

THE MEETINGS COACH »

## *Speaker Coaching:* THE KEY TO UNLOCKING TOP- RATED CONFERENCE SESSIONS

BY AARON D. WOLOWIEC, MSA, CAE, CMP, CTA

**Q:** We recently asked our education committee to identify the greatest challenges inhibiting our industry speakers from reaching their fullest potential during the annual conference. What tactics can we now use to coach speakers to success?

**A:** Improving conference presentations is an iterative process. Mastery does not occur overnight. Rather, repeat industry speakers should be provided ongoing learning guidance, opportunities to practice new knowledge and skills, meaningful feedback from seasoned colleagues and staff, and job aids that enhance retention and transfer.

Responses from your education committee likely included minimal or formulaic attendee engagement within presentations; PowerPoint slides that are overwhelmed by too much content; facilitators who struggle to reel in discussion so they have time to cover all topics planned within their presentation outlines; and presentations that hit on “This is what we do at ...” but do not identify how the idea may be adapted within other contexts.

If these challenges sound familiar, consider developing a one-page resource to share with all selected speakers. Request they use this document in designing their conference presentation experiences.

This resource may:

- ▶ Provide brain-centric attendee engagement strategies such as writing learning objectives into participant materials and scheduling postsession touch points.
- ▶ Encourage speakers to limit their content and slide decks, plan appropriately for practice and feedback time, park unrelated topics and leave time at the end of their sessions for questions, feedback and evaluations.
- ▶ Assemble slide tips intended to help speakers overcome death by PowerPoint. Key insights could include limiting bullet points and text and using video and audio.
- ▶ Ask speakers to share with attendees not only their experiences, but also how their ideas might be adapted to other organizations with differing resources.

But this is just the first step. Offer a training webinar (or a series of shorter training webinars) that illuminate these and other strategies, and provide individualized coaching that allows for more robust reflection, planning, practice and feedback.

Additional ideas for investing in conference speakers might include providing personal feedback from professional development/learning staff sitting in on conference presentations and/or insights from an outside consultant conducting an education audit during the conference. You could also compile feedback from attendee evaluations that are focused on learning outcomes.



**Aaron Wolowiec** is founder and president of Event Garde, a Grand Rapids-based professional development consulting firm. Event Garde works with association leaders who want to deliver dynamic, meaningful and compelling education and networking experiences.

eventgarde.com  
 616.710.1891