned something when we went to the last one.' That's the kind of high-level relationship we would like to have with our clients."

In targeting an audience, you'll want to consider the demographic profile of the participants—age, sex, income level, and so forth. It is important for you to know that you are talking to eligible prospects. It is important to know the occupation and industry affiliation of the attendees to insure your topic is relevant—medical professionals and medical administrators are

interested in very different issues. Participants' residence could be very important. If you are serving a local or regional client base, you may want to avoid national speaking opportunities. However, even when you don't want to attract clients from a broader geographical base, speaking to regional, state, or national groups is often worthwhile because of the publicity. Your image is enhanced when your clients read in their trade magazines or local papers that you are a featured speaker or seminar giver at the state convention.

Early in your career, you may want to join Toastmasters International. There is a chapter in almost every city in the United States. Toastmasters will help you hone your speaking skills so you are interesting and on point.

Deborah Bailey Browne says, "I think that almost any speaking engagement is a good speaking engagement. Anytime you are able to get in front of a crowd, it gets your name out, it gets you known and people are impressed by people who can speak in front of people. One of the things I've done is chair some nonprofit meetings. Usually nonprofits attract good potential clients. So they have been good for my business."

The Body Language of Public Speaking

If you want to become a good public speaker, watch others to see what they do and how they carry their bodies. For example, I've observed that good public speakers walk with their shoulders back, their heads high, and use a lot of hand and arm gestures. If you are nervous, hold your head up and your shoulders back and say, "I am feeling really good." Silly as this may seem, it actually works. Think of a time when you were feeling very confident and productive in some area in your life. How did you act? How did you walk? How did you talk? It's pretty hard to feel inadequate if you walk and act like you know what you are doing.

—Ken Blanchard²

Select a Topic that Communicates One or More Benefits

Have you ever prepared a good seminar, sent out hundreds of invitations, and had almost no one show up? If so, then the problem may have been the attractiveness of your seminar topic.

A person who decides to attend your seminar must believe that his or her investment of time and effort will pay off. And the expected return must be proportional to the investment. Therefore, your seminar must offer real benefits to your target audience.

For example, your topic could be “Section 125 Cafeteria Plans”—but that title, while descriptive, won’t even attract your mother! If, instead, you called the seminar “Increase Your Profits Now by Giving Your Employees a Raise,” the title spells out two possible benefits.

Advertising whiz Leo Burnett once said, “Don’t tell them how good you make the goods, tell them how good the goods will make them.” Before you finalize the topic for your seminar, ask yourself, “What benefits could my clients receive?”

Maximize the Effectiveness of Overheads and Slides

Here are a few suggestions to get the most out of overheads and slides:

- *Don’t begin or end a talk with overheads unless it’s a dazzling montage to get people’s attention.*
- *Make one point per slide.*
- *Use as few words as possible in the graphic. This allows you to do the narration to explain it.*
- *Never hand out copies of your presentation in advance. People will read them and not listen to you. Instead, hand them out after it’s over as a wrap-up.*
- *Tell people the essence of what’s covered on a slide before you show it to them. This puts you more in control as a speaker, not simply someone reading slides.*

—Granville N. Toogood, *The Articulate Executive*³

Bill Jenkins says, “The more our clients know about a particular subject, the more open they are to understanding the need for a consulting service. As a simple example, the more clients know about how the federal estate tax rules work, the more anxious they are to apply what they know and use more of your knowledge to help address that issue. And that is true over and over again, whether it’s estate planning or income tax planning. The other thing that education does prior to consulting is substantially shorten the individual sales cycle that is required with a particular client. If they can come to an educational program that Kennedy and Co. does and gain a basic understanding of concepts or some area of our practice, when we want to consult with them we don’t have to go back to ground zero each time. It reduces the amount of time it takes to explain to clients why they might benefit from that particular consulting service. The more educated people are, the more consulting services they will buy.”

Select a Topic that Interests You

People respond extremely well to an enthusiastic speaker, no matter what the content. Your passion about the subject must come through. No one will enjoy your speech unless you do. Giving a speech on a topic that doesn't interest you will do you more harm than good. Even though you may be tempted to accept the offer of a speech because you will get the exposure, turn it down if you cannot get passionate about the topic.

Terry Orr has had great success in coaching people on how to make presentations to owners of companies seeking financing. It is a subject in which he is extremely knowledgeable and passionate. Mike Kruse speaks to surety agencies on construction industry trends. Greg Anton speaks on SEC issues. These individuals are good business developers because they are knowledgeable and passionate about their topics.

Cover All of the Logistics Early

The myriad of details that come with planning a seminar can be quite extensive, so make sure you use a checklist. Otherwise, you may overlook seemingly trivial but ultimately important details. Consider location and timing early in your seminar planning. Although you want to avoid holidays and any significant local events, you might want to plan your seminar around another event. For example, a Friday afternoon–Saturday morning annual seminar before a major college football rivalry may be a great time to sponsor your industry event.

Timing for your audience is quite important. Bankers generally like breakfast seminars in their own large conference rooms. But attorneys seem to prefer late-afternoon programs that allow them to be in court in the morning.

Almost as important as the subject matter of your talk is the comfort of the room. You must consider temperature, lighting, sound, and potential distractions. I once did a seminar at a beautiful yacht club. Everything went great until about noon, when scantily clad bodies began parading by our windows!

