

Want to Work for Free? Give a Presentation!

By Gary Michael Smith

Being asked to present a session at a conference, a lecture at a symposium, or even to participate in a roundtable discussion is an honor. And with such a tribute comes the responsibility of delivering to an audience the most current, accurate, and beneficial information. To this end, the presenter often must research endless sources, compile voluminous findings, and develop a presentation lasting anywhere from an hour to a day (or more) that won't leave attendees daydreaming in their seats.

Conversely, those organizers who solicit speakers based on their intellectual, educational, or professional backgrounds need to understand and appreciate the quality of the presentation and of the presenter, the burden on the individual with regard to preparation, travel and transportation, and room and board, and the overall time constraints with the speaker's other professional and personal obligations. In other words, speakers should be paid.

There is an alarming trend with professional organizations—particularly nonprofits—to expect speakers to cover all their expenses as well as to provide an educational, informative, and perhaps entertaining presentation for free. But this is like asking a magazine writer to submit all their articles for free. He or she wouldn't do it, and frankly, neither should a conference presenter.

I've personally given a dozen presentations over the last few years at anywhere from meetings of local professional organizations chapters to international conferences. And although I've inquired about compensation, more often than not I'm told that only the keynote speakers are paid an honorarium. This practice is justified by the rationale that "those who present sessions are probably members of the organization and planned to attend the conference anyway, so giving a presentation should be no additional burden." But this is not

only often untrue but also is missing the point.

First, if a speaker were not interested in contributing to the knowledge-base of current information and literature on the topics of publishing and bookselling, s/he may not normally consider attending a particular conference. Second, a speaker's concern is not of whether or not it operates as a 501(c)(3); the presenter is relaying information that others find interesting enough to attend the session. And just like any professional in any field, speakers should be compensated appropriately.

Then there's the issue of not allowing a presenter to sell or even pro-

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mote his or her products during or after the presentation. Granted, attendees may be at your session to learn about trends and new concepts without any interest in enduring an aggressive sales pitch. But if a speaker is not paid, "What's the motivation," as actors say.

Moreover, not only are presenters usually not allowed to sell the product about which they're speaking, but even if sales are permitted the speaker may be required to sign an agreement to sell any and all products—specifically books—through a bookstore that has worked an exclusive deal with the conference committee. What this means is that you must sell on *their* terms—not yours, which translates into high discounts and consignment sales, neither of which is a deal to the bookseller.

In all fairness, one must understand that nonprofit organizations often are

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funded by membership dues, leaving few resources available for speaker compensation. On the other hand, if there is enough money in the treasury to pay for one or two keynote speakers, perhaps either more funds should be set aside for all speakers, or less be paid for the keynotes. Not doing either could eventually result in a decline in the number of those willing to present.

Personally, I've been lucky enough to work for companies willing to pay for my conference attendance—especially if I was presenting. But one year, I had left a contract months after I'd already agreed to present a session on peer-reviewed periodical management at a scientific conference. Not wanting to leave the organizers with no choice other than to cancel my session, I spoke anyway. And this decision cost me over \$1,200 in out-of-pocket expenses.

In this instance, I told myself that I'd never get into such a situation again, and I haven't. But I also regret not being able to share with others my experiences in writing, editing, publishing, and publication management. I'm still asked to present, but I've become much more conscious of my time and expenses, which, in my mind, should not ever be an issue.

