HOW TO BECOME A 7-Figure Professional Speaker

A Concise, No-Nonsense Guide to Exactly What It Takes to be a Highly-Paid Professional Speaker or Executive Trainer

By John Spence
Quick Introduction

For more than 20 years I have spent 200-plus days a year traveling worldwide to help businesses and people be more successful.

I’ve been named one of the top 100 Leadership Speakers in America, one of the Top 100 Business Thought Leaders in America, one of the Top 100 Small Business Influencers in America, one of the top 50 Small Business Experts in America, one of the top 500 Leadership Development Experts in the World and in 2015 the American Management Association named me one of the Top 50 Leaders to Watch in America along with Sergey Brin and Larry Page of Google and Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com. My client list includes organizations such as Microsoft, Apple, IBM, GE, Qualcomm, Coca-Cola, Merrill Lynch, Allstate and dozens of other Fortune 500 companies. I’ve also spoken for hundreds of small to medium-size businesses, nonprofits and associations. My current daily rate is $20,000 or higher (plus all travel & expenses) depending on the assignment and the size of the audience. I tell you all of this simply let you know that this book is not based on theory, it is based on building an extremely successful professional speaking business. In the following pages I will share with you exactly how I did it.
Why Did I Write This e-book?

I can’t count the number of times I’ve been asked, “How do you get into the speaking and training business?” It’s happened so often, I figured it was a good idea to record my answer in a short, focused and easy-to-read e-book for aspiring professional speakers.

This book is based on a note I wrote to a close friend who was trying to build a training company. He wanted to break into the public speaking circuit, and I wanted to help him along. It’s pretty frank — a blunt note sent to someone I cared a great deal about. So, what you have here is a very honest and straightforward memo on what I believe it takes to succeed in the speaking and corporate training realm.

First Things First

First, you will need to distill your thoughts until you have a VERY clear idea of what you are trying to achieve. Specifically,

What do you honestly want to accomplish through your speaking?

1. What will your speeches or training offer that is different, unique and of REAL VALUE?
2. What sort of classes, workshops and keynote speeches can you offer?
3. How much travel are you willing to do?

Answering these questions will bring clarity and an understanding of what is at stake.
Since I began my speaking circuit years ago, my schedule has taken me on the road 150-220 days per year. I’ve traveled to just about every state in the United States and to destinations around the world, including China, Poland, Japan, Australia, Austria, Netherlands, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Aruba and the Cayman Islands. It’s exciting, but you need to be real about everything involved. You need to ask yourself how much and how hard you really want to work. You need to pinpoint what price you’re willing to pay for success.

As you think about these things, it is important to keep in mind that you cannot be ALL THINGS to ALL PEOPLE! You’ll need laser-like focus to determine where you can deliver specialized value. You’ll have to decide what you REALLY want, so you’ll know when to say “NO!” You can get a lot of input from key folks around you — ones you respect and trust. At some point, however, you MUST put a stake in the ground and fully commit to a focused course of action.
Formula for Success

I would also add that the only way you will ever be truly successful in this business — or any other — is to really LOVE what you do. It comes down to a three-pronged approach.

1. Pick something fun.
2. Pick something you are passionate about.
3. Pick a topic highly valued in the marketplace.

If you do not have all three of these components, you will not be able to build a strong speaking or training business.

Once you have a good handle on what you want to be, you must put forth a Herculean effort to become an expert on the subject or subjects you plan to cover. Here’s how I did this.

From age 26, when I was named CEO of one of the Rockefeller foundations, I’ve been interested in business and leadership. I read broadly about those topics to help me be an effective leader for the foundation. Later, when I decided I was going to try to make a living talking about leadership and business matters, I made a personal commitment to become as knowledgeable as possible.
Read, Read, Read Some More

Since 1989, I have read a minimum of 100 business books every year — most years closer to 120. That’s about 10 books every month. I also have listened to 20-30 audio books on leadership, business and strategy every year. In one specific two-year span, I went through more than 300 audio business books because of a four-hour commute every day!

I also read close to 10 magazines every month — Fortune, Forbes, Inc., Fast Company, HBR, Business 2.0 and Fortune Small Business, plus a few others that I pick up at airports, ones such as The Economist, Wired and Entrepreneur. I typically get three to five white papers and research reports every month and also spend several hours each month searching for specific information on the web. I have a library of more than 150 Harvard Business Review and Knowledge@Wharton articles and try to add at least two new articles every month. I receive weekly podcasts from Yale, Wharton, Harvard, MIT, Stanford and the Wall Street Journal, and I have dozens of podcasts that I follow on a regular basis.

