



Online community.
Real-world impact.

Seven reasons to give a speech (and seven reasons not to)

From a presentation by Rob Cottingham
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Some people who should be at the podium a lot more, wouldn't go if you dragged them.

Then there are others who ought to be a lot more finicky. Ever had a client who went up to the mike when they should have just stayed home in bed?

There are good times to be on the stage. And there are good times *not* to be. So how do you tell the difference?

I'd love to tell you there's some kind of invitation tricorder. Some foolproof algorithm to tell you whether your client's future holds a standing ovation or a pratfall. But there isn't.

Here's what you *can* do. Figure out – subjectively – two things.

One, *cost versus benefit*.

Consider the cost of accepting the invitation: your time, the speaker's time, research time, travel costs, attention distracted from other things.

Balance that against the benefit: everything from prestige to goodwill to the ability to convey a message you need to deliver – all measured against the organization's strategic communications goals.

Number two, *risk versus opportunity*.

What could go wrong, from embarrassment to hostility. And what do you get if everything goes right, from great media coverage to a big new sale.

Compare those two pictures. And if you're travelling a huge distance to deliver a speech that will take weeks to write on a topic your client barely cares about ... to a crowd of thirty belligerent cranks at an event that the media wouldn't cover if they all spontaneously combusted... this might not be the event for you.

If, on the other hand, the audience loves you, you have a dynamite message you need to convey especially to them -- and a speech that's tailor-made for this event already in the can, and there's a slew of exactly the right kind of media going to be there... that's probably a yes.

Anything in between... and you're using your informed judgement to decide whether the cost/benefit, risk/reward balance is favourable or not.

Once you've persuaded yourself... you have to persuade your client, or your boss. I want to arm you with seven solid reasons to give a speech, and seven solid reasons not to.



Seven reasons why

1. To put a personal face on the organization

Our strongest, deepest relationships are with other people, not corporations or groups. Introduce an audience to a human being instead of a logo or acronym, and you can break down a lot of potential hostility, skepticism or apathy.

2. To communicate messages that advertising and PR can't

From damage control to reassurance in a time of crisis, there are a lot of messages that work far better face to face than they do in a news release or a TV ad.

Being physically present and hearing a group's leader speak directly to you: that can be far more immediate and personal – and far more persuasive.

3. To build your organization's profile

The fact your organization has a representative out there speaking publicly raises your group's profile.

And if you're feeling just a little mercenary, a lot of this profile-building can be done by your host; you may not have to do anything at all... except write a speech and have the speaker show up.

4. To identify your organization with a cause or issue

Eighty per cent of success is showing up, Woody Allen once wrote. When it comes to caring about an issue or cause, ratchet that up to 90%.

Conveying your organization's belief in a particular cause starts with personal, public commitment from the people at the top – and that can come through loud and clear in a good speech.

5. To build bridges, trust and relationships

There's a level of trust that comes with having met somebody – even when you've been among five hundred people meeting that somebody all at once. Part of the reason is that it takes trust on a speaker's part to get up in front of an audience; even in the most adversarial of situations, that trust is going to be

reciprocated (grudgingly and in small doses, maybe, but still reciprocated).

6. To enhance your organization's prestige and authority

Look at the speakers list for a conference, and you make a few assumptions about the people speaking. One of them is that the people on the stage belong there -- that the conference organizers have decided these people have expertise, experience or wisdom worth listening to. That prestige gets attached to the organizations those people come from, too.

7. To reduce costs, reuse your work and recycle your words

You can repurpose speeches in any number of ways: newsletter articles, op-ed pieces, or letters to members or clients.

You can post audio or video clips on your organization's web site, or include them in a corporate video. Excerpts can make their way into annual reports and other publications. You can send courtesy copies to prospects and current clients as a way of maintaining the relationship.

Seven reasons why not

1. The event's too low-profile

A leader's time is valuable. Staff time is valuable. If you're using it for an event that won't get you the payoff you need, that's a mistake. And the profile of the event reflects on your speaker, too; if you're doing parking lot openings, that sends a signal to others who might invite you.

2. The event's too high-profile

Sometimes you need to keep your head down, whether it's because of legal difficulties, PR problems or an impending major announcement. If your organization is following a low-ball strategy, then a leader's speech to a high-profile event may not be a great idea.



3. The wrong audience

Maybe these folks are hostile, maybe they're aching to hear something you just can't tell them, but there are some audiences you just don't want to talk to.

That said, there are times when you can actually get a lot of credit for bearding the lion in its den. You'll get grudging respect from your opponents, and props from the media for having the nerve to show up. (Much, by the way, depends on how sympathetic your opponents appear.)

4. The wrong agenda

They have your speaker scheduled too late in the day to get coverage. Or right before a huge, contentious resolution debate that has them distracted. Or on a panel with someone you simply don't want to be associated with. These can all be deal-breakers if the convenor isn't willing to budge.

5. The wrong timing

I can't tell you how many invitations I've seen for hour-long speeches: or 45-minute speeches with 15-minute keynotes. Short of some very special circumstances – like the MacWorld keynote – don't do that to your speaker. They'll have a bored, restless audience and a long, meandering speech. If you can't negotiate the time down, that's a deal-breaker too.

6. The wrong messenger

It doesn't always have to be the CEO, the senator, the president, the board coordinator. Sometimes an event is better suited to a staff analyst, or a vice-president in charge of a specialized area.

7. A better opportunity

This is my favourite. Being able to tell a boss or client, "I don't want you taking this gig, because there's this much better one at the same time" — that's golden.

So those are the reasons why and why not. And when it comes time for you to make your decisions, I hope you'll err on the side of why. Speeches are a chance to connect with an audience, build a relationship, maybe move them to action – and there's nothing like the opportunity to lead.

So when you balance out risk and reward, I hope you'll let that be the thumb on your scales.

This talk is based on an article that originally appeared in *SpeechList*, a free e-mail newsletter that focuses on the art and craft of speechwriting, with a strong focus on practical advice and useful information.

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Online community.
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About us

Online strategies for real-world success.

We know the web inside and out. But we also know that your organization's goals come first. Our combination of communications skills, technical expertise and community experience gives us a unique ability to envision and implement the best solutions for your organization.

We bridge the worlds of strategic communications and web development, assembling and managing the team that's best suited to your particular goals and requirements. Turn to Social Signal to harness the power of the latest digital communications tools – and of the best technology providers – in the service of your mission.

Social Signal builds online communities.

We develop and implement leading-edge strategies for online community-building.

Social Signal engages your audience and stakeholders.

We plan, set up and manage a wide range of online participation processes, from formal consultations to community dialogues.

Social Signal helps you make the most of blogging.

We can help you translate your public relations strategy into a distinctive online voice.

Social Signal helps you communicate when the computer's off.

From a single, powerful speech to a strategy that integrates your on- and offline communications, Social Signal can help.

Our principals

Alexandra Samuel, CEO

Alexandra combines hands-on experience implementing online strategies with an extensive research background in digital democracy, e-governance and Internet activism. Her recent projects include managing the online launch of telecentre.org and developing the online community strategy for NetSquared.org. Alexandra holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University, where her research focused on the creative frontiers of online political engagement.

Rob Cottingham, President

Rob is a seasoned communications strategist who is known online as an e-campaigning innovator, and offline as one of Canada's leading speech-writers. His recent projects include creating the Confeederation web site, a window on election blogging; and writing the final report for the Canadian Prime Minister's External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities. Rob maintains a long-running blog at robcottingham.ca and writes SpeechList, a free e-mail newsletter on speechwriting.

