

Planning for Engagement at Your Conference: The Keynote Speaker

by Jeanette Romkema and Michael Culliton

The keynote address is often a “big draw” for conference participants. This person can sometimes attract participants to the event who would otherwise not attend the conference. If carefully selected, this person’s book, research, public notoriety or reputation can draw a large audience. So, how can we maximize the learning so people leave knowing more and potentially having been moved to change their behavior, engage in new research, or continue the dialogue with others?

1. **State why the keynote has been invited.** You don’t want participants wondering why this person has this important role. Share your rationale with the audience as part of the introduction of the keynote speaker as well as why you are excited about the choice.
2. **Have people engage with content *in advance*.** How about asking attendees to read the author’s book or watch a video on the topic before the conference? This can be part of the registration process: introduce the keynote speaker, what they will talk about, and what attendees should do in advance of the conference to get the most out of the keynote address. You can even start the dialogue about the topic online before the conference, to prime the pump!
3. **Invite focused listening.** It can be extremely helpful to listen to a presentation or speech with an ear (or eye!) for specific information. This focused attentiveness can help heighten engagement and encourage dialogue afterward. For example, if you are at a conference about environmental issues and challenges, you may want to invite the audience to listen for what is *most doable* in their own community.
4. **Build a “keynote sandwich.”** Since most keynote speakers are invited for their content expertise and not their facilitation skills, you may have to assist in maximizing learning from the address. An easy way to do this is to design and facilitate a warm-up activity connected to the content *before* the address as well as a way to engage with the content presented *after* the address. If you want to ensure learning, you will need more than just a monologue from a presenter – no matter how engaging that person is. In some cases you may wish to break up into groups (or even separate rooms) after the keynote address to go deeper into the content presented. When time is limited, even one personal question, reflected on and then discussed in groups of three can deepen the learning: “What was more helpful for you in this presentation?” or “What story do you have about the use *or misuse* of the model presented here today? Find someone around you to share it with.”
5. **Use visuals.** Learning can be enhanced and encouraged when there are visuals: PowerPoint slides, a handout, posters, brochures, pictures, a YouTube video or drama. If

your presenter is not planning to come with visuals you will want to work with her to select the best ones to support the presentation.

If your keynote plans to use visuals, it may be helpful to remind her that “less is more.” Too many PowerPoint slides will put people to sleep; too many handouts can be confusing. Remember: your goal is to maximize learning.

6. **Tap into the heart.** We can provoke and touch people profoundly when we do “heart work.” Encourage your speaker to tell stories, use metaphor, give examples, and invite people to personalize the content. The more the keynote speaker can illicit feelings and emotions from the audience, the more chance the learning will stick longer than the hour they are sitting in their seats.
7. **Strategize in advance with the speaker.** Tell this person how you will introduce her, what you will do for a warm-up and how you plan to help engage the audience afterward. You will want to check your understanding of what will be presented and invite input into your planned activities around the presentation. *Together* you can ensure a relevant keynote speaker session with meaningful engagement that leads to real learning.
8. **Ensure the speaker offers something unique and provocative to the event.** In general this person is meant to be one of the highlights of the conference – the big draw. You want to select a person that attracts people because she is known and also because she is able to push people out of their comfort zone. When a keynote speaker provokes an audience to think and act differently, dialogue is stimulated and it can become a generative theme throughout the entire conference. Playing it safe may not ignite curiosity, deep reflection or animated debate – don’t be afraid to “stir up the pot.” After all, people come to a conference to learn and be challenged, right?!
9. **Optimize sound and visuals.** There is nothing worse than not being able to see or hear a speaker. Test all the audio-visuals in advance, get the speaker in the room early enough to do a sound and stage check, and ensure you have a technical person present (and close to the stage!) during the entire keynote address. You never know when something is going to go wrong.
10. **Ensure the speaker is informed.** Tell that person about the conference, who is expected to be there, what people will be especially interested in, what challenges people face in relation to the topic, how the room will be arranged, and how much time they have. The more the speaker knows about the event and people coming, the more this person can tailor her presentation to this unique situation.