

## IF YOU WANT TO BE A PROFESSIONAL SPEAKER ...

I receive numerous calls from people wanting to get together to “chat” about how they might become a professional speaker. Although I like to be as helpful as possible on the phone, I must say that the demands of being a full time professional speaker make it impossible to meet all the requests for general information on the speaking industry. So, I’ve tried to compile a few thoughts for folks who want to get started as a speaker, which I hope prove useful. I don’t pretend to have all the answers as I’m still on this journey myself but having been honored with the speaker of the year award a while back, I believe at least some of the information contained herein ,must be working.

If you’re serious about pursuing a career as a speaker, here are a few musts:

1. Join the professional association, National Speakers Association of Australia. They have monthly meetings in every state and would welcome you along as an introduction. You could attend a couple of meetings and network after with a wide range of speakers to determine if you would like to join and learn more about the industry.

They also organise an annual conference and a one day seminar throughout the year to provide practical information on “how to go from free to fee”.

Contacts: For the most up to date information, I recommend the website as the association is largely run by hard working volunteers who change periodically.

Web site <http://www.nationalspeakers.asn.au>

2. Realise that speaking is a business. It’s wonderful to be able to speak and give a message which you believe is worthwhile but if you want to rely on speaking to earn your living, you must realise that you are a product and it’s not all that different to running any other small business, in terms of marketing, keeping accurate financial records, managing cash flow, keeping the data base updated, research and development, travel arrangement, stock control, office administration, etc. Only a very small percentage of my time is actually spent with face-to-face client contact. So ...
3. Recognise that speaking on stage is not the “glamour” job that it appears from the audience. You’re often away from home for extended periods to time, waiting at airports, missing family and friends.
4. Be patient! Recognise that even though you may be a very competent presenter, it still takes time for the marketplace to recognise your skills. Unless you’re an overnight Olympic medallist or achieve some other notable newsworthy feat, it will take a long time to build awareness in the marketplace.
5. Have a very firm idea of what it is you want to speak about and what benefits it would be to an audience. Most meeting planners want speakers with a specific area of expertise and are unlikely to be impressed by someone who says they can speak on any topic. Look for a niche where you see a need; what makes you unique, what special skills and experience you have that will be a commercial commodity. The more ‘street cred’ you have the better and remember that you also need to use original stories and humour in conveying your message.
6. Again, unless you’re an overnight star, you’ll find that you’ll have to give an innumerable amount of “freebies” before others will actually want to book you for a full fee. Basically, have a compelling reason why people should pay money to hear you speak; what value can you add to their organisation?
7. As for bureaus, they’re a bit like banks and often don’t want to know you until you can prove you are a marketable commodity and don’t really need their services. Most bureaus are very helpful and on the look out for new talent but they want to see a track record of success as they can’t

afford to risk their reputation on an “unknown”. NSAA has conducted sessions on how to work with bureaus.

8. Most speakers are extremely busy running their own business and balancing the bottom line with a lifestyle. But, most are also willing to share what has worked for them if you have any SPECIFIC quick questions such as ... Who produced your brochure, web page or demo video? (and in my opinion, those three things are a must if you want to be taken seriously) Have you had success with telemarketing? Or direct mail? Was your book a valuable marketing tool? How to get a book published etc.

There's probably 101 other things that I've forgotten which is one of the key benefits of joining NSAA because every member will have a different perspective and by interacting with the people already in the industry, you can pick what you believe will or will not work for you.

Finally, one last word ... you're unique and it's a wonderful growth business to be in so I'd certainly encourage anyone to pursue it. Just remember, like any other business, there are no quick fixes or easy answers; and the only time that success comes before work is in the dictionary!

Good luck and good speaking ....

Catherine DeVrye.

PS there are entire books, CD's and courses on how to become a speaker-and again NSAA can point you in that direction so this is just a short overview

I feature in a book, *Secrets of Great Public Speakers Exposed*: [www.secretsexposed.com.au](http://www.secretsexposed.com.au)  
And, also contributed short snippets to another book by Robyn Henderson [www.robbynhenderson.com](http://www.robbynhenderson.com)

I receive no royalties from either of these but was happy to share knowledge and a few snippets are below...