Yes! I do ALL of this reading and study — every month — and have for the past 25 years without fail. But, that’s not all. For the past 15 years I also have blocked off at least one week each year to attend a high-level seminar — as a participant.

I have attended the World Business Forum, listened to Wharton School of Business lectures, and gone to watch Tom Peters, Jim Collins, Jack Welch, Patrick Lincioni and other top business speakers.
I have also attended the Aspen Ideas Festival, the Renaissance Weekend featuring top U.S. thought leaders, and the Abundance 360 Executive Summit, which features global experts. I go to these events to learn everything I can that will be uber-valuable to my audiences and to meet as many interesting people as possible.

During a recent visit to the Aspen Institute, I attended more than 40 lectures by elite global business thinkers and had lunch with Alan Greenspan. I sat in a session next to Colin Powell and chatted with him. I also met more than a dozen CEOs of Fortune 100 firms, was introduced to several folks from the White House staff, and spoke with Queen Noor of Jordan about servant leadership.

These trips are time-consuming and expensive — typically about $15,000+ for the week by the time everything is said and done — but they are an investment I MUST make in order to keep building my skills and growing my network.

So, if we add it all up, it’s roughly about 40,000 pages of reading, hundreds of hours of listening to audio books, and at least a week of high-level seminars every year. This has been my learning agenda for 20-plus years straight.

All these efforts focus on

- Leadership
- Business Strategy
- High-performance Teams,
- Winning Culture
- Consultative Sales
- Customer Service

These are the most important topics to my clients. It’s the stuff I get paid to talk about and the things in which I am most interested. The result? I consistently get $20,000-plus to stand up and talk for an hour at conferences. If you are not willing to do this level of work, no one will be willing to pay that much to listen to you.
Some Thoughts on Being a Thought Leader

Today many “experts” will tell you that to become a successful professional speaker you need to position yourself as a Thought Leader. They will even sell you a book to teach you how to become a recognized thought leader in just a few short months. Problem: the only way to become verifiably recognized as a true thought leader is to be very, very, very good at what you do and incredibly knowledgeable on a specialized topic. You don’t just wake up one day and say “I want to be a thought leader” and then post a few tweets and put it on your Facebook and suddenly everyone considers you among the best in the world at what you do. It takes years and years of intensely focused work and study to be a real thought leader at the level that any large company would consider it a viable title for your accomplishments. I won my first thought leader award from Trust Across America as one of the Top 100 Business Thought Leaders in America in the area of “Trustworthy Business Behavior” in my 17th year of being a professional speaker and business trainer.
“Be Insanely Well Prepared”

But wait! There’s more! I have not included the dozens of hours of research and customization I do for almost every presentation.

Look at it this way. If I give a two-hour talk to 120 senior executives in a room, that equals 240 hours of their time and hundreds of thousands of dollars in salary, not to mention all of the travel, lodging and food expenses for the entire group to fly in from around the country or the world for the meeting. With all of that at stake, I owe it to them to be insanely well-prepared and 100 percent focused on offering real value to them.

For example, I recently gave a keynote talk to a group of about 280 folks from the Apple Specialists Group. It was a topic that I knew fairly well, but had to customize a bit. Afterward, I added up the time I spent preparing for the talk and realized it took me 13½ hours to prepare for a one-hour talk! The key thing to remember is that when you have a group of top executives from a Fortune 500 company you cannot waste a single minute of their time. You have to be totally on your game and ready to GO when you walk up on that stage — every single time. That is why you’ll need to develop a very, very clear area of expertise and a unique differentiation that will drive your success.

Take my speaking business, for example. It is based on this formula: Research + Real Life + Passion = Return on Investment (ROI). I have based my entire business on the idea that I will do more research, more reading and more work than any other speaker around.
I combine that trait with years and years of real life experience as a business owner and the CEO of 8 companies – three of which were multinational. I have worked shoulder to shoulder with some of the top business leaders in the world, and EVERY SINGLE THING that I do during a meeting drives for ROI. No fluff. No silly stories. I will not waste a minute of my listeners’ time. Everything I say will give you a return for your investment in me. These core values have driven my entire speaking career. When we combine them with extreme customer focus and extreme customer service it is a winning combination. To sum it up, the keys to becoming a successful speaker are creating the perfect balance of a clearly targeted message – specifically what value-based products and services you will deliver – and then putting that message in front of lots of the “right people.”

Speaking Style

Above I have described to you the way I approach my speaking business. I am extremely content-focused, fast-paced, information-intensive and driven to deliver ideas and tools that people can take back and apply immediately to significantly improve their business or career. But that’s my style, and it does not need to be yours.

