



[Home](#) > [Event Planning](#) > [Meetings Strategies](#)

## Meetings Strategies

# When Good Speakers Go Bad

What to do when your speaker becomes a liability

By Leo Jakobson

July 1, 2011

### Speak Up

When *Successful Meetings* interviewed speakers bureau owners we asked them to recommend a couple of potential keynoters who can engage and capture an audience and have track records of reliability! [Read more](#)

Bucknell University's five-year-old Bucknell Forum is a big deal for the Lewisburg, PA-based liberal arts college. It attracts not just students and faculty but community members as well, according to Pete Mackey, the university's vice president of communications and chair of the National Speakers Series Task Force that selects the speakers and plans the events. Each year it brings three speakers to campus, one a nationally known keynoter and two others who may not be quite as famous but are very successful in their chosen fields, such as dancer and choreographer Twyla Tharpe, says Mackey. Greg Mortenson, the author of *Three Cups of Tea*, was the

2011 keynoter.

"We signed the contract about a year ago, 18 months before he was to speak," Mackey says. "That was necessary because of [Mortenson's] intense schedule."

It seemed like a home run. A highly sought-after (and expensive) public speaker, Mortenson was the gold standard. His book had become an inspiring best-seller and a must-read for U.S. military officers of all ranks serving in Afghanistan, and Mortenson convinced Americans ranging from schoolchildren to *Into Thin Air* author Jon Krakauer to President Barack Obama to donate to the Central Asia Institute (CAI), a charity he founded to fund schools in remote areas of Afghanistan and

Pakistan.

Then came the *60 Minutes* exposé that portrayed Mortenson as a fraud and left the university scrambling for an A-list keynoter with time running short.

Most planners will never have to deal with their keynote speaker being torpedoed by Steve Kroft on *60 Minutes*, but it can happen. And other things can go wrong: The Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) hired former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to keynote a convention, and shortly thereafter he became engaged in a public scandal when it was revealed that he had a child with a former housekeeper. Nightmare scenario? Absolutely, but there are a number of steps a well-prepared planner can take to minimize these risks.

### **Crisis Mode**

The members of the Bucknell Forum National Speakers Series Task Force faced a crisis beginning the day after *60 Minutes* aired the harshly critical segment on Mortenson, calling much of his autobiography about building schools for desperately poor children in remote areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan a fake and raising serious questions about the financial oversight of his charity.

The task force, which is made up of administrators, faculty, and students, met twice in the week after the program aired. “At the first meeting, we discussed all we had read and seen, shared our impressions candidly, and decided to reflect on that,” Mackey says. “We met again that Friday. That gave us time to digest all of what our colleagues had said and see what more the media or Mr. Mortenson had said about the controversy. The consensus of the group was quite clear: We were no longer comfortable bringing him here.”

That left the task force with two main duties. One: Find an available replacement of suitable stature who met the current Forum’s theme of creativity and was available on the specific date they’d selected a year earlier. And two: Find out what the cancellation was going to cost them. While Mackey would not disclose fees, Mortenson has been reported to charge \$30,000, and a 50 percent deposit is common in the industry. “The typical provision is if the university cancels, the deposit is lost,” Mackey says. “I told the agent that, given the complexities of what occurred, we would appreciate it if our deposit could be returned. She said, ‘Absolutely.’ ”

### **Hasta La Vista, Baby**

The decision whether to cancel a speaker depends on the unique circumstances of the situation, says Bonnie Boisner, vice president of client operations, business loyalty, at Minneapolis-based meeting and event planning firm Carlson Marketing. While Boisner would advise a client not to go forward with a speaker in Mortenson’s position, “there are so many variables; you have to look at each situation uniquely,” she says.

Key factors include the type of controversy and the group the planner works for, says corporate communications expert Jeff Ansell, president of Jeff Ansell & Associates, a media and crisis advisory firm based in Toronto.

Another is whether the person in question has apologized, adds Julie Freeman, president of the International Association of Business Communicators. Since Schwarzenegger is in the midst of a divorce after admitting he fathered a child out of wedlock, his apologies have been many and public.

Planners should also assess whether the issue affects the speaker's basic credentials.

In that case, "you have to ask, 'How do we want our stakeholders to see us and perceive us?'" Ansell says. "I still want him to speak unless I am a bank or some other very mainstream company. He'll be a huge draw."

According to Ansell, the question is, "What are the words we would use to describe what we want to project to our stakeholders? Words like respected, honest, trustworthy, accountable, responsible. If I invite Governor Schwarzenegger, am I violating any of these attributes, which I claim to hold dear? If I have the word respectful in there—respectful of my customers, respectful of my stakeholders—I might choose to take a pass. But if it's an organization like a Google or a Facebook, they might use words like leading edge, avant-garde, edgy. In that case, an invitation to Governor Schwarzenegger [could still] be appropriate."

When the GBTA found itself forced to make that choice three months before the GBTA Convention 2011, which runs from August 21-24, the website had been identifying Schwarzenegger as a "former governor, cultural icon, environmental crusader." At the time, GBTA Convention Director Liz Huh would say only that the situation was "being reviewed."