Room temperature is very important. When people are too cold or too hot, they will not pay attention to you. Try to have the room's temperature at exactly 72 degrees if possible.

One of the worst things you can do is dim the lights for a slide presentation. When you do that, the focus goes off of you. Also, dim light tends to make people sleepy. You should be the focus of the program, so keep the lights up. If you are speaking to more than 20 people, or if the ceilings in your room are high, always use a microphone.

Before you begin speaking, make sure that all service personnel are out of the room. Clanging dishes and glasses, and people moving around the room, are distracting for you and your attendees.

If you are going to bring your partners or other personnel, have them prepped on all aspects of your speech. This group makes a great dress-rehearsal audience for you. Coach each person on how to answer different questions that may arise. And have each person from your firm sit with a different segment of the audience. Don't allow your people to sit together.

Bob Gaida recognizes the importance of being in the audience when another firm member is speaking. He says, "I'd rather not be giving the speech; I'd rather be in the room working it and have somebody else giving the speech. When you give a speech or sponsor a seminar, you ought to do your homework. First of all, there are so many opportunities to find out who's going to be there, at least by category. Is it going to be all CPAs? I don't need to go to meetings of CPAs. Shortly before you attend, you can get details on who signed up. Compare the names to your database. For those you don't know, research them. Identify those you think you want to meet. Go in with a team and say, 'Okay, you're going to meet these five people and I'm going to meet these five people tonight.' Keep your focus and get to those five people."

Listen to Yourself

Most people talk in more of a monotone than they realize. Grab a tape recorder and recite something into it. Get crazy with your intonation! Then play the tape back. You might find that it sounds pretty good.

—Art Sobczak, *Telephone Selling Report*⁴

Remember the Element of Theater

In his book *Selling to a Group*, Paul LeRoux⁵ says, "Successful seminars walk a fine line between advice and entertainment." Many accounting firms forget this important rule. All too often, a parade of knowledgeable but dull presenters plods to the lectern and reads the latest tax rulings. That's a waste of everyone's time—yours and the attendees. Remember, your audience is conditioned by years of movies and television and expects to be entertained. If you let them down, it will hurt you.

If you are not a showman, give interesting case studies or tell stories. People relate well to stories about situations like theirs. Also, it is much more interesting to tell a story about a client who survived an IRS audit than it is to list the seven tactics for surviving an audit.

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Here's another tip: The more you can involve the audience, the more they will like your presentation. Get your audience to stand up, ask questions, or role-play—your audience will stay awake and will be “tuned in” to you. There are wonderful books available to help you select some audience involvement techniques. Games and quizzes are fun. *Games Trainers Play* by John Newstrom and Edward Scannell⁶ has hundreds of ideas. Setting up case studies so that your audience gets involved with each other is a great way to keep the session interesting and moving.

Another technique that adds credibility to your presentation is to show that your advice is timely and of national importance. For example, hold up a copy of *The Wall Street Journal* when you quote it. Audiovisuals, presentation technology, and handouts can also be helpful, but just be careful that they don't overpower your presentation.

Another way to keep your audience involved is to talk with them the way you would with your best friend when you are discussing something that really interests you. If there is a gap between the formal way you present to an audience and the way you talk to your friends, use extensive rehearsal to close that gap.

When a show opens on Broadway, there are at least 60 hours of rehearsal behind every performance hour. Your preparation time is the most important aspect of your presentation.

Go for Involvement

Plan to get your audience involved. Give them ways to respond and react. Ask questions and ask for a show of hands. Have them shout out what's important to them about your topic. Gather responses or questions from them.

—Richard L. Hudson, *70 Steps to Speaking Success*⁷

Follow Up with Every Invited Guest

Allan Koltin, president of PDI Global, says, “The purpose of seminars is to create new business, so don't be like the doctor who said the operation was a success, but the patient died.” The most important element in making your seminar a sales success is in how you plan to follow up with your new contacts.

At the seminar itself, make sure that every member of your firm's team has an ample supply of business cards and is prepared to schedule follow-up appointments when the opportunity avails itself. You can also follow up

with new contacts after the seminar is over. And your efforts need not be “high pressure.” For instance, you could call and ask the attendees what they enjoyed about the program. If the contact has some interest in the subject matter—or in your firm—you should be able to detect it.

When you think about how you are going to follow up with your target audience, don’t overlook those who did not accept your invitation. After all, your goal isn’t to have people come to your seminar—it’s to have a marketing interaction with them. So send them a copy of the handouts with a cover note saying you missed them and will be calling soon.

Summary

Those CPAs who only hold a seminar every year or two will have a low marketing return. Like compound interest, as they increase in frequency, seminars have an increasing rate of return. Not only do you become more adept in the organization and presentation of seminars, but your audience will respond to you better.

Some of the most successful seminars my clients have held are those with 5 to 20 participants, held every week or twice a month. Develop a catchy topic, such as “Power Up Your Profits,” and invite a small assortment of clients, referral sources, and prospects so that you can meet the attendees personally. Over time, you will be surprised at how good you become in presenting your material.

The other key reason for an increasing success rate from a frequent seminar program is that you capture a share of the mind of your potential clients before their need develops. If a prospect thinks of you first when the need for your service develops, then you have created a competitive advantage.

The CPA who commits to a regular seminar program will become known as a communicator. As our complex business world changes, those who communicate on their feet will have a distinct competitive advantage.