Perhaps you want to be a motivational speaker, or more of an entertainer, or perhaps you want to use humor to impact your audience. To be successful you simply need to develop a style that is unique to you and focused on the kind of audience you want to sell speeches to. You need the right style, on the right subject, for the right people.
Target Customer Profile

Who are the right people? They are potential clients who have a significant need for what you present and the resources to easily afford your price.

So, this means it’s essential for you to create a very detailed “target customer profile,” one in which you define the absolute best potential clients for your speaking or training business. How do you do this? Look at the people who buy those services now and build a database of potential clients who meet your key criteria. You need to read the blogs of successful speakers in your arena, see who they’re working with, look at the client list they post on their website. Also you can look at major conferences that you might like to speak at and see what speakers they have hired and what topics they will be focused on. It’s really a pretty straightforward process:

- Define a target customer profile
- Create a powerful target message
- Get your message to the right people
- Deliver absolutely superior work
- Provide great customer service
- Watch them tell more of the right people!

***A Note: In our firm, we have figured out who are the most likely to want, need and afford our services, and we focus ALL our energy on ONLY them. We try hard not to invest a lot of time with people who do not meet “key client criteria.” Those who don’t meet our parameters are usually just a pain to deal with. They will complain about everything – especially price. No matter what we do, we won’t be able to make them happy. It is just bad all the way around. So, learning to say “No” to some people is just as important as determining who your target client is.
Let’s Be Perfectly Clear

You will need to be excruciatingly clear about WHAT you sell. Make it super easy for your targeted audience to understand specifically what they are buying. They need to know what they can expect and how much it costs. You have to take all of the guess work out of it. Make it simple for them to make a buying decision.

People will not spend money on what they do not understand. It’s sometimes hard for people to get a feel for what we really do when we sell them a speech, consulting or training – these are all fairly intangible products. Remember, there are a lot of people out there who claim to be trainers, coaches, consultants and speakers, and, frankly, a great many of them are terrible! Oftentimes, these folks have totally burned our potential clients, so we already have a hurdle to jump right out of the starting blocks. Keep in mind that the biggest block to making a buying decision about our sort of products is “FUD,” or Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt. So, it’s your responsibility to remove as much FUD as possible. You have to do this or people will not trust you enough to invest in your programs. You have to create specific “products” with concise deliverables and concise outcomes. These potential clients need to know precisely what they are spending money to accomplish. (For a good example simply go to my website, johnspence.com, and look at how I have outlined the various speeches and programs I deliver. I would also suggest you go to several others speaker’s websites and see how they describe the key topics they cover and the programs they deliver).
Set the Right Price

Other questions I get a lot are about pricing. Here is how I do it. I collect every single piece of competitive literature I can and scan all of the websites to see exactly what everyone else is charging and then set my price at about 85% of the high-end of the market. That way I don’t leave too much money on the table and my price seems like a good value to our target customers when compared with the highest priced speakers at my level.

After you define your “product” and figure this pricing thing out, you have to be an evangelist for your company and programs. You don’t want to be pushy or overbearing – and absolutely not a pest, but you must be a very professional and polished marketer and salesperson to anyone and everyone who meets your “ideal client” criteria.

Know what service you sell. Know who is most likely to want it, need it and pay for it. Then, spend every waking moment getting in front of those folks and helping them get excited about how you can help them. You’ll need to scan the papers, local and regional magazines, and the internet for possible leads. Send out highly customized and extremely well-written emails, letters and social media posts. You will have to make dozens of calls and send hundreds of personal emails. All should focus on telling a compelling and honest story about how you can be of significant value to your clients. You have to show them clearly how you can solve pressing problems that they desperately want to have go away. You have to convince them that you can help them achieve the great things they always wanted to achieve.

***FYI: When you are starting out, the close ratio is typically ONE new client for every 100 or so contacts. Ten new clients will be the result of 1,000 well-orchestrated, professionally delivered sales efforts through letter, call, text, tweet, meeting or email). Wow! It REALLY is a lot of work for the first three years or so. But now after more than 20 years of delivering speeches and training classes all around the world, 99 percent of my work comes directly from referrals! Now, I do almost no outreach at all, and my close rate is nearly 100 percent. …Which leads me to a discussion about another critical aspect of business success.
It’s Called Networking, People!

As part of your sales effort, you also will need a HUGE network of people who can recommend you, send you referrals, and give you leads. Obviously your past customers are the very best for this. (In fact, the client I delivered a class for yesterday sent me an email this morning. Because I got some of the highest feedback scores ever for the groups I presented to, they want to hire me for additional days next year and have already offered to pass my name on to several of their vendors and associations. THAT, my friends, is exactly how it’s supposed to work!)

