

HIRING A SPEAKER? DON'T!

NOT UNTIL YOU ANSWER THESE 10 QUESTIONS

So you've got a conference coming up and you need to hire a speaker. How can you be sure you're getting the right person for the job? Drawing on my twenty years in the industry, both as a speaker and a CNBC Africa host interviewing speakers, here are ten questions you have to ask before you hire your next speaker.

1. Are they an expert or achiever?

You wouldn't hire a lawyer without a law degree but there is no such thing as a "speaker degree." Many top speakers like Anthony Robbins don't have degrees or like Richard Branson, are high school dropouts. So how do these guys command hundreds of thousands of dollars for a one-hour speech? In the case of Anthony Robbins, he is a self-taught expert. He's written multiple bestselling books and is extensively referenced. Branson is an industry disrupting, self-made billionaire.

Bottom line: A speaker has to know something or do something worth talking about. Of course you can be an expert or an achiever and be a poor speaker which brings us to...

2. Are they effective communicators?

My first surprise at university was the way students brazenly skipped lectures. My second surprise was why. The lecturers were boring! Professors are hired for their research not their communication skills and it shows. But it's not just professors. I've seen celebrity sportsmen and high performing CEO's crash and burn on the stage. They may have done something extraordinary but they don't know how to communicate it. Check out their demo video and ask yourself would I want to listen to this person for an hour?

3. Are they entertaining?

New speakers sometimes ask, "Should I put humour in my presentation?" The answer: "Only if you want to get paid!" Your speaker doesn't need to be a comedian but a little laughter reduces stress, increases wellbeing, creates connection and boosts memory.

If the audience is not laughing, they still need to be feeling. The American poet Maya Angelou said: "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Emotion is the glue that sticks the message to you. Nick Vujicic was born with no arms or legs yet he surfs, skydives and paints. His personal story moves most audiences to tears. That's what makes his message of triumph over adversity so memorable.

Talking about stories, they're more than great entertainment. The greatest gift that a story has to give is the lesson of a life that we didn't have to live. I've yet to see a great speaker who wasn't a great storyteller.

4. Are they informative?

Of course speakers need to be more than entertainers, they have to have useful, relevant information to share. A sales speaker is unlikely to go down well at an innovation conference. The first question I ask at every briefing meeting is: "At the end of my presentation, what do you want the audience to know?" It's amazing how seldom the client can immediately answer that question. I don't leave the brief until they do. Better still, even before you interview a speaker ask yourself that question and then see how the speaker answers it.

But knowledge isn't power. The implementation of knowledge is power. Once my client can tell me what they want the audience to know, I ask them what they want the audience to do. Of course no speaker can guarantee that the audience will take action but if they can provide clear actionable steps they increase the chance.

5. Will they do a briefing meeting?

After nearly 20 years in this profession I can tell you that there is a direct correlation between the quality of the brief the client gives me and the quality of my presentation. My job is to ask the right questions but if the client doesn't give me the time, or delegates the brief to a junior employee who doesn't understand the purpose of the event, I hear alarm bells.

If you're really just looking for a canned presentation you might strike it lucky but if you want the speaker to address your conference theme and key objectives you've got to make that clear. And if you're unsure that the speaker can deliver, interview them before committing.

6. Will they customize their presentation

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen, it's great to be in Frankfurt!" That's not a bad opening unless you happen to be in Berlin! Of course mistakes happen. The problem with this particular speaker is that was his only attempt at customization. Everything else was canned. He never congratulated the audience for the 35% increase in sales they had achieved, or provided any advice on the potential disruption their industry was facing. He never mentioned anything to do with their brand or product. Worse, he spent most of the speech talking about his own achievements. The best speaker doesn't make you think how great they are; they make you think how great you are!

7. Are they easy to deal with?

Speakers are used to being the center of attention. That doesn't always make for humility. If they seem more interested in their requirements than yours, if they're arrogant or late for the briefing meeting those are warning signs. Will they interact with the audience before and after their presentation, or do they think they're above that? If they do interact, will they exemplify the best qualities of your corporate culture or will they be a jerk?

You're going to be working with this person, possibly arranging their travel, meals and accommodation. If they're going to make your life a nightmare, no matter how great they are on the stage, they're probably not worth the trouble. But any speaker who thinks that they're more important than you or the audience is unlikely to be a hit, even if they are in their own mind!

8. Can they provide testimonials?

Asking a speaker if they're the right person for the job is a bit like asking a presidential candidate if they should be president. They're likely to be a little biased! That's why it helps to book through a speaker bureau. They represent loads of speakers. Based on your brief they are incentivized to give you the most appropriate recommendation. If they don't, you won't book a speaker through them again!

Either way be sure to get testimonials. If the speaker has delivered excellence for others there's a good chance they'll do the same for you. The most relevant testimonials will be from similar organisations within your industry

9. Are they a one trick pony?

Many speakers are just speakers and that's fine but to get more bang for your buck see if they can emcee or facilitate. Most speakers will not charge that much more for participating in your whole conference. If they are skilled emcees or facilitators they can provide a golden thread through the event, keep the audience energized, conduct interviews and panel discussions and draw out the main points. Experienced speakers have hundreds if not thousands of conferences under their belt. They generally know what works and what doesn't. Use their expertise!

10. Do they provide follow up

To ensure that the message sticks long after the event, ask the speaker if they provide any follow up tools. That could be a book, podcast, video or training program.

Even if your speaker ticks all ten boxes, will they be worth the money? When the true value of Barack Obama's fine speeches was questioned, this is how he answered:

...I have a dream!" Just words. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." Just words? "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." Just words? Just speeches... Don't tell me words don't matter!

Listening to Obama made me think of what President John F Kennedy said to Winston Churchill when awarding him honorary American citizenship: "You mobilized the English language and sent it into battle."

Will your guest speaker mobilize your people to achieve their mission? If they do, they'll be worth every cent!

Justin Cohen is an international speaker, bestselling author, TV host and speaker hall of fame inductee.

WHAT THEY'RE SAYING ABOUT JUSTIN COHEN

"I have seen a lot of speakers and sat through a lot of breakout sessions. Justin Cohen is the most informative, entertaining and inspiring that I've seen. He is the key reason that this year's annual convention was rated the best in our chapter's history."

– **Dave Goranson, President, American Society for Training and Development**

"Justin delivered a powerful message that will have a long lasting effect on our people. We are experiencing early returns on our investment with a clear increase in sales numbers."

- **Raymond O'Neil, MD, HSBC, Dubai**

"Justin electrifies his audience ... he was the best speaker."

- **Sir Eric Peacock, Chairman, Academy of Chief Executives, UK**

"Your work ethic and extra effort to make your message special for each group was highly commendable. Your 94% rating confirms that your talk was the highlight of the conventions."

– **Leon Lourens, MD Pep Stores (Largest retailer in Africa)**

"Justin really made his presentation relevant to our organisation. This was the best guest speaker engagement we've had in ten years."

– **Dirk Eksteen, Executive Director, Bytes Managed Solutions**

"Justin really gets to understand what your organisation is all about and what you're trying to achieve. Each time we've had him, it's been different. He adapts the presentation to fit the context."

- **Susan Webber, Brand Manager, HUGO BOSS**

For more information email info@justinpresents.com

JUSTIN COHEN
International Speaker & Author

