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Outside the Box

Speakers from other industries
give meetings a fresh
perspective | by lynna Caruso

WHEN HE'S NOT facing life-and-death situations as an emergency room physician at two central Florida hospitals, Dr. Maurice Ramirez coaches groups on rapid decision-making skills. His audiences aren't comprised of his peers. In fact, they're about as far from the medical profession as it gets.

Ramirez is a doctor *and* a professional speaker who applies his emergency room techniques to business situations, instructing everyone from CEOs and CFOs to attorneys and concrete industry workers. He changes their thinking and their perspectives.

And they're mesmerized.

"When we're in our own businesses, we have an internal bias," Ramirez explains. "We know what we expect to see and, therefore, that's what we see. We can't see our own blind spots. That's true in medicine. That's true in every business."

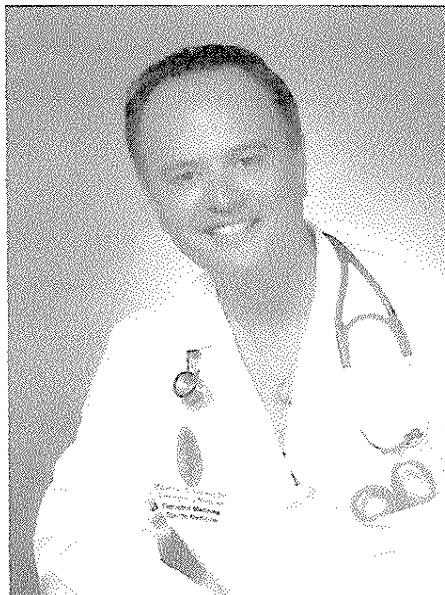
Meeting planners are increasingly recognizing the value of bringing in outside experts who take aim at *this-is-how-it's-done* mindsets—the kind of experts untarnished by insular, institutional thinking and who are not afraid to push the boundaries of the tried-and-true. "Too many events consist of breathing each other's exhaust," says Vickie Sullivan of Sullivan Speaker Services in Tempe, Arizona. The key is applying that

unique point of view to the challenges a particular industry is facing. "It's OK to be an outsider, but not clueless," she adds.

Outsiders can also deliver important company messages, especially to executive-level staff, that insiders can't or won't. B.J. Gallagher, a Los Angeles-based speaker and author of six business books, likens it to the old saying: "You can't be a prophet in your own land." Outsiders are in a better position "to point out painful realities and thorny problems that

employees dare not broach." In other words, they can say things insiders can't. In doing so, "they help shake companies out of complacency."

Rita Gunther McGrath, co-author of *MarketBusters: 40 Strategic Moves that Drive Exceptional Business Growth* (Harvard Business School Press, 2005) and an associate professor at



COURTESY: MAURICE RAMIREZ

Dr. Maurice Ramirez uses his experience as an emergency room physician in central Florida to coach groups of business professionals on rapid decision-making skills.

Columbia Business School in New York, agrees. "The primary advantage of an external speaker is that they can challenge the assumptions of the people in the room because they come from a different reality." The results can be eye-opening. People from other industries can turn audiences on to new practices that haven't yet been adopted in their own. "Someone with pizza experience might learn from a delivery company. Someone in the retail business might learn from a service center operation," McGrath continues. People think their industry is atypical, but when presented with the facts, "the inevitable reaction is, 'Wow, you have that problem, too?'"

With new insights comes the possibility of breakthrough thinking and an upside to the bottom line. "The direction of the marketplace is toward more content, more value," says Frank Candy, CEO and president of American Speakers Bureau Corporation in Orlando, Florida. "In order to justify the expense of speakers, everyone from CEOs to participants and meeting planners is demanding more return on investment, and justifiably so."

Stephen Shapiro, speaker and founder of The 24/7 Innovation Group, an education-and-research organization in Boston, puts it this way: "I play golf—not well—but I play. My handicap is in double digits. For me to shoot par would be a dream. But for Tiger Woods, par would be a nightmare. I am reminded of this comparison when I see companies that are satisfied to focus on their understanding of 'par,' otherwise known as 'best practice,' especially from within their industry. It was once an admirable aim, but is not sufficient today. Your competitors are more like Tiger Woods than they are like me. Par won't keep you alive in the current environment."

So what does it take to win over an audience and set the wheels of change in motion? For starters, it takes a speaker who can integrate remarks with the strategic intent of the meeting and the overall goals of the firm. Marquee value helps, too. "Education is good, but it's better, lasts longer, is more valuable and improves retention when it's entertaining," says Frank Candy. About half his bookings are for celebrity speakers, a broad category that includes athletes, best-selling authors and American heroes. "Rick Searfoss is definitely in the American hero category."

Colonel Rick Searfoss, a speaker on the American Speakers Bureau roster, is a retired astronaut, fighter pilot and space shuttle

commander from Tehachapi, California, who addresses corporate clients on topics of leadership, teamwork and innovation. "I don't tell audiences to think outside the box. I say, 'Think off the planet.'"

To make his message resonate, he shares his own

"Houston, we have a problem" moment. On his second shuttle mission, the crew experienced a hydraulic system failure on launch. It was Searfoss' emergency to handle. "The re-entry was critical. We were down one hydraulic system. If we would have lost one more, we might have lost the vehicle." His military training was put to the test. A crisis was averted.

Now Searfoss shares his methodology of crisis management, a system he calls PAPA: Preparation, Awareness, Persistence and Accountability. *Can this process apply in your daily execution of*

business? he asks his audiences.

"Absolutely."

Searfoss says he's often hired for events based around space themes such as "Reaching for the Stars." Themes are routinely used as a rally point in meetings, and sports themes are among the most popular. A name athlete is a natural to deliver cheerleading messages like "Teamwork," "Going for the Gold" or "Outpacing the Competition," the kind of messages that motivate, incentivize and reinforce company goals.

