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# 7 Habits of Highly Effective Professional Speakers

BY **Caitlin Delohery** IN Professional Speaking (<https://www.karmacrm.com/blog/category/professional-speaking/>)

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You already know you have to rock the platform. But to be a truly successful professional speaker, you also have to strengthen your network, grow your business, anticipate the future, and much more.

We sat down with some of the most successful professional speakers in the business to find out the keys to their success. Here's what top speakers do to thrive.

# 1. They build strong relationships.

Pro speakers don't go it alone. They know that speaking is a people business, and to truly make it, you have to collaborate, connect, and listen.

## They go out of their way to make meaningful connections.

Professional speakers sell more than just keynotes and training sessions. Their business is built on their ability to connect with leads and clients. To stand out from the throng, successful speakers are constantly on the lookout for innovative ways to connect.

Doug Devitre (<http://dougdevitre.com/>), CSP, author of *Screen to Screen Selling: How to Increase Sales, Productivity, and Customer Experience with the Latest Technology*, relies on a combination of high- and low-tech touches to nurture leads. "For a low-tech example, the handwritten thank-you note is always in my arsenal," he says. "If someone connects with me on LinkedIn and I want to nurture that relationship, I'll send a handwritten thank-you note."

Devitre also goes beyond sending proposals, leveraging his high-tech assets to land new clients. He asks to be streamed into potential clients' decision-making processes. **"If I can appear on their screen in a video conference and help them work through some challenges, I can build that relationship.** It increases the likelihood that I'll get the job because I didn't just email them a PDF of my proposal, I had a conversation with them."

Leadership expert and best-selling author of *Why Leaders Fail and the 7 Prescriptions for Success* and other books, Mary Kelly (<http://productiveleaders.com/>), CSP, says potential clients want **"the "BLT" sandwich: people they Believe, Like, and Trust.** People have to Believe what you say. They have to Like you enough to want to work with you. And then they have to Trust you enough to know you're going to do what you promise."

### The Yellow Card — Mary Kelly

As a speaker, there's one moment that stands out more than any. I use these yellow goals cards and pass them out to help people stay focused. People use them as reminders. One lady came up to me after a speech and said, "I need to tell you something. My husband is in the Army, and four years ago, he was injured and lost both legs. I went to see him in the hospital, and all he had left was his wallet. In his wallet was his ID, a credit card, and your yellow card."

By then we were both sobbing. She said, “I looked at his goals for his life. It was #1 Provide for my family, #2 Serve my country, and #3 Have my own business. When I saw that yellow card, I realized that his goals had to become my goals. We put that yellow card on the refrigerator, and when things got tough, we just reminded ourselves that our goals together were to take care of our family, serve our country, and work for this business.” That was the best moment I think I ever had. Knowing that what you do is making a difference for someone else — I was beyond humbled and amazed. It was one of those moments that you can’t even describe. It makes everything worthwhile.

## They collaborate with clients to make them fans.

The power of relationship building doesn’t stop once you’ve made the sale. The best speakers listen hard to understand their clients and collaborate with them to build true experiences for the audiences they want to reach. **“The more you collaborate, the more value there is,”** says Devitre. “The more you talk to your clients, the more you can help them figure out not just what they want you to talk about but the end goal they’re trying to achieve.”

Michael Hoffman (<http://www.ignitingperformance.com/>), CSP, a motivational sales and customer-service expert, says his longevity is rooted in stellar client relationships. “We become friends with the meeting planners, and **they see me as a resource, not a vendor.** I have been invited back to the majority of my clientele: 92% over 22 years. If you’ve had me once, you’ll have me again. **That’s the secret to this business: you’ve got to give them an excuse to invite you back.**”

## They nurture their network to build referral bases.

Professional speaking may be an easy business to break into on your own, but turning that first speech into a thriving career takes a whole village.

