

Guidelines for hosting a speaker

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I used to roll my eyes at the conference speaker divas who had a whole list of demands, until I needed to develop a few of my own guidelines. I don't need green M&Ms or a plate of farm-fresh produce, but there are a few things I need. Whether you're an organizer or a speaker, here's a bottom-line checklist.

In preparation for the event—

Send out a schedule. In particular, make sure the speaker knows the starting and ending time. If you would like the speaker to hang-out with conference participants, you can make that clear (some speakers are better than others on this).

Realize if you're asking the speaker to keynote for an hour, but you'd like for him or her to attend the conference for five days, the speaker might have a per diem. That might be difficult to understand. (Who doesn't want to relax in a nice hotel for five days?) But when a person spends a lot of time away from his or her family and friends, then the time is precious. If the speaker has a day job, then he or she is often cutting into vacation time to be there. In other words, time is expensive.

Be sure that the obligations are clear to the speaker. Will the speaker need to keynote, preach, or teach a workshop? How many hours is he or she responsible for? Would you like discussion time built in? Please make that clear.

Be prepared to make the travel arrangements. There have been some months when I carry the debt of six different conferences on my credit card at one time. Then reimbursements can take months of hassle. So, I started asking the hosting organization to put my airfare on their cards. It has been a huge relief.

Have the honorarium ready for the event. I've relied on speaking income to pay our mortgage for many years now, so I use the same understanding that I would for any contract employee—honorariums are expected when services are rendered. Conference vouchers and reimbursements can be very confusing. Often there are several organizations that fund the conference. There are many forms and W-2s to

fill out. It can take months to get a check cut, so it's good to have all of that settled before the conference. Organizers often like to take a deep breath and a few days off after the conference, so this will give them less to worry about during their down-time as well.

At the event—

Communicate transportation from the airport. If I have not been given any instruction, I assume someone will be meeting me at the airport. But I cannot tell you how many times I have arrived at an event and there's no one at the airport to meet me. There's no car rental reservation. There's no shuttle information. I'm just stranded at the airport. It's the worse feeling in the world, and it happens all the time. I can go on with horror stories. (After hours of calling/texting/emailing, I finally get in contact with conference organizer who's at the hotel bar and can't pick me up because he's drunk, so I'm stuck for even longer.) Just... please don't be that person.... remember the basics of hospitality.

Provide meals. I don't mind finding my own meals, as long as it is possible. But often I'm dropped off at a hotel, without dinner. Then I'm picked up, without breakfast. Then I speak for six hours without any food because I have a book signing scheduled during lunch. This is made more difficult by the fact that I'm vegetarian, so I often can't sneak a church meal between breaks, because there's bacon in the green beans.

I'm five foot tall and not-gonna-tell-you-how-many pounds... but I don't take much food. I just need some. Sometimes organizers will leave a bag of nuts, granola bars, and fruit. I'm not saying organizers have to do this. But when I see that bag, I have a rush of appreciation, because I know I won't have to do any speaking without protein.

I feel rather grumpy writing out this list. Which is not the point. I thank God every day for the opportunities that I've had to see the world as a conference speaker. I guess the bottom line is making sure there is basic hospitality—clear obligations, transportation, food, and honorarium.