

HOW TO BECOME A MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER

By Ross Shafer

Do you think you have what it takes to be a highly paid motivational speaker? If so, read this article to either confirm (or crush) your aspirations.

You are probably hoping you will find the secret recipe for making a lot of money by standing on a stage, firing people up. You might even think being a motivational speaker is your destiny. Or, maybe you think motivational speaking is an easy side job. I had one man come up to me after a speech and say, "*Ross, I hate to burst your bubble but I could do your job. I mean if a former standup comedian and TV host like you gets paid to be a motivational speaker, I'm sure I could pull it off. How much did you get paid for a gig like this?*" That was 16 years ago and I've never heard this (rude) guy's name mentioned in any of my pro speaker's circles. I guess it was harder than he thought.

In my case, I never intended to be a motivational speaker. In fact, I cringed when I heard someone say I was one of those "motivational speaker people." This was horrifying to me. My well-researched "work" was to cross-pollinate original ideas for companies to deal with change. I am fascinated by how people and companies survive by adapting, evolving, innovating and disrupting. I have written (9) books on these subjects and have done more than 2,600 paid keynote speeches. I pride myself on giving an audience tangible take-home tactics; not just blurting out empty enthusiasm. My assumption was that motivational speakers were loud and obnoxious. Many of the ones I saw waved their arms overhead. Others sobbed to evoke sympathy from the crowd. The worst sin (to me) was that they spewed platitudes and bromides (trite and unoriginal ideas; typically intended to soothe or placate). An example of a platitude might be, "If you fall off the horse, get back in the saddle." (Oh, just kill me now)

I don't do any of those "motivational" clichés so when I would get a call to do a "motivational speech" I felt the meeting planner totally misunderstood what I do.

I was wrong.

Primarily, my phone rings as a result of a recommendation.

The recommender was simply telling the new client what he or she had seen. And, that is how they saw me? YUCK!

One day I was complaining to a friend how much I dreaded being called a motivational speaker. He laughed and said, "*Motivational speakers encourage people and the word encourage means to inspire courage.*" Whatever I was doing was inadvertently "motivating" others to act with more courage when they left the conference. Instantly, I changed my mindset. We must never forget that the audience's perception of us is what we are to them.

So I ask you to put aside whatever stigma you have about motivational speakers while I pull back the curtain to show you how myself (and others) have made a very respectable living being professional motivational speakers.

This is a huge topic but I'll start by answering the following questions:

- How do motivational speakers get started?
- How will I know if I have what it takes to be a motivational speaker?
- How much money do motivational speakers make?
- How do I go from Free...to Fee?
- Should I contact a speaker's bureau to get me work?

HOW DO MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKERS GET STARTED?

First, there is not a one-size-fits-all formula.

Those of us who became motivational speakers each got here via a different path. And to be honest, none of us started out with the intention of being a motivational speaker. But through a series of circumstances we discovered people would pay us to talk about "our stories."

For example, I was in a garage band in Jr. High School. As a senior in High School I was elected as Student Body President. After college, I bought two-dozen companies out of bankruptcy while moonlighting as a stand up comedian. That led to me getting work as a TV talk show host. As you can imagine I was pretty comfortable in front of a crowd. And, I also knew how to make people laugh. The "motivational speaker" part of me came as what I would characterize as an accident.

One successful male motivational speaker friend of mine started out as a high school teacher. He was so good at communicating that he was hired by an insurance company to give training presentations. He was so convincing on stage that his confidence inspired confidence in others; which is almost the definition of a motivational speaker.

A female motivational speaker I know never set out to be a professional encourager. She was a carnival juggler in Australia who had a knack for recreating sound effects. Her primary skill was being able to capture the rapt attention of an audience. One day she was telling her coworkers her personal story of triumph over tragedy and they flipped out. Her friends prodded her to tell her inspirational story at the weekly staff meeting. Her motivational chops were born in that meeting. Over the next few years other companies paid her up to \$5,000 to tell the same 20-minute story.

Motivational guru, Anthony (Tony) Robbins worked in the office of 1970's motivational speaker, Jim Rohn. Tony was initially in charge of shipping Jim's books and training materials to clients. Tony became so inspired by Jim's content that he contemporized Rohn's material for a new generation. If anybody was ever born to be a motivational speaker it was Tony Robbins. He is convicted about the content and his 6' 7" tall frame combined with his booming voice gave him a physically impressive advantage.

