

A speakers bureau is a group of individuals, often volunteers, from within an organization, who make presentations about a specific topic, project, or resource. Speakers bureaus are all about educational outreach. They can be used to promote positive public relations and build community support. By sending speakers out to regular meetings of civic and church groups, service organizations, neighborhood associations, and other types of clubs, you will be able to reach many more people.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 10:

Forming and Utilizing a Speakers Bureau

BY

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Need a way to increase visibility and people's awareness of your cause, project, or resource? Having trouble getting publicity or disseminating information to broader, diverse interests? Do you need to counterbalance rumors, misinterpretations of newspaper articles or elements of controversy? Then a speakers bureau could be just the thing for you.

Organizing a speakers' bureau involves three distinct steps:

- ◆ Recruiting willing and knowledgeable speakers
- ◆ Preparing presentations
- ◆ Finding and scheduling speaking opportunities

Recruiting Speakers

Find individuals in your organization who are comfortable speaking and who may have experience doing so. Those with good communications skills are obvious candidates. Remember this – good speakers are not born, they are trained. They do not have to be directly involved in a particular project as long as they are willing to receive training and your organization feels confident of them as ambassadors. Speakers do not need to come from the highest levels of your organization either.

Sometimes your best spokespersons are individuals who may be lower down in the organization but are passionate about the message you are trying to deliver because they live and breathe it every day. I know a rank and file person who frankly would not be considered by most people to be a foremost expert on any particular topic. But she spends the time to learn enough about a subject so she can present knowledgeably. Then she speaks with such enthusiasm and persuasiveness that she engages her audiences to the extent they want to find out more or participate in an ongoing dialogue.

The speakers list should be regularly reviewed and updated. Adding new blood is always a good thing and you can never have too many speaker volunteers. You may want to develop a group of speakers that includes some people versed in all or most of the topics you develop into presentations. Other speakers can specialize in certain topics.

Preparing Presentations

The first step in preparing presentations is to formulate the messages your organization wishes to advance and list key points. Presentations may be on upcoming projects, ongoing project updates or general messages about your organization's mission. Next establish topic committees comprised of most knowledgeable staff to prepare the presentations, scripts and accompanying materials. Bring in people with skills in photography, writing, and graphics. Before the presentations and materials are finalized, try to involve your speakers in the review process. By bringing them into the process at this stage, you will bestow a sense of authorship and be able to personalize the presentations.

There may be one presentation that several different people give or each speaker may have his or her own specialized presentation. Consider preparing different scripts for different type of meeting venues. Breakfast meetings require the briefest remarks. Lunch meetings are more businesslike. After-dinner speeches should not be too serious.

Draft potential questions and answers so that speakers are not caught off-guard. In a Q&A session, one of the most important responses is, "I don't know the answer, so let me get your name and number and get back to you." Remember the purpose of these speaking engagements is to disseminate accurate information and strengthen credibility and trust in the community.

Practice Makes Perfect

Once the presentations have been prepared, have the speakers go over the scripts and practice many times. It is helpful to have the speakers deliver the presentations before small in house groups. Videotaping these in house dry runs is an effective tool that can really help speakers hone their delivery skills and techniques. By reviewing the videotape and seeking and integrating the in house audience's feedback, your speakers' confidence level will increase as will their effectiveness as spokesperson. The committee should remain available to provide continued support to the speakers and to tweak the messages, key points and presentation materials as needed. Don't forget to also stage a Q&A session and have the speakers use and be familiar with any props.

A Word About Props

Depending upon both the presentation and project budget, it may be useful to include props such as slides, computerized projections, maps, displays, etc. Ideally, each speaker should have a separate set of presentation materials to avoid confusion and potential scheduling conflicts. If this is not possible, arrange for storage of props at a central location, ideally one where all speakers can have 24-hour access. Speakers should also be supplied ample copies of brochures, newsletters, flyers, or other informational and promotional material that explains the project or the topic.

Finding & Scheduling Speaking Engagements

To launch your speakers' bureau, you will need to:

- 💧 Publicize availability of speakers

- Make contacts and coordinate speaking engagements
- Follow up with the organization you spoke to after your presentation

Publicity

To find groups, begin by having each topic committee brainstorm a list of suitable groups. You can find community organizations on the Internet by searching for key words like “environmental groups in Orlando” or “volunteer groups in Tampa or “senior citizens groups in Miami.” Your organization may already have stakeholder organization lists already in hand. There you go – natural ready-made audiences for your speakers!

