

The great conference con

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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This is a column I've wanted to write for many years, but as someone who earns a living partly out of talking at conferences I thought it wise to keep my Sagittarian mouth shut on the topic.

However talking at and attending a couple of conferences recently I felt the time had come to sound off on the topic.

Firstly how do most of these conference companies acquire their distinguished line up of speakers? It's really quite easy. Depending on the topic of the conference they look at big business and possibly parastatals and even government to get BIG NAMES. It doesn't matter that they've never heard these people talk in front of an audience as long as they're a BIG NAME...

Spot the sleeper

The bonus of using corporate people is that the conference companies don't need to pay them. They're not professional speakers and the conference company's spiel to them is 'think of the publicity this will give to your company.'

It also looks good in their advertising to name the CEO of one of the country's top corporations. You automatically think 'great opportunity to glean some useful insider tips.' Unfortunately what you generally get is a fumbling, mumbling speaker who subjects you to death by PowerPoint.

Seriously, I play a game at conferences - it's called 'spot the sleeping delegate'. Sometimes this hits double numbers...

Then you get the arrogant speaker, who feels you should know it's an honour they are there at all, deigning to speak to you.

Talk to me, don't yell at me

Then my personal favourite - the angry speaker, who virtually shouts at you. You sit there thinking I've come here to enjoy the day, not be shouted at. This one particular speaker in the IT field, who I've now listened to at two conferences, is a master of shouting at her audience. I think perhaps she comes from a teaching background where she taught naughty grade ones.

Occasionally though you do get a gem. Just recently I heard a wonderful speaker talking on the benefits of Linked In. He made me want to go home and really see where I'd been missing out on this networking opportunity. Now that's what a speaker should be doing - inspiring you.

I'm not at all surprised to find that many conference companies have in fact gone out of business in these tough economic times, where companies aren't just forking out to send staff on a two-day jaunt in the hope they'll come back invigorated and enthusiastic about what they've learnt.

As a speaker your aim should be to not only impart knowledge but also to entertain your audience - maybe even get a laugh or two...

Hello-o-o-o... I'm talking to you

I used to think the worst thing for a speaker would be to see a sleeping delegate but today it's more a case of can you stop your audience from staring at their phones or tablets?

I understand that people want to Tweet what they're seeing, but it's really disturbing for a speaker when all they can see are heads down! Surely people can wait twenty minutes or so until the speaker's finished to Tweet.

Even worse is when the conference flashes up the Tweets whilst the speaker is talking in front of the screen. This means that at least half the audience is glaring at the moving screen - again not listening to the speaker.

So the question is - are conferences really useful or just a great place to network with colleagues?

ABOUT MARION SCHER

Marion Scher (www.mediamentors.co.za) is an award-winning journalist, lecturer, media trainer and consultant with 25 years' experience in the industry. For more of her writing, go to her Bizcommunity profile or to Twitter @marionscher.

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