

Speaking for their supper

Motivational speakers are experts in their fields with the gift of the gab and a flair for entertainment

What do an African game ranger, a British football star, an Australian happiness guru, an American remarkability expert, a business school professor, a hypnotist, a Malaysian security company boss, and a severely disabled South African have in common?

They all speak for a living.

Motivational speakers. Inspirational speakers. After-dinner speakers. Professional speakers. Keynote speakers.

Call them what you will, each believes he or she has a unique story to tell, something that will add value to the life of an individual, service, product or organisation.

While they do not exactly sing for their supper, they are experts in their respective fields who also happen to have the gift of the gab – and a flair for entertainment.

The average person in his or her lifetime will perhaps hear two or three such experts speak.

Imagine being in a place with around 80 of them, from every corner of the globe, delivering their high-powered messages. Enough to induce motivational burnout in anyone.

However, that was the scene in Cape Town recently where the Professional Speakers Association of Southern Africa (PSASA) hosted the third Global Speakers Summit, the bi-annual convention of the International Federation for Professional Speakers (IFFPS).

In one conference room a spellbound group of people listened to Roger Harrop, a British engineer and businessman, as he presented a talk in his acclaimed *Staying in the Helicopter* series, which he says has helped over 4 000 CEOs and others achieve massive growth in profits and sales.

In another room, South African Gary Bailey, a former Manchester United and England goalkeeper, made South Africa's hosting of the 2010 Fifa Soccer World Cup event the subject of his presentation.

And next door, Ian Thomas, a business graduate who worked as a game ranger for 20 years, told his audience what they could learn from lions and the likes.

Across the passage was Billy Sele Kane, a township product of Tembisa on the East Rand, sharing his “from comfort zone to

power zone” philosophy with some of the more than three million people he says he has inspired globally.

Before him we listened to United Kingdom-based Graeme Codrington, a consulting futurist who holds five different degrees from five different universities and who presents to about 100 000 people each year, sharing a platform with big names such as Neil Armstrong, Edward de Bono and Jonas Ridderstråle.

Dr Janelle Barlow – who has been “speaking for a living” since the late 1970s, lives in Las Vegas, has a PhD from the University of California, Berkley and has a couple of Masters degrees – explains that the summit co-host, the IFFPS, is an organisation whose almost 5 000 members are professional speakers around the globe.

“The purpose of the association is to create a community of professional speakers around the globe. While the demands of speaking are different in each locale, there are some global norms and standards that, if firmly in place, will help this community as the individual members develop their own speaking practices.”

While professional speakers have to be people who are experts in a field and are able to impart new skills or knowledge to their audiences, they also have to entertain their audiences, says Richard Mulvey, the Durban-based president of PSASA.

“There is much more to it than the traditional definition of a speaker being ‘an expert who speaks’,” he says, “but the ‘expert’ part of the definition is an absolute. In addition, the message must be delivered in a way that is informative and entertaining”.

Mulvey is a former sales director of a large international company and author of 17 books, who now is a full-time international speaker.

“The challenge for a speaker is to make sure the audience leaves in some way different from when they arrived,” Mulvey says.

Carole Spiers, who is based in London and Dubai and has been a motivational speaker, counsellor and coach in the field of stress management for over 20 years, as well as a broadcaster for the BBC, agrees with Mulvey's definition.

“Professional speakers all are experts in their own fields. To be a professional speaker takes time, commitment, motivation and dedication to the profession. Being a speaker is being a

stage performer and you have to practise, practise and practise. All of this, plus being able to engage with the audience.”

To which, adds Barlow, that “the test of a professional speaker is that a continuing line of clients are willing to buy their services”.

Bailey, who became a well-known sports commentator on South African television after his soccer career ended, but these days finds himself working as a speaker most of the time says, “Every speaker will want to impart something that is of value to people, something they specialise in, something they are good at, something they feel can help others. They have to have the competence to speak and know the topic. Those are the vital ingredients.”

Bailey himself offers two different presentations. His talk on leadership is an interactive, three-hour affair based on the example of, among others, Sir Alex Ferguson, the living legend who still manages Manchester United, as well as on “the latest thinking from universities around the world”.

He also uses South African examples such as Springbok rugby captain John Smit, former Springbok coach Jake White and South African soccer great, Jomo Sono.

His other talk, designed more as a keynote talk, is a multimedia presentation, co-presented with former Bafana Bafana goalkeeper Andre Arendse, which offers “valuable insight into the incredible opportunities that can arise from the 2010 World Cup, from transport, food, logistics, accommodation, security and lots more”.

London-based Alan Stevens, a journalist by background, acted as spokesperson for a major British company for 20 years, appearing on television and speaking at conferences before forming his own company, MediaCoach (www.mediacoach.co.uk).

He now provides media training to chief executives of companies, helping them to hone their speaking and media skills.

Stevens says the main benefit he delivers to his clients is a reduction in their marketing budget, while also helping to raise their profile. “If you know the techniques, you can make a lot of noise about your brand for very little cost.”

For him, the defining moment in his career came in 1999 after hackers compromised



Motivational speakers from left: Alan Stevens, Gordon MacKay, Shelley Sykes, Bart Queen, Glenna Griffin, Janelle Barlow, Joe Sherren, Graeme Codrington

credit card numbers on a website for which he was responsible. He soon found out that tapes of the 47 media interviews he did that day were being used by media training companies to show clients the perfect way to communicate in a crisis. So he set up his own company and has been busy ever since, counting among his clients companies such as BMW, Virgin, Glaxo and Barclays.

One man whose message is very relevant in these times of global recession, is Durban-based Gordon Mackay.