WHERE DO YOU FIT INTO THE MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKING WORLD?

If you have an inspiring story or a profound solution for overcoming a common problem or obstacle, there is room for you to join the ranks of motivational speakers.

First, you should listen to feedback when you tell your story privately to friends and family. Do they say you are captivating? If they say yes, ask yourself. *"Would anyone pay me money to hear about my achievements or my observations?"* If you have overcome an obstacle of almost any kind, and you have a blueprint lesson for how others can learn from you, then you have a shot at becoming a motivational speaker.

Here is a short list of motivational speaker categories that are in high demand.

- You have achieved success in business (you have no formal education but is now a successful software engineer)
- Sports heroes are popular because they have risen to the top of admired, yet difficult career.
- Sports star comeback stories (a star athlete who fell from grace, learned A valuable life lesson, and had the fortitude to return to greatness)
- A child stricken born with a physical impairment who became a hall of fame athlete
- Self help authors (these people offer solutions and cite case studies of how others have found success; using their methods)
- Overcoming a medical tragedy (car accident, heart attack, stroke, or burn victim)
- Overcoming a drug or alcohol addiction (kicking substance abuse of is popular in schools and rehab centers)
- You were in prison and turned your life around (being an example To others who have been convicted - but are now a contributing member of society.
- Overcoming an inborn impairment (debilitating dyslexia who has become successful in any enterprise)
- An extreme accomplishment (from climbing Mt Everest to winning an Oscar® or a Super Bowl)
- An extreme accomplishment in spite of a severe physical impairment (i.e., climbing Mt Everest while legally blind or with only one limb)
- Ordinary people with a rags-to-riches story (refusing to let obstacles deter them from their success)
- Ordinary people who have discovered a profound way to accomplish tough tasks; more easily.
- Celebrity adjacent motivational speakers (what they learned while being a famous person's assistant)
- Religious speakers who are charismatic and can bring fresh life to parables
- TV and Movie stars who have a resilient perspective we can all learn from

WHAT WILL YOU TALK ABOUT?

The best answer is, TALK ABOUT YOU. Tell *your* story. Your best story is the one you have lived and can repeat and inspire other people. The best motivational speakers move the hearts and mind of others because they are believable. They are honest. They have made mistakes along the way and have overcome them. Maybe you've told your story so often (and so well) that "your story" gets requested at parties? In fact, maybe you got the idea to be a motivational speaker because your friends and family said, "*You should become a motivational speaker.*"

MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER STORIES HAVE A STRUCTURE

You've heard it before but I'll repeat the basic structure of any great story:

The Beginning. (What is the problem you were trying to solve?)

The Middle. (What is your plan to accomplish your goal?)

The End. (What is the resolution? Did you win? O, did you lose?)

The easiest way to build story structure is to think of you as the hero in a movie. In every movie there is a protagonist (hero) and a villain (antagonist). The hero is trying to accomplish something (win the girl, rescue the family, find freedom, earn money to buy something, escape death, etc.) The antagonist is trying to stop the hero. Your story must be a story of triumph over seemingly impossible odds. The goal of every motivational speaker is to inspire others to learn from *your* trials.

ALERT! Your story cannot be boring. Your story must be an adventure filled with impossibilities, traps, suspense, impending disaster, and finally...a victory. You want an audience to sit on the edge of their seats while they are listening to you. The story has to include these elements because you are expecting somebody to pay you money to tell *your* story. You want your audience to hear your story and believe if they follow your example, they can win too. Incidentally, stories come from ordinary people it's the structure and the art of telling that story that holds a stranger's attention.

Real Life Example: I was speaking in Grand Prairie, Alberta, Canada last month and a woman came up to me and said, "*You have got hear Troy's story about surviving a bear attack!*" That's all I had to hear and I was hooked. Troy started his story with, "*I fought off a grizzly bear at such close range I ran out of bear spray.*" You'd listen to that story, right? Already, Troy had structure.

The Beginning: Troy and his girlfriend were training for a marathon by hiking up a steep mountain grade. They crossed a path and noticed three large Grizzly bears. Troy knew "running" would only incite an attack. The bears advanced.

The Middle: Troy and Debbie anticipated they might see a bear so they brought a large can of bear repellent. Within a couple of minutes they had emptied the can of spray so they began hitting the largest bear with their hiking sticks. A close up battle ensued.