**“This is a relationship business,”** says Diane DiResta (<https://www.diresta.com/>), CSP, author of *Knockout Presentations: How to Deliver Your Message with Power, Punch, and Pizzazz*, which has been called the “Bible of Public Speaking.” She reflects, **“Forming strategic alliances is important because referrals are the easiest way to get business.** Starting from scratch is a long process, so a personal introduction makes a big difference. I constantly look for strategic alliances. Who’s working with my market and could refer me? Whom do I complement instead of compete with? I make sure to stay in touch with people who’ve referred me in the past and with all my past clients.”

Growth, DiResta says, comes from pushing beyond a competition model: “You want to be friends with competitors. Today, it’s more about *co-opetition*.”

Hoffman also nurtures his relationships with his referral network, just as he might nurture potential clients. “I develop five relationship-building pieces, such as email notes or video notes. **I send out five pieces to my advocate list, a group of people who I know will recommend me in a heartbeat.** I let them know what I did last month and what I am looking forward to next month.”

Kelly notes that building strong relationships can help keep speakers, many of whom are solopreneurs, embedded in a strong community. “There are a lot of aspects to running your own business that are really lonely. To combat this, you join with people who do what you do. You brainstorm and support each other through mastermind groups, people you can call in case you get stuck.”

Joel Block (<http://www.bullseyecap.com/about.html>), CSP, CEO at Bullseye Capital (<http://bullseyecapital.capitalgroupkit.com/>), agrees, noting that collaboration only makes speakers stronger. “Speakers should collaborate more together. There are lots of solopreneurs out there doing speaking by themselves. They’d do better if they worked together. **This is an industry where sharing helps, it doesn’t hurt. It’s better for everyone to share and learn from each other, rather than fight and learn for yourself.**”

## 2. They know how to grow their business.

Successful professional speakers know that speaking is a business. Though they glory in the time they get to spend on stage, they know that, to get there, they have to put a lot of work into growing their business.

Shep Hyken (<https://hyken.com/>), CSP, CPAE, NSA Hall of Fame Speaker and customer service and experience expert, says “**I’ve been saying for years that the job isn’t *doing the speech*, it’s *getting the speech*.** The speaker’s job is marketing and relationship-building. The speech is the outcome of everything you do.”

He continues, “The speaking business is two words: it’s *speaking* and it’s *business*. There are successful speakers who are just good at what they do. Then there are amazing speakers that will blow you away with their speaking ability, but they don’t get much work.

The difference is that some people have figured out that the speaking business is two words, and others haven't.”

#### **Smile and Dial – Shep Hyken**

Just pick up the phone and make phone calls to potential clients. I call it Smile and Dial. When I first started out, I went the magazine store and bought every business magazine available. I tore out every full page ad. I figured if they were big enough to have a full-page ad, they were probably selling something worthwhile, and they were big enough to have a meeting about it. So I figured out who was in charge of those sales meetings and I called every one of them. That's how I started my business.

Mike Wittenstein (<http://mikewittenstein.com/>), CSP, CMC, DTM, CCXP, international conference speaker, corporate consultant, and founder of Storyminers (<http://storyminers.com/>), describes the many hats a professional speaker may wear in a single day. “A professional speaker doesn't just speak, a professional speaker runs a business. Often, they run every part of their business. Each day, you'll be involved in all the things that matter – from finding clients to building new content, from staying up-to-date on current trends to providing thought leadership for your audiences.”

Motivational keynote speaker Neen James (<http://www.neenjames.com/>), CSP, agrees. “**It doesn't matter how awesome you are on stage in this profession, if you can't run a business, you will go out of business.** The challenge is balancing the delivery of speeches and building the business. Every day is a hustle, meaning constantly staying in business-development mode to make sales calls, prepare intellectual property, build relationships, and do everything that is required to run a business well.”

Hoffman warns that ignoring the business end of things can lead to career instability. “**Like any good business person, you are trying to be one step ahead of what your customers need.** The majority of the business is working on your business. I may be delivering four to six big speeches in a month, and everything in between is trying to keep ahead of that curve. Many people will overfocus on delivery. They will ignore marketing, the relationships, or the upkeep of social media. That leads to a pattern of feast and famine.”