Beyond just questions of who and why, it's also a matter of *when*. When in the conference or meeting does an outside expert fit in?

Speakers can be successfully integrated into the program three ways, says Phelps Hope, CMP, vice president of meetings and expositions at Kellen Meetings, a



COURTESY: RICK SEARFOSS

Retired astronaut, fighter pilot and space shuttle commander Col. Rick Searfoss frequently addresses groups of corporate clients on topics such as leadership, teamwork and innovation.

division of the Kellen Company, the second-largest association management company in the world.

As a conference opener, an outside speaker can help employees get focused in the same direction. When they come to a meeting, the gamut of personal and work issues they've just left behind is still rattling around in their brains. Before the graphs and pie charts come out, an outside speaker with a message that's educational and entertaining helps to concentrate "all those minds on the stage. It's all about having those people starting to think in the same way so we can truly have a meeting," Hope explains.

A motivational keynote speaker can also be a valuable networking tool. Hope recalls attending a conference in which Colin Powell delivered the keynote address. Powell's speech gave Hope a substantial topic of conversation to use as an ice-breaker with colleagues for the rest of the conference.

Some meeting planners save heavy hitters for last. As the closer, a powerful speaker gives attendees a reason to stick around, instead of checking out early to hit the greens. Not only that, but the final speaker also leaves the greatest impact, a theory known as the *recency effect*. "Leave them on a high note," Hope says, and attendees will spread the good word.

If all goes right, that is.

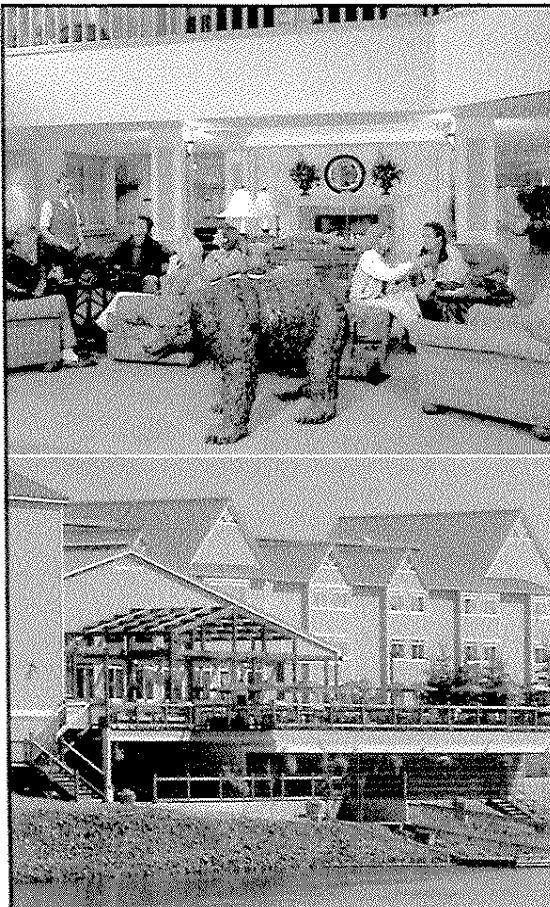
A planner's neck is on the line every time an outside speaker is hired. "If I make a recommendation and the speaker flops, guess who everybody's coming to?" says Hope.

A marquee name doesn't guarantee a standout performance. Even speakers with great track records, dynamic demo tapes and fistfuls of recommendations can have bad days.

Hope recalls the much anticipated keynote address by a future NBA hall-of-famer. For reasons unknown, the presentation fell flat. It happens. But planners can take steps to minimize the chance.

Experts say due diligence is critical in determining whether a speaker can deliver a strong message. Research, reference checks, demo reels—it's just like hiring a full-time employee. A household name doesn't mean an individual can make the transition to public speaker. It's a little like a rock star trying to make it in movies.

Then it comes down to ensuring the environment is primed for success, and reducing the possibility the speaker will have an off day. That could mean providing comfortable accommodations for the night prior, instead of having the speaker take a taxi straight from the



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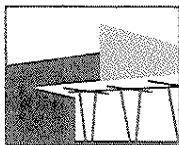
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But in the end, it comes down to a speaker making a connection with the audience, no matter the industry.

Col. Rick Searfoss says the more removed the industries he addresses are from the aerospace field, the more attendees "latch on to what I have to say."

While insiders might live and breathe the concerns and issues of their particular industry, the other side of the coin is that they can be too close to see all the available options, says Cindy Ventrice, a professional speaker and author of *Make Their Day! Employee Recognition that Works* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003) from Santa Cruz, California. "I have had high-tech companies adapt

Experts from outside the industry can deliver important messages, especially to executive staff, that insiders can't or won't.

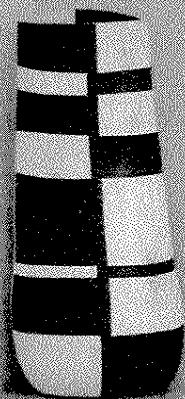
recognition practices borrowed from a gravel company. The best solution to your problem may already exist in another industry."

And sometimes it's even simpler than that. Patrick Snow, author of *Creating Your Own Destiny*, (Aviva Publishing, 2001), recently addressed the Stewart Title Regional Conference in Victoria, British Columbia. "One of the title representatives who happened to sit at my table said, 'I'm hopeful that your presentation has nothing to do with the title and escrow business,'" Snow says. "After sitting through three days of industry presentations, I'm hoping for an uplifting message—and another topic!" m

Ilyna Caruso is a freelance writer in Rockville Centre, New York.

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