The End: Miraculously, one poke in the largest bear's eye caused a loud squeal and all three bears ran away. Troy and Debbie escaped without a scratch. Running the Marathon was the easiest part of their training.

PRACTICING YOUR STORY

Once you have decided upon your unique motivational speaker story, write down everything you can remember about how you accomplished your task. Yes, write it down because you want to refine your story to include interesting details about the obstacles you faced and your emotional state of mind. Once you've written it down, start practicing the telling of your motivational speech. Tell your story as often as you can. Repeat it to anyone who will listen.

TALK FASTER

When you are presenting your story to an audience, DO NOT use a normal conversational speed of 120 words per minute. As a motivational speaker you are a performer. Increase your speaking speed to 160-180 words per minute. It will seem awkward, at first, but talking faster adds energy and urgency to your story. Don't worry about your audience. They have already been trained to keep up. News broadcasters speak at a rate of 180-220 words per minute and we can easily absorb every word they say.

THINK OF YOURSELF AS A "HIGHLIGHT FILM"

Not every part of your motivational speech has to be included in telling your story. You only want to keep the exciting, dangerous, compelling, and funny parts. The more you tell your story, the more you will discover that some parts of your story just aren't that interesting. Some parts are too long. Some details could be eliminated. Other parts happen to be very exciting to listeners. How will you know? Your audience will tell you with their posture. If they like your story, they are sitting closer to you. They are smiling as they listen. If they are losing interest, they will be sitting back in their chairs with folded arms. They will be checking their phones or looking at the time.

HAVE A QUOTABLE ENDING

The ending is the most important part of every speech. It is the part your audience will remember most. If you have crafted a powerful ending quote, you ensure the audience will remember you. That's important because you're your audience to recommend you to their friends. Why is the ending so important? If you have ever participated in a primacy and recency test you will remember how you felt after the exercise.

Here's how it works. A teacher verbally asks you to remember a set of ten random words, in order. You will likely remember what the first or second word - but remembering the middle words is much harder. However, to this day, you can probably remember the last word you heard in the set of ten. The most recent thing you see or hear is why you want to leave the audience with something they will remember. That's why many songs end with the highest note or the most powerful crescendo. That's why the final scene of a musical theatre production includes the

entire cast. The goal is for the ending to be so powerful that the audience erupts in a standing ovation. Being quotable is the equivalent of your own crescendo. Something unforgettable helps insure that your audience will recommend you to their friends; i.e., generating future business. From the audience point of view, the ending is their reward for hanging in there with you.

HOW MUCH DO MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKERS GET PAID?

Short answer: Anything from free...to millions of dollars per speech. The fee is dependent upon how well you tell your story and how often you are asked to tell it. At first, you will have to tell your story 90-100 times for free. You have a lot of legwork to do. Ask your local schools and business clubs if you can tell your story. Find out who holds weekly meetings and volunteer to speak for free. The amount of time for your speech is up to them. You should have at least a 20-minute talk. Take every opportunity you're given. You need to tell your story over and over so you can "work out the kinks." You will learn what parts they liked and which parts you can leave out. If you are good, you will soon be too busy to tell your story for free. At that point, make up a dollar amount you think a client could pay and what it will be worth to you to give of your time away from other activities. \$250? \$500? \$1,000? \$10,000? \$100,000. Fee is always dependent upon demand. Simply put, as your reputation spreads you can raise your fee to suit your time away from your other activities. At first, I made my fee affordable for as many organizations as possible. When I did 100 speeches a year at say, \$1,000 per speech, I would raise my fee 25%-50%. If the fee increase did not lower the number of speeches I did in a calendar year, I'd raise it again.

THINK LIKE A BUYER

Why would an organization hire you as a motivational speaker? They think what you have to say will solve their problems. The leaders of most company have tried to motivate their coworkers, on their own, but it's not making the impact or changes they want. They recognize their teams are burned out. They notice that their coworkers are getting complacent and not meeting deadlines. Leaders think "If we brought in an outsider with a fresh perspective, maybe our team will be inspired to think differently about work." That's where you come in. If you can refresh with the troops with energy, humor, drama, tales of people just like them who triumphed, a motivational speaker can make a difference. Keep in mind, you are probably one of several dozen people the leaders are thinking about hiring to motivate their team. Why should they choose you? I've got your secret weapon.