### **3. They make their content work hard.**

To avoid that feast and famine, stellar speakers work hard to create content, and they make their content work hard for them. Speeches are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the good, info-packed resources professional speakers constantly create. From books to podcasts, from livestreams to tweets, expert speakers use multiple channels to get their message out there.

Hyken says, “A professional speaker today can communicate to people in multiple ways: a webinar, a teleseminar, Google Hangout, an online experience, in-person experience, or a streamed experience.”

He has shifted from dialing and smiling to posting and tweeting. “Today I write a tremendous amount of content, a minimum of three articles per week. I do blog posts, my weekly column, tweets, and videos. The exposure I can get from that one hour spent writing an article is so much greater than if I spent that same hour making two to four calls.”

For both Hoffman and Hyken, a strict schedule and constant repurposing is key to keeping good content flowing. Hoffman says, “Scheduling is everything. I have a social media calendar. On Mondays, a blog will go out. We repurpose as much as possible. So from that blog, we’ll be tweeting on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and creating an audio or a podcast.”

Hyken notes, “We have a calendar of things we do *every single day*. I have social media flowing seven days a week. We kick things off on Monday with an article. Tuesdays I do my radio show. On Wednesday, it’s my regular blog. Thursdays I do a video. My article in Forbes comes out every Saturday. There is always something going on social media-wise.”

## 4. They are masters of discipline and preparation.

To keep all these moving pieces working together, the most successful speakers have got their process *down*. The magic onstage doesn’t happen by magic — it takes strong systems, dedication, and prep work.

“**You’ve got to have schedules, systems, and processes,**” says Hoffman. “Otherwise, your social media doesn’t get posted, your follow-ups don’t happen, and your relationships don’t grow.

## They are dedicated to discipline.

Hyken says that discipline is the key to his success. “Professional speakers need to be disciplined. If you aren’t on a stage speaking, you aren’t making money. At the end of the day, if you want to be on a stage or on one of these different channels getting paid to speak, you need to make it happen. You need discipline.

“**Systems create freedom,**” James says. She stays organized, prizes automation, and manages her intense workflow with time-management rules:

- Meetings are rarely more than 15 minutes and preferably by phone.
- Blogs are written in defined time blocks.
- Videos are scripted and recorded in sections.

Mark Sanborn (<http://www.marksanborn.com/>), CSP, CPAE, best-selling author of *The Fred Factor: How Passion in Your Work and Life Can Turn the Ordinary into the Extraordinary* and other books, says strong speakers aren’t afraid of a little hard work. “The hardest work you’ll do before you speak is giving the speech over and over, out loud and in your mind. The only way you become better is to do it over and over and over.”

## They are pros at prep.

You might call them the Boy Scouts of the conference circuit because top speakers are always prepared.

Kelly says, “Every single time I have a speech, I rehearse the night before – even ones I’ve done 1000 times in the past. I’ll walk off a great event, and I’ll think it was great except for that one 15-second spot. And while that doesn’t seem like a lot — if I can make it better, that’s what I need to do. **Preparation, preparation, preparation and practice, practice, practice — that’s what has helped me the most.**

Sanborn says prep work will make or break you. “The number one reason why speakers fail is lack of preparation. People think they’re prepared, but you can tell by how they do. Preparation doesn’t guarantee success, but it’s the closest thing you’ve got to a guarantee

in this world.”

### **The Pointed Stick — Mark Sanborn**

Robert Fripp from the band King Crimson teaches a high-level class for accomplished guitarists. He has a technique called The Pointed Stick. The students do a performance at the end of the class in a divey kind of bar, and Robert pays someone to disrupt the performance! He’s trying to create musicians who are so accomplished that they are unflappable. The point is, you need to be really prepared. Life throws curve balls at you. When the pointed stick pokes you, and you lose it, then you really weren’t as prepared as you could have been.

## They really love checklists.

Kelly says it well: “I love checklists. Anything that makes my life easy, anything that I can use systematically to make me more productive every single day — I’m gonna do it. So, I have a checklist for packing for an event, for the questions I’m going to ask my clients, checklists of what I want from my audiences, and a checklist for a small business plan as well.”