It is critical to understand that your success will be multiplied when you have a bunch of “hubs.” Hubs? What are hubs?! Hubs are helpful people who – by the nature of who they are and what they do – come into contact with lots and lots of your key target customers. Get a hub on your side, and they’ll tell 400 people about how great you are. A regular person who loves what you do might only tell five or six people. That’s nice of them, but it’s not enough on which to build a future. Likewise, two or three hubs are great, but there is simply no way they can send enough work your way. You need a small army of hubs – key folks waiving your banner 24/7. Personally, I have several agents, quite a few key hubs, and dozens of happy clients who send one or two new clients my direction each year. Individually, this is not much, but when combined I get 30-plus solid and qualified leads a year—more than enough to keep me as busy as I can handle.

Live exposure is another key factor. People need to meet you and watch you present before they’ll trust you and want to hire you. That means for the first year or two you need to get out and do as many presentations as possible. Try Rotary, Kiwanis, town chambers, business clubs and networking groups. Volunteer at a non-profit or any organization that will let you put on a program in front of the right people. You may have to do a lot of these for free or for very little money.

I probably did 25 free seminars in my first year. I still do some freebies for a very select handful of organizations. The more exposure and practice you get, the more work you will eventually garner. With what we sell, decisions to hire us rest largely on whether people like and trust us. Many can’t make that leap until they have met you or seen you present, so make it easy for them. Find a way to let them see you deliver a superior program, and they will want to hire you right away.

Lastly, when you do land a client, you simply must dazzle them! Delight, enthral and surprise them by delivering a level of excellence they had not imagined possible. It all has to be amazing. It must encompass every aspect of your program:

- Pre-meeting coordination
- Responsiveness
- Flexibility
- Delivery style and professionalism
- Workbooks
- Facilitating roundtable discussions
- PowerPoint slides and other media
- Customization
- Tools and resources
- Research and story illustrations
- Follow-ups and thank-yous
Follow Through. Follow Up.

After your presentation, stay in close contact with your host and participants. Become a real friend and trusted advisor. Nurture the relationships. I, in fact, am still on very good terms with people I did work for in 1994.

I talk to them at least two or three times a year and send notes from time to time or an article or book. Then, out of the blue, I’ll get a call from one of them, asking for help or wanting to introduce me to a potential client. Case in point, three of my current clients came from referrals from a business friend I have known since 1996.

We actually have not worked on a project together since 2014, but he’s helped us land our top three clients that represent 40 percent of our current business! Your loyal customers will build, grow and sustain your firm for the long run. I promise it.
In the End, It’s Up to You

The hard part of this line of work is that no one else can do these things for you. People can help, suggest, guide and mentor you, and you can read books on sales, networking, referrals, and marketing (a very good idea), but to sell your programs and speeches, it MUST be you out on the street! You need to be in the meetings, at the seminars, sending letters, making phone calls, and writing texts and emails. YOU need to sit down with a company’s key decision makers and help them become excited about the services you offer – so excited that they book you and write a check for $5,000—$50,000 to get you to come help their team. A lot of consultants, speakers and trainers know this is the way to build their businesses, but very few are willing to do the hard work to get it done.

***A Warning: There are a ton of people who sell very expensive training programs on “How to be a Millionaire Professional Speaker.” I would simply recommend that you do a lot of research on these people before buying their programs. A good number of them have actually never sold major speeches to top-level companies and are not recognized in the industry as high-quality professional speakers. They make their money selling programs and books about things in which they have no expertise. So, be very careful before you plop down a couple of thousand dollars to learn how to be a “seven-figure speaker” from someone who is not one.
Here’s a final little thought

I get dozens of speakers and trainers asking me how I get so many engagements every year and how I garner such good fees. (I did 68 presentations last year!) The answer I give is straightforward. It goes something like this:

“Do NOT worry at all about selling programs. Worry your ass off about being the best presenter you possibly can be. Worry yourself to death about always delivering maximum value to the client. Drive yourself crazy worrying about being incredibly well prepared and totally focused for every presentation. Have a nervous breakdown worrying that your work is so good that the client will be overjoyed they hired you. Worry about all that stuff! And, you will never, ever, have to worry about being busy. Your clients will keep you booked for months in advance – at whatever reasonable price you want to request. Be fantastic with delivering information and making a great presentation. The rest will take care of itself. That is honestly the secret!”

