

How I became 'Carole of Arabia'

Carole Spiers

Self-marketing skills that successfully introduced Carole Spiers International to the CEO's of top UAE Companies within months!

Self-marketing is an ever-current topic for professional speakers that is never out of fashion - and having selected the subjects for the Professional Speakers Association's London Chapter meetings for over three years, I've learned one thing that every Chapter President needs to know. Without some promise of self-marketing 'know-how' in one or other of the presentations, there will be a distinct lowering of attendance at the next meeting.

Even in a good year, we're all ultimately in PSA to develop our self-marketing skills, because so many speakers are one-man, or woman, businesses. But in a year like this, with the global credit crunch upon us, that topic moves sharply up the agenda, from being merely interesting to being absolutely vital - in fact, the key to survival itself. And as a result of these current challenges, many speakers are starting to research the potential of other markets overseas.

Well, in the past three years I've succeeded in attracting regular repeat-business from two of the United Arab Emirates, chiefly Dubai and Abu Dhabi and the Sultanate of Oman -

to the extent that it has now become our second most important business centre. Since I am fortunate enough to get repeat business, I'm able to plan lucrative speaking tours of up to a fortnight each, several times a year, as well as writing a weekly regular column, 'Managing Pressure in the Workplace', in Gulf News, one of the UAE's prestigious, main business newspapers. (Incidentally, there aren't many speaker-bureaux out there, so press coverage becomes a more essential showcase.)



Why Dubai - and how did it start?

Frankly, I feel I could have been made for Dubai. It was a relationship that had to happen. All that energy and drive that you can feel in the air... the welcome they reserve for the kind of people eager to seize opportunities... even those massive billboards trumpeting those key words - Vision, Inspiration, Success - that are written so large in my own mind. So when I called in there on one of my whistle-stop world speaking tours, I knew this wasn't just any other city. It was a dynamically fast-growing economy, keen to attract talent from the UK and around the world. And as a World Authority on Executive Stress, with a passionate belief in empowerment, I was well-positioned to speak at many conferences and seminars taking place within a mile or two of each other, in central Dubai. Then suddenly at the end of 2008, the global credit crunch hit UAE, making stress management a more urgent skill necessity than ever before.

So was it just rapport and lucky timing? The right place at the right time?



No doubt that came into it, as it often does. But judging by the comments that I've attracted over this period, I'm convinced it was chiefly done by sticking to some simple ground-rules about tenacity, commitment and vigorous self-marketing - as explained to so many of those selective Saturday morning audiences at the London chapter!

Personal reflections and recommendations

This is just one female professional's view of a large, complex subject, so I may as well personalise the experiences which I found most significant in our Dubai launch, hoping that you may be able to utilise some of my findings to your own advantage.

First, I knew better than to arrive in a new location without a long list of useful contacts. So I was able to cultivate government facilitators, Chambers of Commerce and business exchanges like Ecademy - which is where I found my UAE Bank Manager! When I arrived at Dubai airport on a Sunday, forgetting for the moment that this was an ordinary working day, my phone rang and it was Pervais, welcoming me to Dubai. We are now firm friends (and he is still my Bank Manager!) I had also made appointments with the media in advance. Of course, as professional speakers, we make good interviewees, so journalists tend to like us.

Next, I never forget that a speaking is a theatrical product, and that you should never miss a chance to stage a piece of mini-theatre as a sample of your full-length presentation. This may be an offer of a formal unpaid appearance, which you may think you should turn down. But in any case, your conversational style and manner will give an important clue to your platform impact. Even at the shortest interview, find a chance to deliver a well-rehearsed anecdote that you know will be well received.

A networking event also provides this kind of showcase, where one can impress potential new business partners as well as displaying the qualities of a good guest and a desirable platform speaker. It is also an opportunity for you to leave your business card, making sure it's the best laid-out card in the pile. (At the beginning, I experimented with a personal strapline 'The speaker who's more than just talk.' Amazingly, a year later, four people quoted it back to me during a single evening!)

Now, when it came to negotiating with my first potential client, I quoted my usual quality fee, as an international speaker - not realising that anywhere in the Middle East, bartering is commonplace, and around the board-table is no different to anywhere else. The person at the other side of the table needs to feel they're getting added value. You'll get used to it - I did!