Wittenstein suggests creating regular checklists that you can use at every event. For example:

### **To pack:**

- Computer
- Cable
- Thumb drive
- Backup of thumb drive

### **To do:**

- Email presentation to myself
- Email it on another server

He also suggests creating a list for things you do after the event:

- Follow up with client
- See if client wants a debrief session
- Help them get their surveys created and disseminated

- Find out what their scores are

## They do their homework.

But all this hard work is about even more than just systems and discipline. It's about really digging in and working hard to understand everyone they work with. Top speakers put the long hours in and study their clients, colleagues, and audience before an event.

"I also do a ton of pre-work," says Hoffman. "I will listen to at least three conversations with the people planning an event. I will call five people that they have recommended I talk to. **I listen for the words they use: what they call themselves, what they say when they complain about their jobs, how they talk about their clients. Then, I will pepper these words into my presentation.** I want them to think I work in their field."

When these speakers get to their event or conference, they don't just kick back and relax. They are on the floor, listening to other speakers, taking notes, and connecting with the crowd. Hoffman says, "Even if I am the closing speaker, **I will spend the whole morning sitting in and watching other speakers to pick up tips and make personal connections,**" Hoffman says. "At minimum, I will spend the entire morning of event day with them, taking notes with my little iPad. One thing that sets me apart is the ability to integrate those little thoughts, ideas, names, and jokes that have come up throughout the morning into my presentation.

Sanborn suggests a combination of formal and informal client touches to succeed at understanding your client, "**Successful, high-fee speakers do a pre-program questionnaire and a conference call.** Learn as much as you can about the people you're going to be talking to. Find the intersection between their interests and needs and your material."

He continues, "And talk to people in the audience before your speech. Have a genuine, non-manipulative conversation. More often than not, people will say something you can tie into your presentation. This is a powerful technique. It shows you did the hard work of getting to know the audience."

Kelly does 20 to 30 hours of research for a single hour on-stage. "You have to be willing to work hard and work smart. Your time on stage is one hour of the week. By that time, you should've done a ton of research on the audience." She says that by the time she's on

stage, she is an expert on her client:

- What their problems are
- What they're thinking
- What's going on in their industry
- What changes they're dealing with
- What's causing them to be concerned about job security
- Whether or not their 401k is being fully funded
- Personnel changes in their organization
- All the organizations, the industries, and the companies involved in their industry

Wittenstein suggests the knowledge gathering doesn't stop when the event is over. He seeks feedback after shows:

- What did you like?
- **What would you like even better?**
- Can I refer you to a friend for next year? (If they want you, they'll ask you back! They might even give you referrals.)

## 5. They engage audiences, on and off the stage.

All of that preparation and information gathering helps these speaking stars rock the platform.

Hoffman points out that “**everything fails if you don't rock the platform.** You have to be good on the platform — that's what they're paying for. All of your homework, all of your due diligence needs to show up on the platform.”

To do this, he likes to get stuck in his audience's head, so they think of him months down the road. “I go out of my way to add mental hooks, which is something to connect with – an idea they will use for rest of year. For instance, my platform is the *tornado of business*,

which gives me a really flexible framework to talk about anything. The *tornado of business* is a mental hook. It becomes part of their vernacular. I want them talking about me for a year.”

Sanborn warns, “Once you get in front of that audience, the single greatest challenge is breaking preoccupation and getting attention. You’ve got to start strong or you’re dead in the water.” He has three tips for designing a talk that will get — and keep — the audience’s attention:

1. **Open strong.** If you take too long — more than a few seconds — to really prove what you’re saying is relevant and valuable, you’re going to have a hard time gaining the attention of the audience going forward.
2. **Be clear on two or four points you want the audience to remember.** If you can’t explain those things in three sentences, then you aren’t clear on what you want them to remember.
3. **Close strong.** In psychology, there is a concept known as the recency effect. If a mediocre speaker ends on a really up note, that’s what you remember. A lot of speakers mistakenly think they did well, but if they had an anticlimactic ending, that’s what people remember. You need a strong close does to harness the power of the recency effect.

Our expert speakers like to connect with audiences as early as possible, to make sure they’re engaged, interested, and ready to interact come presentation day.