Well, here you have it. You asked me how it’s done, and this is pretty much how I think about my line of work. I feel VERY comfortable with this information, because it is EXACTLY what I had to do myself for the first five years to get my business in a position to finally get it where it is now... almost 22 years later!

Now that I have given you an honest and maybe somewhat overwhelming view of what it takes to do this job, I want to leave you with this thought: I LOVE to go to work! Yes, I am on the road for 200-plus days a year. Yes, it’s a lot of reading and study. Yes, the travel can be extremely challenging. Yes, the job can bring a lot of pressure when there are 9,000 people in the audience, and it’s your responsibility to make sure they have a super time while you are talking for two non-stop hours. But, at the end of the day, I would not trade my job for any other in the world. The work of being a professional speaker and executive educator has allowed me to travel across the globe, meet incredible people, make lifelong friends, and enjoy a very good living. I HELP PEOPLE BE MORE SUCCESSFUL — and there is not a day that goes by that I don’t say to myself, “I can’t believe I get paid to do this!”

Hope this helps you - John
So You Still Want To Be A Professional Speaker?

If a person has gotten to this point – having finished my “speaker’s manifesto” – and STILL wants to be a professional speaker, then I send them the following memo.

17 Steps to Speaking Success

If you still want to commit, let me give you a few more suggestions. A few of the steps listed below might be somewhat redundant, but they are topics that bear repeating because they are essential to building a highly successful professional speaking and training business.

Step One is finding a topic to speak about that brings out the passion in you. You need to be highly knowledgeable, AND there has to be a large customer base – with money – willing to pay you to talk about it. I know lots of speakers who are deeply passionate about topics that no one will spend significant cash to listen to. If you simply want to speak as a hobby, that is absolutely fine, but if you want to make a substantial income from your speaking or training business, then you have to pick a topic that organizations see as highly important. Your topic has to be so valuable to clients that they are willing to write you a check for $10,000 to $50,000-plus for one day’s work.

Do you think that’s an exorbitant amount of money to charge? Well, just, keep in mind that if you stand in front of several hundred executives from a top company and you give them great ideas, credible information and usable tools and techniques, then it is entirely possible that they will use the information you teach them to save millions of dollars for their companies. If they’re convinced, they’ll implement your advice and generate millions of dollars in additional profit. So, spending $50,000 to generate several million dollars in benefit is a pretty darn fair exchange of value.
In addition to your personal experience, you’re going to have to invest significant time, energy and money on study and research to gain more knowledge about your topic. I teach about business leadership, winning culture, high performance teams, strategy, customer service and business excellence, and as you know from the first part of this book, I still read more than 120 topical books annually. In large part, because of my commitment to lifelong learning, I have won several prestigious awards recognizing me as one of the top business experts in the world. Trust me, I am not THAT smart. I simply am very, very focused. I know that these are the topics that my clients want to understand and that they are willing to pay big bucks for highly recognized international business thought leader to deliver valuable information to them. In your venture, YOU will need to consistently deliver massive value (whether that is education, entertainment, motivation or instruction) every time you step up to the podium.

In addition to reading and studying other people’s information and data, you should start collecting your own data. Ask people questions in your workshops, send out surveys, or do focus groups. Look at all the ways you can collect your own unique research. It’s valuable stuff. For example, I sent out a survey to several thousand high-potential employees at top-tier companies around the world, asking them to fill out the survey and then share it with their high-potential colleagues. As a result, I was able to get thousands of top employees at significant companies to answer a survey about leadership, engagement and work satisfaction – research that no one else in the world has. It is research that I now can build classes around – ones that are differentiated and highly valuable.

Start collecting REAL business stories from your clients and add them to your own personal experiences. It’s great to know a whole bunch of the famous business stories from books and other research, but you need to build credibility by giving people new meaningful and helpful stories to illustrate your points. My only caution here is make sure that they are valuable – no fluff, no silly scenarios, no boring stories, and not a ton of anecdotes about YOU – only real, interesting and highly valuable business situations you have personally collected from clients. The stories need to help the audience better understand the ideas and information you’re sharing. Remember that it’s all about what is important to the audience – what they want to learn and what will add value to them. It is something that I learned early in my career: You are not a sage on the stage; you are a guide on the side AND the only critic whose opinion counts is the customer.
As soon as you designate speaking topics, do research to find out who are the true thought leaders in that field. Who are the people that your potential clients look up to in that niche? Who have written top selling books? Who have the most followers on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn? Then, begin to follow those people. Read their blogs, read their books and listen to their podcasts. Then, reach out to them with good, honest, thoughtful comments, feedback and questions. Over the course of months and years, you will establish a real relationship with them. The goal here is to be authentic. You’ll build the relationship by adding value, not by wasting their time. When I looked around my field, I realized people like Seth Godin, Tom Peters, Tim Sanders, Guy Kawasaki, Jim Kouzes, Marshall Goldsmith, Tom Morris, Joe Calloway and several other top speakers were individuals I wanted to know, so I have been reaching out to them consistently with comments, ideas and information. It helped establish peer-to-peer relationships and genuine friendship. Now, 10 years later, I consider many of them as friends and talk to them often. We share research and data, and it adds tremendous credibility when I mention their names and ideas to my audiences.

