

Speaker Referrals/Recommendations

When selecting speakers for a conference, do not overlook the importance of reaching out to past speakers to ask for referrals.

Speakers could be rated using a qualitative and/or quantitative survey with information saved in a speaker database (current AMS, spreadsheet, or other type of format). Surveys could be completed either onsite after each session or at the conclusion of the conference (it is important to note, however, that surveys require careful question construction to obtain useful information). There are other options that can be employed in rating speakers – observation of the speaker's interactions with participants, group discussions at the end of the session guided by specific questions, personal interviews with participants, or review of video should the session be taped. Whatever method is utilized, those speakers with the highest ratings could then be asked to provide recommendations.

Speaker recommendations could also be made based upon the types of questions that were received during and/or after the session. If an individual hasn't been assigned to write down the questions that were asked, recording the session for transcription and/or playback at a later time would assist in capturing this information. Based upon the questions that were asked by the participants, speakers could then refer others who have particular expertise in addressing the topics that were raised during their session.

It is important to review the qualifications of speakers who have been recommended. A review of recommendations should include:

- video of the speaker giving a presentation (if available)
- references from other organizations
- phone call or, if possible, a face-to-face conversation
- list of other organizations and/or presentations made by the speaker
- area of expertise and/or types of topics covered by the speaker

OUTCOMES

- Reduces the amount of time needed to look for qualified speakers.
- Knowledge of audience can be conveyed by the individual making the recommendation.
- Serves as an “endorsement” of the importance of your meeting by the individual making the referral.
- Can provide for a more interactive and/or informative panel if the speakers already know each other.
- Past speakers will know your audience and the caliber of the speakers that you are looking for and often will be able to provide recommendations of other speakers to contact.
- Could require less time to source appropriate/good speakers for the overall programming – assuming you have enough “connected” sources to gather referrals/recommendations.
- May be able to engage the participation of “paid/professional” speakers for “discounted” fees and/or pro bono based on the relationship of the speaker with the person/people making the referral/recommendation.
- Avoid receiving several unwanted speaker packages because there is not a need for a call for presentation.

CHALLENGES

- Recommendations may perpetuate the “same old” type of presentation.
- Individuals may tend to recommend others who are “like them” which is a result of cultural bias and decreases diversity.
- Positive bias may occur through participants giving high marks in surveys to please the speaker and/or organization.
- Difficult to not select an individual who has been recommended, particularly if the recommendation is from a highly-regarded speaker.
- Speakers that are parachuted into the program through referral/recommendation may have expectations that selection is more automatic and may not be willing to go through any screening/selection process (if referral/recommended speakers are just added to the general “speaker” selection pool).

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES

- http://psychology.uchicago.edu/people/faculty/keysar/20_keysarhenly02.pdf
- <http://mbio.asm.org/content/5/1/e00846-13.short>
- <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jeb.12198/full>
- https://www.natcom.org/uploadedFiles/Teaching_and_Learning/Assessment_Resources/PDF-Competent_Speaker_Speech_Evaluation_Form_2ndEd.pdf
- <http://www.learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/g3658-11.pdf>