That changed on June 15, when the GBTA announced TARP-era Treasury Secretary and former Goldman Sachs CEO Henry Paulson would deliver the opening keynote. In a press release, Michael McCormick, executive director and COO of the GBTA, said: "We are fortunate that Mr. Paulson will be able to share his insight into the economy and the financial system with our members. His perspective will be invaluable for ... anyone who is involved with the business travel industry."

Schwarzenegger was not mentioned, and the group's only comment was that he "will not be able to attend because of a personal obligation."

The group would not discuss how Paulson was chosen.

Any company retaining a speaker with image problems should be prepared for a lot of media attention and to defend its decision, says Ansell, who is also author of the recently published, *When the Headline Is You: An Insider's Guide to Handling the Media*.

He advises: "Be prepared for a potential demonstration. Give some thought to how you want to introduce [someone like] Governor Schwarzenegger—if you want to even suggest that he's been in the news as of late. And be prepared for hecklers in the audience to yell out something inappropriate."

Whether the eventual decision is to cancel or to retain a speaker, "any crisis is best handled by a contingency plan," Freeman says.

### **Negotiating a Cancellation**

Coming to an agreement like Mortenson's representative did with Mackey is good business, says Gail Davis, president of both Gail Davis & Associates and the International Association of Speakers Bureaus. "If the speaker is sensitive to being associated, rightfully or wrongfully, with any controversy, and they have the reputation of saying, 'I understand the concern of the client, and that they would prefer to book someone else this year and consider me for next year'—that is a class act," she says. "That is certainly what I would advise [to a speaker] who is hopeful things will blow over."

A speakers bureau also has a vested interest in keeping everyone happy. Andrea Gold, president of Tucson, AZ-based Gold Stars Speakers Bureau, recalls having booked a "very famous businessperson from the U.K., someone who was very well respected." Prior to the event, the \$25,000 speaker "said something against public opinion, and the group no longer wanted her," Gold says. "The client lost their deposit, even though I fought like the dickens." And Gold lost a client.

Another point Davis makes is that if a planner booked a speaker directly and wants to cancel, "you're negotiating with the person you have the issue with, and that can be awkward, versus having someone negotiating on your behalf saying, 'This is a problem.' "

This is why it's also a good idea for the planner to remember that the speaker is a businessperson as well. "A cancellation is very serious—a speaker only has time to sell," Gold notes.

Citigroup found this out when it dropped actor and economist Ben Stein as a speaker shortly before a client event in May, immediately after one person complained to the financial institution about Stein allegedly telling sexist jokes at an earlier gig. Stein was thrown into damage control mode, and the incident got a great deal of media coverage, including a widely cited Bloomberg article

rehashing details of a year-old gender discrimination lawsuit against the bank. And it reportedly had to pay Stein his full \$45,000 fee.

### **Replacing a Speaker**

Once the decision has been made to replace a speaker, the next step is finding a suitable alternative. Lead time is a big factor.

With six months to go, the Bucknell Task Force was able to go back to the research it had done on other speakers before selecting Mortenson, figure out who was available on the date, and make another choice.

“We were looking at people whose price we knew, whose availability we knew, and whose interest we knew,” Mackey says. Still, despite identifying a new target speaker within a week of the April 25 cancellation of Mortenson, it was mid-June before the university announced his replacement—voice actor, puppeteer, and multiple Emmy-winner Kevin Clash, who created *Sesame Street’s* Elmo.

But planners often don’t have that much time, says Davis, who prior to starting her company was a corporate event planner for EDS, the IT outsourcing giant purchased three years ago by computer maker HP. “I was responsible for their large incentive sales program, the Inner Circle,” she says. “One time I had booked Christopher Reeve through a speakers bureau. Two or three weeks before the event, I noticed a small blurb in the *Dallas Morning News* that said he had been admitted to the hospital with a small blood clot behind his knee. I immediately began asking, ‘What is my backup plan, what am I going to do?’ I called the bureau and they said, ‘Don’t worry about it, he’s going to be out [of the hospital]; it’s two weeks away.’ ”

But Davis decided to put another speaker—actor Robert Urich—on standby. While that can be difficult, as the speaker is asked to reserve dates for a fraction of his or her fee, it proved doable, Davis says.

“So Christopher Reeve was out of the hospital and appeared to be doing great,” she says. “We were on site, people were arriving, and I got the call. We were literally transforming his hotel room—installing the hospital bed and oxygen tank—and I was told he’d had another incident and was not going to be arriving.”

That was a valuable lesson Davis says she took with her when starting her own bureau.

“Clearly, anyone can go on the Internet and book just about any speaker they want,” Davis says. “But if you book direct, and that speaker calls you and says, ‘I just had a car wreck on the way to the airport,’ you’re on your own. Especially if it’s happening on the day of the event or the week of

the event, when you have so many other responsibilities on your plate, you don't want to be trying to figure out what your options are. Having been on both sides—owning a speakers bureau as well as being responsible for a large-scale corporate event—I think that's one of the biggest benefits of having a strong partner relationship with a speakers bureau.”

While it has happened only three times in 12 years, Davis says she doesn't just tell the client a speaker can't make it. “You're going to know some other options,” she says. “You're not just going to call and dump a problem on someone.”

Gold adds that using a speakers bureau that has a large network “is a type of insurance,” because it has relationships with lots of speakers and knows not only who can step in, but also who can be relied upon to go to great lengths to fulfill their obligations. And who can't.