Put yourself in places where you’ll have opportunity to meet global thought leaders on topics on which you plan to speak. In my career, I have had the chance to meet and talk with people like Colin Powell, Alan Greenspan, Steve Wozniak, Jack Welch, Mark Cuban, Sam Walton…and many others. When I get a chance to meet someone like this, I make it a point to ask them an important question related to leadership or business. This lets me learn from them, and I walk away with a wonderful piece of information that I can share with my audiences. You know, things like, “When I was talking to Steve Wozniak at a recent Apple meeting, he told me….” Done with finesse, it’s a great way to build credibility without seeming like too much of a name dropper.

If you’re going to deliver speeches in the business arena, being a guest lecturer or adjunct professor at a prestigious business school also adds a huge amount of credibility. I’ve had the great honor to be a guest lecturer at the Wharton School of Business for the past 17 years. In total, I have lectured at more than 90 universities and colleges. To a perspective business client this gives them a great deal of comfort in knowing that top universities have sought me out as an expert. By the way, most of these invitations have come from audience members who are alumni at these universities and invite me to present or introduce me to key faculty members who might want me to share my ideas and expertise with their students.
If you are going to target a certain kind of customer, the very best way is to get in front of an association or group they belong to or speak at a major convention they are attending. It is difficult, if not impossible, to sell speeches by cold calling major corporations and it is completely impossible to get a high-quality speakers bureau to represent you until you have a solid track record with an impressive client list. So a major focus has to be on getting in front of the right people at large meetings and conventions so that you can demonstrate your expertise in front of a huge group of your target customers. I have been extremely fortunate to be invited to speak at the American Society of Association Executives, Professional Convention Management Association, Women in Foodservice Forum, Million Dollar Round Table, and other big events that ultimately have driven dozens of new engagements my way. This is where the leverage is. Getting in front of a group that represents thousands of your target customers is big stuff. However, it is NOT easy to earn a spot at one of these events; they are exceedingly selective and do a great deal of research prior to inviting speakers. These groups demand talent, value, professionalism and an assurance that speakers don’t waste their attendees’ time.

Speakers bureaus. Although there are hundreds of speakers bureaus out there, there are very few high-level speakers bureaus that will accept you and less you are billing at a minimum of $10,000 a speech. There simply isn’t enough money in them for them to put forth the effort to sell you. Typically a speakers Bureau takes 15 to 20% and sets up the entire contract. I work with several speakers bureaus and their wonderful people and send me a few speeches each year. Not enough to build your entire business on, but definitely a good source of business. Important note: once a speakers bureau books a client for you they own the client. Never, ever go around the speakers bureau and try to cut a deal with the client directly, it will destroy your relationship with them and your reputation in the industry.

I believe the mark of a true professional speaker is how often they get invited back to talk to the same organization. I know a lot of speakers that are great at selling speeches, but then they deliver mediocre programs and never get invited back. They spend 90 percent of their time trying to SELL speeches and 10 percent of their effort making their speeches highly valuable. I would recommend they invert those figures, spending most of their effort on building world-class presentations. Once you close a few engagements and do a stellar job, word of mouth will drive the success of your business. Case in point, I have had most of my clients for 10 or more years. They bring me back year after year to talk about different subjects or offer a refresher for presentations made years earlier. I have at least 10 clients that I’ve been delivering programs to for 15 years or more. Don’t focus on slick sales techniques, giant social media crusades, or direct mail campaigns. Instead, focus on being so incredibly valuable, authentic, knowledgeable, and easy to work with that your current clients will want you to come back often. They’ll be such big fans that they even recommend you to their colleagues.
A word about “free speeches.” In the early stages of your career you will probably have to do a fairly large number of free speeches. As a beginning speaker, the practice in front of a live audience is always helpful. It will allow you to craft your message and work on your delivery. When I started, I accepted just about every offer to present. Then, when people started to call me about potential speeches, I began charging a nominal fee of $500 - $1,000. I slowly worked my way up from there, increasing my prices every other year or so to get where I am today – in the $20,000-$30,000 range per speech. Now, when someone asks me to give a free speech (and I want to help them by giving the speech), I tell them my normal rate, but add that I would be happy to give a presentation without compensation IF they donate $1,000 to a charity that I support. Nearly everybody gladly makes a contribution. For those who tell me they don’t have a thousand dollars, I politely decline because I know they will not value my time. I do, however, give a couple of speeches per year where the client only pays travel and expenses. Why? Well, I KNOW that the audience is full of potential customers! If they can put me in front of 2,000 or 3,000 people who work for target client companies, I am willing to look at that speech as a marketing investment. Actually that’s a key point. Once you start charging for speeches, the only reason you should reduce your fee is if the audience is a perfect match for your Ideal Target Client, there are decision-makers in the audience, if the event location is a place on your bucket list, or it is for charity that you deeply believe in and want to support. Because, if you lower your fee for a client company they will expect you to always honor that lower fee and might possibly share that fee with other companies that they recommend you to and you will be locked in to honoring that lower fee for them as well. Set the highest reasonable fee you can command and then stay consistent and always charging something very close to that fee.