“I see creating value as a collaborative process,” says Devitre. “I look for low-tech, low-cost content I can send along to clients that they can get their audience plugged into, to get people excited about the event.” He sends along:

- Pre-recorded videos
- The powerpoint slides of the presentation
- A download of the first chapter of his book
- A checklist to prepare for the presentation

“This does more than just get the participants engaged beforehand,” Devitre notes. “It also **encourages a higher-level conversation during the event because the audience is more prepared.**”

Wittenstein recommends two tenets to guide speakers on the stage:

1. Remember that audience outcomes take precedence over your own ego.
2. Don't just share knowledge through stories. Provide complete experiences.

He also suggests making audience engagement visible. "Project a Twitter feed in the background during your speech to let people see what others are thinking. People will tweet whatever they want, good or bad. It gives you a really cool sense of what's going on in real time—and valuable social contacts to follow up with afterwards."

He works to break down the barriers between online engagement and in-person engagement, "Poll the audience and then send the equivalent of a landing page and free download to your audience."

And cutting-edge speakers keep that engagement going, long after a conference is over.

Devitre carries on his commitment to collaboration during his post-event follow up. "Afterward, I send along a recording, and I follow up with a video conference 30 days after the event. Once people have had a chance to implement the ideas, **we talk about how they might overcome stumbling blocks they've encountered in the past month. It's another way to take action on the value you've worked so hard to provide.**"

## 6. They constantly explore new tech tools.

It's nearly impossible to capitalize on that value you've worked to provide without some great tech tools in your arsenal.

Here's a compilation of tools our expert speakers recommend:

- "I go to Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>), which is primarily for video meetings. Facebook Live is good for awareness, but Zoom is good for conversions. **It's good to be flexible enough to go live and broadcast but also have the skills to guide someone more effectively in a more private environment.**" (Devitre)
- "There is a new tool called GenieCast (<https://www.geniecast.com/>) that specializes in booking virtual speaking engagements. One morning, I did a speech in Chicago from a hotel in Dallas, where I was giving a speech after lunch the same day. I did my presentation with a high-quality camera connected to my computer. They had a

camera for me to view the audience, and I actually talked to people in the audience.”  
(Hyken)

- Wittenstein gave us a list of tools he’s currently reviewing:
  - Sli.do (<https://www.sli.do/>)
  - Outbrain (<http://www.outbrain.com/>)
  - Paper.li (<http://paper.li/>)
  - Poll Everywhere (<https://www.polleverywhere.com/>)
  - Poken (<https://www.poken.com/>)

Wittenstein also highlights the importance of a CRM as an engagement hub for speakers. “If you don’t have a CRM (customer relationship management) system, get one—even if you’re just starting out.”

He says, “Tie your website to your CRM. We’re creating a new website right now, and 70% of the content will be driven from the CRM system, as opposed to from our website. It will contain landing pages for presentations, services, endorsements, and more. With web traffic (down to the page level) tied to our CRM, we can track interactions, get in touch with people when their interest is high, know who’s interested in what, and tailor some of our online and follow-up phone messages according to their interests.”

Wittenstein suggests tying your tech purchases to your overall vision. “Before you invest in lots of random tech, figure out the experience your clients, colleagues, partners and contractors, and audience members (paying or not, live or not) want to have.”

Then, you’ll be ready to look for technology that can do what your (future) clients will care about,” he says. “**When I shop, I make sure I’m not just following the features. The features are following my experience design because that is my strategy.**”

## 7. They look to the future.

We asked each of our speakers to look in their crystal balls and predict the future of professional speaking.

Wittenstein located the future of speaking in the rapidly changing present. “**Professional speaking is no longer a job for the meek or weak. Why? Because everything – and I mean everything – is in a constant state of flux.** Clients’ needs are evolving faster than

ever. Technology, with the capabilities and frustrations it brings to your business, demands more care and feeding. You need to staying at the leading edge of your industry and keep up with prospects, clients, and colleagues for your voice to matter.”

