

PUBLIC RELATIONS ● Rubber chicken, anyone?

# Relating publicly has great value, great downside

BY LAURIE FREEMAN

**P**ersonal appearances are great public relations—for your employer (or your own business) and for you. And, you can pocket several thousand dollars a year in speakers' fees.

You *can*, that is, but there's no guarantee that you will. And because it involves putting yourself—rather than the results of your work—out on public display, it's a PR strategy that can backfire in a way that a misdirected press release never would.

"I know how to act, speak, move on stage, use the teleprompter, all the things you need to do," says John Gerdelman, executive vice

president of technology ventures for Jackson, Miss.-based MCI WorldCom Corp. "All of these things help

not only get my name out but get out our business message."

But even Gerdelman, a bona fide business speaker celebrity (although in the wake of MCI Corp. and WorldCom Corp.'s merger earlier this year, he's taken himself off the speaking circuit for now), notes, "You can't be unprepared. This is not only you, but your company's reputation and possibly future on the line."

So why risk it?

"We live in a celebrity culture, and people will pay more for people they see as famous," says Irv Rein, professor of communication studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.; he co-authored the book, *High Visibility: The Making and Marketing of Professionals into Celebrities*, with Philip Kotler and Martin Stoller.

In the hundreds of interviews conducted for the book, "not one said they'd like to be a normal citizen," Rein says. "There are a lot of things that you get used to when you're

famous. People treat you differently, and that's a real incentive."

The key, experts say, is to be not just knowledgeable, but passionate about the topic you'll speak on, invest in top-notch training, and be prepared to apply public relations savvy to this PR-related part of the marketing plan.

"You have to be the kind of person who ultimately really wants to explain the ways of the world to people

over and over again," says Fred Pfaff, president of Fred Pfaff Inc., a New York-based leadership marketing and public relations specialist.

And an in-demand speaker wants to talk about the ins and outs of the topic, not just the particulars of their business—a distinction that entrepreneurs, especially, may overlook.

"Where the average Joes fall down is (that) it becomes apparent that all they want to do is beat their own chests," Pfaff says. "Find the passion about what's missing, what's the larger business issue, and be ready to demonstrate the next frontier of your industry. You have to be willing to get out in front and show how this is representative of the industry's future. Then you have a chance to be the spokesperson for that issue."

But passion without preparation does not a Steven R. Covey make. Executives with business celebrity-hood on their minds are advised to seek training.

Gerdelman, for example, began working with Joyce Newman, a well-regarded New York-based media trainer, about eight years ago, to polish his delivery and establish a stage presence.

"When you have someone who can become known in the industry as the person who can get the message across, bingo!" Newman exclaims. "This is very much aligned with marketing, in that they don't need to become the next Tom Peters but they can become a guru in their industry, and attract publicity and attention to their company."

She notes that many executives and entrepreneurs already are communicative and gregarious—in a group of their peers or co-workers.

"We find that people are really good about talking to each other internally about what they do, so much so that they don't realize their messages cannot be communicated in that form to an outside audience," she says.

Trainers like Newman can help translate the message, but the expertise does not come cheap. Newman charges on a project-by-project basis, generally about \$2,000 for a half-day and \$4,000 for a full day of training. Most would-be speakers require a session or two to prepare for an appearance.

Unless the corporation is willing to pick up the tab, that may seem a steep price. But one of the key failings of many would-be business celebrities is not being prepared for the spotlight, Newman notes. "You can't just

go out before an audience, any audience, and ad-lib your way through. The stakes are simply too high."

Knowledge, passion and training help prepare an executive to moonlight as a public speaker, but without a little PR, the speaking career will never be launched.

"I knew, from being a teacher, that I could get a point across and reach an audience," says Peter McLaughlin, author of *Catch Fire* and the Denver-based senior vice president of corporate programs for Fitness Age, a Carlsbad, Calif. corporate fitness program that measures "fitness" age and develops personalized health and exercise programs. "But to be a celebrity businessperson, I needed a good product, a good speech and good publicity. Like a celebrity athlete."

McLaughlin, named one of the top business speakers by the *Journal of Business Strategy*, has built a career in the last 10 years teaching businesspeople how to develop mental, physical and emotional capacities. This year alone he'll log 130,000 air miles to maintain his speaking schedule.

He commands \$10,000 to \$15,000 per appearance, and pegs much of his success to word-of-mouth. "Choose your appearances carefully," he advises. "Look for situations where you'll appear before business owners, CEOs, CFOs. If you're good, they are the ones who will come up to you and talk, get you to come to their company or their event."

McLaughlin says being known to speakers bureaus and brokers also is key, as companies often will call looking for a particular speaker for a specific topic. "If you have some good publicity, even if you're not a good speaker, you'll get some dates," he says. "Putting together a promotional package, including a video, also is an important factor. When you think of yourself as a product, you can market yourself accordingly."

At a time when the marketplace increasingly moves to what's new, what's next, there's always room for passionate individuals expounding upon the future. "That's the only cachet you have in a commodity market," Pfaff says. "And there are people who are leading the thinking, driving the dialog of their industry, and that's why they're successful." ■

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## SPOTLIGHT

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