Please note that I’ve stated that “I” tell the client my normal fee, but it’s actually my wife who negotiates with all our clients. We have found that it is much easier for her to explain the value I bring and why we charge what we do rather than for me to try to defend my worth. It’s teamwork that gels! In the beginning we were worried our clients might view us as a “mom and pop shop,” but we have found out that our clients love dealing with my wife and her team. Some even insist that she join me when I travel to deliver my program. Because we have no kids, my wife travels with me quite often. It’s a really nice lifestyle business, one in which I get paid to travel around the world with my spouse, meet nice people, and help them. Whether it is your spouse, partner, employee or an agent, the key point here is that it’s often easier for someone else to sell your value and negotiate for a higher price than it is for you to argue with the client about why you are charging so much for you!
What tools do you need to sell a speech or training workshop? First, you will need an excellent website that is clean, professional and highly focused on your target audience. You will also need a listing of topics and workshops you can deliver with clear descriptions about what is covered and how it will benefit the attendees. Next, you will need a professionally edited high-definition video that showcases your work, a professional headshot, and some professional pictures of you delivering speeches. If you don’t have the money to shoot the video and pictures, consider trading out a free speech where they will have a videographer and photographer on hand who will give you everything they shoot. To understand the level of quality your website, photos and video will have to be, simply Google eight or 10 of the top speakers in the arena that you plan to go into and very carefully study their website. Having a book is also helpful, but if it is to have any real clout it needs to come from a large publishing house. Today, anybody can print out their own book or write an e-book (like the one you’re reading now), so the value of writing a self-published book is not nearly so substantial. Be forewarned; it is exceedingly difficult to get a book published by a major publishing house. It’s a topic heavily written about, so I won’t try to cover it here. Once, however, you have everything I just mentioned in order, you have the minimum requirements in place to sell a professional speech.

As a speaker, you are the product. And in order to effectively sell that product it is critical that you take the time to develop a very clear “brand” to represent you and your work in the marketplace. To do this you need to determine such things as:

- What do I want people to think and feel when they hear my name?
- What do I want to be recognized for in the marketplace?
- What sort of imagery and colors will represent my brand?
- What are my “own words” or tagline?
- What is my unique value proposition?
- How does my brand match my target audience?
- What other brands do my target audience admire?
- Who are the top speakers in my arena and how have they branded themselves?
- How will my brand stand out is unique, compelling and valuable?

Then you must be extremely consistent in branding all of your materials; your website, your logo, your business cards, your videos, your blog, your podcast, your products, even the clothes you wear on stage, everything you do must be “on brand.”
Personal referrals from clients and colleagues is absolutely the most powerful way to get new business, but another great way to gain exposure, build your brand and garner new clients is through social media. Again, this is a topic that has been broadly written about by people who know a whole bunch more about it and I do, but here’s what I will tell you. A big part of being a successful professional speaker or executive trainer is to build a very large group of followers who support you and love your work. As Seth Godin likes to say you need to build a “tribe.” My recommendation would be to look at your target audience and see what types of social media they use the most.