His gut feeling on future industry trends are that:

- Fees will stay flat
- Companies will accelerate their use of speakers as *agents of change*
- Speakers will be chosen more frequently based on their ability to implement what they talk about
- More first-time clients will enter the market—desiring business outcomes over topics

DiResta also connects to the present push for content creation, noticing a developing trend for more thought leadership in speakers. Similarly, Hoffman thinks those without online learning elements won't be able to survive in a decade.

James anticipates new forms, more integration and interaction, and diversified distribution channels:

- Increased requests for shorter talks, i.e., TED-style talks.
- Requests for more integration of technology in speeches to drive audience interaction and share content.
- Demands on keynoters to provide additional offerings before and after the event.
- Livestreaming and more video integration to allow wider distribution of content.
- Requests for more audience interaction and conversational approach, regardless of audience size.
- Demands to make content more actionable and measurable, with more regular follow-up throughout the year.

Hyken predicts barriers will be broken down through technology, leading to more international engagement. “The world is getting smaller. The internet and social media have made it easier to communicate with people on the other side of the world.”

So there you have it! The seven habits of highly effective professional speakers. Want more? Check out our in-depth speaker interview series (<https://www.karmacrm.com/blog/category/professional-speaking/>).



Caitlin Delohery (<https://www.karmacrm.com/blog/author/caitlin/>)

Caitlin got her roots in inbound marketing before it got its name. As a teenager in the 90s, she promoted her independently published magazines by writing about the importance of indie publishing all over AOL. Now, Caitlin is passionate about moving people and society forward. She follows thought leaders in the National Speakers Association, the staffing industry, and all human rights movements. She loves learning and helping

people learn.

← Professional Speaker Interview Series: Mark Sanborn Talks About Knowing Your Audience, Closing Strong, and Educating While Entertaining (<https://www.karmacrm.com/blog/professional-speaker-interview-series-mark-sanborn-talks-about-knowing-your-audience-closing-strong-and-educating-while-entertaining/>)  
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**Steve Sapato** • a year ago

A wonderfilled article! I thought you did an absolutely terrific job of capturing the essence of the speakers you quoted! Loved every word. Thanks so much! And I loved the Speaking and Business aspect. Great job. Steve Sapato - the most famous unfamous speaker in America.

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**Caitlin Delohery** → Steve Sapato • a year ago

Thank you, Steve! :)

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**Dr. Mary C Kelly** • a year ago

What a pleasure working with Caitlin on this article! Thank you so much!

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**Caitlin Delohery** → Dr. Mary C Kelly • 10 months ago



Thank you for all your insight, Mary!

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**Caitlin Delohery** → John Williams · 10 months ago

Thanks for the tip, John!

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**De'Anna Nunez** · 10 months ago

Hi Caitlan, You sure hit it on target with this article. I loved it! It's a blueprint for success in the speaking industry, and what I loved most is you didn't sugar-coat it with the bliss of being on stage. It seems many rookie speakers want that limelight moment, but it's everything that happens behind the scenes that gets you there. I appreciated the fact that you included the hard work top speakers put in to achieve the results they do. Fantastic job.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Caitlin Delohery** → De'Anna Nunez · 10 months ago

Thank you, De'Anna! I'm so glad you found it useful. Yes, though the pros make it look easy on the platform, they put in \*tons\* of hard off-stage first!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Theresa Behenna** · a year ago

Great info here. I particularly agree with Mark Sanborn and The Pointed Stick exercise having been a professional pianist for many years and a speaker for the past 16....preparation is key to spontaneity on the stage. I rehearse my speeches word for word, over and over, that provides a sense of mastery (same as the piano) that in turn results in the freedom to have fun with the audience.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Caitlin Delohery** → Theresa Behenna · a year ago

Thanks, Theresa!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Justin Jones-Fosu** · a year ago

This was a very well written article by top notch speakers. The one concept that stood out the most to me is that speaking is also a business, and it challenged me to continue to think about myself as a business and what do successful businesses do. Thank you for sharing this invaluable content.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Caitlin Delohery** → Justin Jones-Fosu · a year ago

Thank you, Justin! I'm glad you found it valuable.

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