In the early 1990s during the recession and the property market collapse, Gordon lost nearly everything he had worked for on the stock market and was technically bankrupt.

From this extremely low point in his life, having even contemplated suicide, he recovered through hard work, discipline, perseverance and patience.

Today he is a wealthy man who owns over 300 properties and runs a successful seminar business as a professional speaker. His typical clients, he says, is "anyone who wants to get out of debt, handle a recession, overcome problems and create wealth".

Among the 80-odd speakers at the summit, the ever-smiling face and energy of one stood out. Naturally so, for Dr Shelley Sykes – born in the UK, raised in South Africa and now living in Australia – specialises in happiness.

With an academic background in business, psychology, journalism and information technology, Sykes is a world-leading expert on happiness, encouraging every individual to become empowered through new thinking-skills.

With an honorary doctorate for her pioneering work in happiness and mental health, Dr Edward de Bono describes Shelley as "a creative thinking genius of our time" and nicknamed her "the Happiness Guru".

One speaker who rightly believes he addresses his audiences from a "unique, qualified perspective", is Derick Poremba-Brumer from Pretoria.

In 1986, in his matric year, Derick was in a serious motorcycle accident that left him in a coma for seven months. Despite being given only a 5% chance of survival, he not only regained consciousness but also went on to obtain, among others, his BA degree from the University of Pretoria.

Today Poremba-Brumer is a recognised speaker, the title of his presentation being "5%".

He also produces motivational CDs which, together with his talks, strive to motivate people to achieve their dreams through dedication and perseverance, and to enlighten people about the possibilities for those with acquired disabilities.

Poremba-Brumer says his parents, who survived Nazi Germany, were a great inspiration in his life, as well as Viktor Frankl, the world-famous psychologist and Holocaust survivor,

who was in the Auschwitz concentration camp at the same time as his father.

In fact, most of the professional speakers who attended the Cape Town summit have role models and idols.

In the case of Bailey, it is Sir Alex Ferguson. In the case of Barlow, business author Peter Drucker is one of them. Spiers mentions Nelson Mandela and Viktor Frankl among others.

Sykes looks up to Edward de Bono with whom she is friends and who "recognised my gift to convert any disaster into a win and continually remain joyful".

While he admired icons such as Steven Covey, Napoleon Hill, Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale and Billy Graham when he was younger, Mulvey says these days he is inspired by all the members of the PSA rather than any one individual.

Mulvey says he is constantly amazed by how giving and caring professional speakers are and how they share their skills and success secrets with other speakers who are effectively their competitors, which was essentially the purpose of the Global Speakers Summit.

In this vein, speakers also use their public profiles and connections for charity.

Among Mulvey's own highlights, he counts the opportunity last year to climb Mount Kilimanjaro and raise R70 000 for the Reach For A Dream charity.

Spiers has also been involved in charitable work and for over 20 years has been a volunteer for the crisis agency Samaritans, has worked in one of Britain's top security men's prisons, and in the 1990s did post trauma support training and counselling for humanitarian aid workers and refugees in war-torn Serbia.

She and her partner frequently visit South Africa, staying in various Southern Cape townships where they voluntarily coach township residents wanting to market their businesses.

Sykes, who was nominated for Australian of the Year in 2009, meanwhile does philanthropic work in 216 countries. Her Shelley Sykes Happiness Foundation Charity is helping those that are hurting "to heal and learn how to catch the happiness bug".

As founders of the Let Your Life Speak Foundation, Bart Queen and Glenna Griffin, who both hail from North Carolina in the US, travel the world sharing their communication skills. Among other charitable deeds, they recently travelled to the remote Kenyan village of Wikondiek to work with children in an orphanage.

Looking somewhat like Hollywood movie stars, the pair bill themselves as "remarkability experts".

Both appear regularly on American television shows and together they run Speak America, a company founded by Bart that specialises in "motivating individuals to let their lives speak,

training them to master the skill sets to be able to communicate their life purpose, and then mentors them to share their gifts with the world."

The likely beneficiaries of the wisdom and inspiration of professional speakers are varied.

In Mulvey's case, he has influenced over 140 000 business people over the last 15 years in South Africa, Europe and Asia and has trained the sales teams of many top companies.

Spiers' typical clients are blue-chip companies and multinationals, while she also travels around the world doing keynote presentations at conferences and seminars or conducting workshops.

Barlow owns three companies that are part of global corporations, giving her access to multinationals, as a result of which, she says, "We have had enormous impact on a host of organisations.

"Our work with Scandinavian Airlines resulted in the book, *Moments of Truth*. The TMI company (one of her companies) is the producer of the Time Manager, the first of the planning tools that hit the market in the mid-1970s.

"We also did all the Putting People First work with British Airways.

"In the United States we have worked with companies that span the US market, such as Kaiser Permanente hospital, ARAMARK, Isle of Capri Casinos, American Express, AT&T."

Mulvey believes the global speaking industry has never been more relevant than right now, and its future looks good despite the global economic meltdown. The confidence levels of many businesses are down and they expect poor results because of the global crisis.

"My task right now is to redirect their confidence levels. There is absolutely no reason to accept poor results and blame it on the world economic crisis."

Yet, he acknowledges that there has been a marked drop over the last year in the number of corporate conventions around the world and says speakers have been forced to refocus and re-evaluate themselves in order to be relevant.

Barlow agrees about the impact of the recession. "It's a great time to regroup, reach out to clients in different ways, perhaps write a book, open a new business – which is what I have chosen to do."

For the future, Mulvey sees the Internet as a driving force with what he calls "webinars" and "tele-seminars" replacing the traditional ways in which speakers communicate their messages.

Barlow concurs, saying speakers will have to be flexible as technology changes. ▲

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