For my particular audience, business people, I have found that a Facebook fan page, LinkedIn and Twitter are the most effective social media platforms for me. Many other speakers use Snapchat, Periscope, Instagram and other types of social media that I’ve never heard of. My blog has also been a tremendously important part of growing my tribe and keeping my customers highly involved in my brand. The key to success with a blog is consistency, whether it’s once a day, once a week or twice a month your followers need to know that you will consistently deliver very high quality content at regular intervals. I have also used videos very effectively inside of my blog, what are called v-blogs, as a powerful way to present my ideas. The goal is to pick just a few platforms that connect best with your target audience and then stick to those and do them VERY well. Another key way to use social media to grow your business is to connect with opinion leaders in your area of expertise who have built huge numbers of followers. A few of the folks that I work with have anywhere from 500,000 to 1 million+ followers. When I put out a blog, video or tweet that I think is especially valuable, I send an email or DM to these key contacts and ask them if they would take a minute to post a link to it across their various social media platforms. I can say from experience that when a very well-known speaker/expert retweets a link to your blog, you can get thousands of people going there to read it. This is totally free marketing and it is unbelievably powerful. However, keep in mind that you will very rarely sell a major speech strictly through social media, it is simply a tool to extend your reach and brand and to keep your past clients apprised of any new programs, speeches or products you have developed.

Once you’ve built up a good speaking business, developed a lot of quality content and expertise, collected a large tribe, built a substantial email list, and connected with key opinion leaders in your marketplace, it is time to begin to monetize your content. This might be through videos, training courses, coaching, e-books, webinars or any other products that you can sell to your target market. As a speaker who travels more than 200 days a year and is consistently booked 18 months out, I understand clearly that I don’t have any more time to sell. The only way for my business to grow is through passive income generated by selling products based on my most valuable content. Currently I am putting together several new e-books (such as the one you’re now reading), video training programs and paid webinars. Done properly, I anticipate that these should be able to generate several hundred thousand dollars a year in additional income. Once again, this is not a topic I’m an expert on but there are some magnificent podcasts and books on the market written by people who are already extremely successful at Internet marketing and sale of informational products. Two of my favorite are Pat Flynn and Amy Porterfield, and if you listen to their podcasts they will recommend several other superb Internet marketers.
Once you get to a level of success in the profession, I would highly encourage you to start a mastermind group with other professional speakers at – or above – your level. I am in a mastermind group with five of the top sales trainers in America, and I have learned a ton from them. We get on the phone about once a month to share our best ideas and suggestions, help each other out, and refer business to one another. It has been a valuable relationship for all of us. So, there you have it – a few more tips for you to utilize on your quest to become a professional speaker or executive trainer.

There is a massive amount of competition in this arena. Sometimes, it feels as if EVERYONE wants to be a motivational speaker, workshop facilitator or corporate trainer, but if you follow the advice I’ve listed in these two memos, you’ll be in a much better position to develop a SUCCESSFUL professional speaking career. You will be able to build a business that is fun, rewarding and potentially VERY financially lucrative.

I hope you found this helpful. – John

PS - I welcome any feedback or comments you might have on this e-book, my personal email address is: John@JohnSpence.com. Also, if you found this e-book of value I very much hope you will recommend it to anyone who wants to be a professional speaker or who would like to improve their professional speaking business. Thanks!!!!
John Spence is recognized as one of the Top 100 Business Thought Leaders in America, one of the Top 100 Small Business Influencers in America, and one of the Top 500 Leadership Development Experts in the World. John is also one of the American Management Association’s Leaders to Watch along with Google’s Sergey Brin and Larry Page and Amazon’s Jeff Bezos. He is an international keynote speaker and a management consultant who has written five books on business and life success and has made a career out of “Making the Very Complex… Awesomely Simple”.

EXPERIENCE

At 26, John was the CEO of an international Rockefeller foundation, overseeing projects in 20 countries. Just two years later, he was named an “Up and Coming Young Business Leader” by Inc. Magazine.

John is a guest lecturer at more than 90 colleges and universities across the United States, including Harvard, Cornell, Stanford and the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. John also is a special instructor for the Entrepreneurial Masters Program at MIT. He has been the owner or CEO of 10 companies and is an advisor or board member to several influential organizations.

Since 1994, John has presented workshops, speeches and executive coaching to hundreds of companies and organizations worldwide, including government offices and not-for-profits. His work as a business advisor and executive educator has taken him on assignments to many European countries, as well as Hong Kong, Japan, China, Mexico, Latin America, New Zealand, Australia, the Caribbean and Canada.
BOOKS

John is the author of several business and life success books.

- “Excellence by Design: Leadership”
- “Awesomely Simple”
- “Letters to a CEO”
- “Strategies for Success”

SPECIALTIES

John Spence provides a variety of services. His specialties include executive education and training workshops in the following areas:

- Advanced leadership
- High-performance teams
- Strategic thinking and planning
- Business excellence
- Building winning cultures
- Accountability and disciplined execution
- Superior customer service
- Consultative sales excellence
- Getting more high-quality referrals

THANK YOU