On the subject of your cash-value or status in Dubai generally, I have to sound one warning, at the risk of being spoilsport. If you've never been there, but only heard stories about the lucrative earnings, those stories may relate to the situation a few years back, when they were still crying out for almost any qualified Westerner to bring in their expertise, like water in the desert. Those times are now over, as you'll soon discover. Finally, your obvious question: what about being a woman in a



male dominated country? Well, it's true that businesswomen are still a novelty on a conference-platform, so there is certainly a marketplace here for women speakers aspiring to go abroad. Also it doesn't exactly hurt to be the only female in the hall. But you do have to tread carefully with established etiquette and local culture. Always defer to age. As a woman - never offer to shake hands with an Emirati man in public; wait for him to make the first move, if at all. As for security - to the amazement of UK visitors - the city streets are totally safe all round the clock. The other half of this picture, of course, is a high-level of security at most office buildings, where you'll need to show identification. But leaving the police guns and sniffer-dogs behind at Heathrow airport was certainly a big relief for me.

Not long ago, I issued a workbook with the same title as this article 'How I became Carole of Arabia'. It went down well with PSA London members, so here is your checklist, based on my original Seven Pillars of Wisdom (joke over!) which do, in fact, condense the challenges and potential for a newcomer to the UAE, into a seven-part checklist.

1. Checking Out a New Territory

You'll be one of many foreigners in town, walking a well-trodden path, facing heavy competition. So you must judge the feasibility of the venture - assess your competitive strengths, take enough funds to tide you over early obstacles, and ask yourself whether you've got the character and personality to make a big, decisive leap.

2. Developing the Relationship

Spirit of launch is crucial. Try to make sure that your first visit to Dubai is a success, and you will then be classified as somebody naturally successful. Become identified as the international expert in a particular niche area, visiting for the first time, and you'll be of special interest to the press, and hopefully get invited to conferences and other events.

3. The Business Environment

First-timers need to acclimatise themselves to the local work-culture in Dubai - it's an odd blend of high technology and ancient trading rituals, even including bartering, as previously mentioned. There are also serious points of business etiquette which you overlook at your peril. But the Westerner who has mastered the cultural terrain can enjoy a valuable advantage.

4. The Social Environment

Gambling and extramarital sex are illegal - as is an overt display of touching between unmarried couples. Alcohol is virtually forbidden, but available subject to special licence in certain hotels. Foreigners ("incomers") are expected to be on time for appointments, even though Emiratis can very often be late. Before talking business, it is customary to enquire about the family first. Emirati women may cover up completely but when you sit down with them, (if you are a woman), off will come their all-enveloping black abaya to reveal the most beautiful designer clothing.

5. Establishing Your Cash Value

Research the standard level of fees in your particular field, compared to the UK and establish whether particular clients respond better to hard-sell or soft-sell techniques. Assert your product-benefits strongly, so they can visualise exactly what they're buying. Don't let them beat you down through fear of losing a potential contract, or rush you into agreeing a price. Never quote so far below market price that you end up making an outright loss. Be aware that you may be in competition with local professionals who may be offering a similar service as you. But retain the mindset that you come with international expertise - and that is a cachet that is, in many cases, of great value.

6. Dynamics of Long-Range Management

A two-centre business can be seen to be more impressive (and profitable) than a one centre business - implying a dynamic global agenda as well as style and mystique, and multi-culturalism adds authority to your pitch. But can your UK business operate without your full-time presence? You still need to be able to keep your existing client database interested and motivated while you're away, and maintain the vital commercial momentum during your absence.

Furthermore, if there's a crisis in one centre whilst you're at the other, you'll need an emergency procedure in place for putting out brushfires remotely by email.

7. Things You Need To Know

As with any foreign location, you need to check out local conditions, from climate and taxation to airline deals, custom regulations and what is protocol during Ramadan and on Fridays! For your benefit, a list of useful business and media contacts in UAE is available from me in my special workbook, as presented to PSA, so just drop me an email for your copy - info@carolespiersgroup.co.uk

Transforming yourself into an international operator I personally have grown measurably because of this experience in the UAE. For one thing, I've found that being a two-centre business works both ways - the Dubai dimension has definitely heightened and strengthened our profile back in the UK and Europe, as well as adding different facets to our website.

But the whole programme has taken me right out of my comfort zone. Establishing my business in the UK over 20 years ago meant that in 2008, I was looking for new challenges. And new challenges they were! Our business in the UK was well known and high profile. I took myself over to the UAE where I was an unknown...untried...and untested. Believe me, it really was a challenge and still is. We can't rest on our laurels and say 'job well done', there are too many others who have the same intention to exploit new markets.

So this is my considered advice to anyone who listens to the gloomy news and just wants to hide away and hibernate. Look abroad instead at the mass of possibilities and opportunities on offer that match your particular talents. Come out fighting. And enjoy the journey while you're at it!

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