LEVERAGE YOUR SPECIFIC JOB EXPERIENCE

Whatever job you have held will serve you well as a motivational speaker. Buyers love to hire people they believe know the intricacies of their business. If you have been in real estate, pharmaceuticals, retail clothing, trucking, or any other micro niche, you already have an advantage over the competition. For myself, I've bought and sold 23 different companies so I have the advantage of being able to "make payroll" in a wide variety of enterprises. For you, when you get on the pre-booking conference call (that's the audition where you convince the buyer they

should hire you) share with the buyer the reasons you think you can relate to their audience. Bring up your previous experience. Use the familiar buzzwords used in that industry. Tell them why you were urged to become a motivational speaker for that specific industry. Since they cannot look at your video demo, give the buyer your best two-minute highlight of your story.

ASKING TO BE PAID

Sometimes a buyer will assume you are happy to speak for free. Squash that notion as soon as possible.

"My speaking honorarium for this kind of engagement is \$_____.

Be bold enough to ask for the sale.

"This feels like a fit for me. Shall we go to contract?"

"I'd love to work for you. Can I send you my one-page agreement?"

If the buyer pushes back on the amount of your fee with, *"I didn't know it would be that much."* It is up to you to counter offer. Keep the ball in their court.

"What were you expecting to pay?"

If the buyer says, *"We usually don't pay for speakers"* you say,

"I can't do it for free but I can make an adjustment to \$_____ (That is a conditional reason to reduce your fee) if you will allow me to shoot a video of the event for my archives." (That way you get valuable video you can use in your future video demo).

HOW WILL YOU HANDLE REJECTION?

Don't be discouraged. Going from Free to Fee will be hard because you don't yet have a lot of experience. "Known" motivational speakers who have been doing this a long time (over five years) have an advantage because they already nicely shot "demo" videos of them on stage. They have a website that describes, in detail, what they talk about. They may have a weekly blog or podcast that continues to promote their name and brand. Most importantly, they have a proven client list; which is perceived as credible previous employment. *"Well, if she has been hired by Amazon and Apple, then she must be good."*

Remember, the best motivational speakers on this planet started out with zero experience and zero marketing materials. This is a long game. They rose through the ranks by telling a great story that mesmerized an audience. If you can do that, people will talk about you and you will get work.

SHOULD I CONTACT A SPEAKER'S BUREAU TO BOOK ME?

No. Not in the beginning stages of your career. Speaker's bureaus will only take a chance on booking you after they have seen you speak in person. (That is if you can actually get them to leave the office to see you speak) They typically won't take chances on unknown speakers. They also want to know you have created a fan base of clients who like you. Bureaus have their choice of any motivational speaker on earth. They will only refer the best motivational speakers (to their clients)

because they want to become a reliable source for their future meetings. Just so you know how it works, speakers bureaus take a 25% commission off the top of the agreed upon fee. Furthermore, they are wise with their time. They will spend the same amount of their time earning 25% of a \$10,000 fee (\$2,500) as they do earning 25% of a \$1,000 fee (\$250 bucks). So, you will have to work a few years before you get their attention. That's good. You should not quit your current job until you can fully replace your income with speaking fees. Besides you need to:

1. Practice and perfect your speech
2. Get your marketing materials together (video demo, web site, blog, podcast, etc.)
3. Establish a track record and build your client resume
4. Boost the number of speeches you do in a year
5. Increase your fee to a point that bureaus find you worth their while. (\$5,000 is a good starting point)

TO SUSTAIN THIS CAREER, YOU WILL NEED MORE THAN ONE STORY

Ok. Let's say you are able to make a full time living telling your original story. If you are an amazing motivational speaker, people are starting to say you are one of the best motivational speakers they have ever heard. Here's what happens next. Your clients will want to bring you back for a repeat performance. Yikes! They probably don't want to hear the same story again. How will you come up with new material? In my next article I will talk about how to harvest as many motivational speeches as you want. I will show you how to find enough new material for life!

HOW TO TELL A GREAT STORY <https://www.RossShafer.com/Articles>

ABOUT ROSS:

ROSS SHAFER is the preeminent keynote speaker on CHANGE & RELEVANCE. He has authored (9) business books, won (2) International stand-up comedy competitions, and earned (6) TV Emmys as a network talk and game show. He has also bought and sold 23 different companies. As a veteran of more than 2,600 keynote speeches, you might want to have Ross speak at your next conference <https://RossShafer.com>

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