## \* Finding your topic

Have a firm idea of what it is you want to speak about and what *benefits* it would be to an audience. Being passionate about your topic is a given! But, meeting planners want speakers with a specific area of expertise and are unlikely to be impressed by someone who says they can speak on any topic. Look for a niche that matches your talents-what makes you unique, what special skills and past experience you have that will be a commercial commodity. Go with your strengths from your past experience. For example, I started speaking within IBM for free on customer service and quality because I had lived in Japan at the time when service quality was a relatively new concept to the Australian marketplace. Then, other IT companies and IBM clients hired me based on word of mouth.... Folks asked for handouts (which I don't believe in) and then suggested I write a book...and I must say that having a #1 best selling book on customer service-really gave me an edge over other speakers on customer service, as it provided a unique credibility as a service 'expert'.

And it was many years later, before clients asked me back to speak on other topics-and only then did I develop new material on change and turning obstacles to opportunities. Without realizing it at the beginning, I had the 'street cred' working from my base of experience. The more 'street cred' you have from your past, the better. And, remember that you also need to use *original* stories and humour to convey your message.

## \* How to create speaking engagements - paid and free

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Again, unless you're an overnight star, you'll find that you'll have to give an innumerable amount of "freebies" before others will actually want to book you for a full fee. Basically, have a compelling reason why people should pay money to hear you speak; what value can you add to their organisation?

My business started with what I call the WOMBAT theory...**Word Of Mouth-Best Advertising Technique**. Referrals are important but it's equally important to start a collection of testimonials. When you speak, people (hopefully!) will come up after and compliment you on your presentation. This may be good for the ego...but talk is cheap and you need to get it in writing to show a prospective client. So, when someone says ' That was a great presentation', reply..."Thanks for your kind comments. Would you be so kind as to put a couple of sentences along those lines on paper.' 80% of the people will oblige. Thus, you slowly begin collecting your first testimonials. At first, I only had a couple, but now have hundreds listed in alphabetical order according to industry -eg A for Automotive, B for Building C for Charity E for Education etc...Tip-I didn't have the foresight to do the alpha listing at the beginning and it took me ages to sort them out a few years later.

## \* Health and fitness tips for the road warrior

Recognise that speaking on stage is not the "glamour" job that it appears from the audience. You're often away from home for extended periods of time, waiting at airports, missing family and friends. But, it's no excuse to let your physical or mental health suffer.

We hear about 'walking the talk' and I love to walk, walk, walk when I'm traveling. As soon as I get to a new destination, I unpack, put on the sneakers and go for a walk-which helps clear my head from the flight but also gives me a perspective of the environment in which I'll be addressing my audience and I usually pick up a local point or two that I can incorporate into my presentation.

For mental health, I have a checklist of everything you need on the back of my cupboard door-and a pre-packed toiletry bag and medical kit-to ensure I never forget anything in my often rush to get away. I try to arrive early and relax rather than be stressed arriving at the last minute.

Drink lots of water on flights and avoid alcohol. Join a frequent flyer club to make those inevitable delays at the airport bearable. If a long flight, get up and walk and stretch and wiggle your toes. Stretch at the luggage carousel.

After many years in this business and million of kilometers, I now give myself a treat at the end of each flight-by booking a massage. So rather than dread another flight, I look forward to the massage after-my own little mind game but it seems to work for me

People often ask how I have time to keep fit but I firmly believe that if we don't take care of ourselves, we can't take care of others.

### Other tips

Realise that speaking is a business. It's wonderful to be able to speak and give a message which you believe is worthwhile but if you want to rely on speaking to earn your living, you must realise that you are a product and it's not all that different to running any other small business, in terms of marketing, keeping accurate financial records, managing cash flow, keeping the data base updated, research and development, travel arrangement, stock control, office administration, etc. Only a very small percentage of my time is actually spent with face-to-face client contact.