



CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR MEETING PROFESSIONALS

Learning Curve

BY JOHN DI FRANCES

Speaking of Ethics and ROI

Worldwide, businesses are in crisis. At the heart of it is an ethical failure. Corporate scandals, financial fraud and executive abuses have sent already troubled financial markets tumbling to record lows. The international economic downturn that began early in 2001 and the wariness brought about by 9/11 have taken a harsh toll on the meeting industry, but the current credibility crisis has also had an impact. This is evident as we look to the value of the content we provide meeting attendees. Whether that content is provided via a contracted speaker or through the development of collateral materials, there are ethical considerations that will—and should—impact the ROI meeting professionals offer clients.

Quality Counts

As a member of MPI and the National Speakers Association (NSA), I have become increasingly concerned about several aspects of ethical lapses. One clear example is the emphasis placed by some in the speaking profession on developing and promoting products. Books, tapes, CDs and other resources can be very useful to the sponsoring organization in maximizing the effectiveness and residual impact of the speaker's message. I am constantly hearing, however, that some prominent speakers tout the revenue-producing value they receive from these resources, but at the same time they downplay the need for quality. For any professional speaker to say that "most books are never read, so it doesn't matter how well they are written or what content they deliver" diminishes and demeans the profession.

Developing products to be sold at a profit is

commendable, as long as that is not the only goal. In a free enterprise system, profits are crucial to the survival of all businesses, but the guarantee of real—not only perceived—value is also critical to the well-being of the capitalist system. When we produce products that are attractively packaged to

Meeting planners

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sell, but are undeniably deficient in content and quality, we are cheating customers. Just because they do not call to complain a week, month or year later—when they have had a chance to read the book or listen to the audio program—does not mean their trust has not been compromised. Meeting planners must ensure that the products marketed in conjunction with an event offer the highest standards of quality and provide a positive ROI to attendees.

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Customization Is Key

A second area of concern involves the stampede of speakers promising “customization” of their materials and presentations for each audience. This commitment isn’t bad; in most cases, “content” speakers should be doing enough work beforehand to ensure that their presentations are highly targeted to meet the clients’ needs and desired outcomes. The problem lies not in the client’s expectation, but in the speaker’s implementation. Throwing in a few names and other references to the specific organization does not fulfill this promise. True tailoring means investing sufficient time before the presentation to understand where the audience is coming from and what issues will determine the organization’s performance in the area to be addressed.

This is not simply a matter of learning a few industry-specific buzzwords to wow the crowd. It takes hard work and thorough preparation to effectively understand, and thereby address, each specific audience’s needs. For meeting planners, is it really ethical to partner with a speaker who isn’t willing to spend sufficient time on the front end to develop a program that provides tangible value to the client?

Empowering Attendees

A final concern involves the growing trend among some speakers to be abusive toward their audiences. In difficult economic times, the truth is not always pleasant to hear, and at times speakers have a duty to honestly convey the message of hard work and results-oriented expectations. Some



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speakers, however, have adopted the techniques of talk show celebrities who badger, ridicule and demean their audiences. True professionalism does not allow for such behavior. Meeting professionals and speakers alike must ensure that their audiences are treated with respect and dignity. Empowerment results from providing audiences with tools, encouragement and a vision to succeed.

These are only a few examples of areas where our industry is falling short in delivering content. As meeting professionals, we must exhibit consistently high ethical standards in words and deeds. To achieve this, we must add our personal commitment to delivering maximum value in every aspect of our work, including providing high-quality speakers and relevant collateral materials.

If we want this industry to flourish and grow during tough economic times, and if meetings and events are to make a significant contribution to business growth and organizational development, then we must focus on and commit to delivering high value in all we do.

JOHN DI FRANCES is a senior executive adviser, author and speaking professional with 30 years of international business experience. His latest book, *Reclaiming the Ethical High Ground: Developing Organizations of Character*, was released in November. Visit his Web site at www.difrances.com.