Prepare a flyer that lists all speakers bureau presentation topics and provides your contact information. Then mail the flyers to the community organization on your lists. Be strategic with your promotion and don’t solicit more than you can handle especially if your search for suitable groups has been particularly fruitful. Start with a few key audiences in your community rather than a mass mailing. Follow up the mailings by calling or, ideally, making a personal contact with a known member of the group you have solicited. Many of the community service groups like the Kiwanis have program chairpersons. National groups like the Sierra Club or the American Association of University Women have local chapters and local program committees you can contact.

SPEAKERS AVAILABLE

Your Water/Wastewater Utility: Providing a Vital Public Service

Thousands of people in our area are served by [NAME OF UTILITY]. We [provide the clean water you drink OR protect the environment and enhance the quality of life by treating the millions of gallons of wastewater that go into the sewers each day]. We would like to tell your organization about all the good things we are doing to protect public health and the environment we have a number of topics that your group might be interested in hearing more about. We are available to speak at no charge to community organizations like yours.

Topics include:

[LIST TOPICS]

If you don't see a [water OR wastewater] topic that you want to hear about above, call us and we'll do our best to address your area of interest.

For more information or to schedule a speaker, contact [NAME] at [PHONE NUMBER] or [E-MAIL].

Get the Facts

Speakers Bureau Worksheet
Name of organization: _____
Date of scheduled presentation: _____ Time: _____
Location: _____
Organization's contact name and number: _____
Proposed length of presentation: _____
Brief description of audience: _____
Number of people scheduled to attend: _____
Seating and room arrangements (podium, head table, etc.): _____
Can you use visual aids (overheads, slides)? If yes, describe: _____
Can you distribute information, such as a fact sheet? _____
Is this ready? _____
Other notes: _____

Information about an engagement should include the time, date, and place of the meeting; an agenda or any pre-publicity if applicable; the anticipated audience size; the format such as lecture, panel discussion, or workshop; amount of time allocated to speak; and, if applicable, availability of aids like a microphone, lectern, slide projector, etc. Use a worksheet like this one.

If the presentation will be at a distant location, travel and lodging arrangements will need to be discussed. Being prepared for different facilities means using different props. Speakers should not arrive at a facility expecting a slide projector only to find an overhead unit instead. Ask beforehand what is available, what should be brought, or what will need to be done without.

Assign a speaker

Unless the presentation is speaker-specific by request or otherwise, assign a presenter that might already have a connection with the group or organization. If that is not possible, just make sure there is not a negative history between the speaker and the audience that for some reason would make the speaker or the audience uncomfortable. Respect the reasons, remember that your speakers are volunteers and try to never send them into the machine guns.

Keep a master calendar

In case of last minute cancellations or emergencies, speakers should have a list that includes each speaker's name and phone number and a calendar showing all engagements. One person in your organization should be responsible for coordinating schedules, responding to special requests for information following a presentation, and soliciting new engagements. Should a speaker become unavailable at the last minute, the coordinator, not the speaker, should be responsible to find a substitute.

Follow Up

Make sure to follow up with the group after the speaking engagement. Send a thank you note and ask them if the topic was covered thoroughly and presented well. Ask them if there are other topics your organization is qualified to address that they'd like to hear about. Try to invite yourself back.

Universally Speaking

We live in a fast paced world. People are busy. They may not be willing to come to a public meeting because of schedule conflicts, distance or many other reasons. You can use a speakers bureau anytime you need to spread the word about a subject of interest to your organization. In addition to giving information, speakers bureaus can be used to gather information. From collecting names for a mailing list to getting comments on a pending project or the services you provide, the speaker can learn how well people understand what your organization does and the value perceived by the people you serve. You can learn whether they are supportive of your actions, and potentially turn someone's negative attitude into positive support.

Don't forget to check out next month's Tip Sheet No. 11. As a follow up to this Tip Sheet, it will present tips on speaking in public.

You can download a reprint of this and other PE Tip Sheets from the FWEA web site at <http://fwea.cnsusa.com/cms/index.cfm?primarykeylist=,234,248,266,1669,1675>