

Parrish DuDell BigSpeak Podcast Interview

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We'll hear their exclusive tips, behind the scenes insights, and off the record stories. Pieces of knowledge only available from BigSpeak's unique slate of keynote speakers, and business leaders.

During these episodes, we'll meet just a few of the best speakers in the business, learn their unique skillsets, that enable them to inspire audiences on the biggest stages in the world.

Inspiration begins now.

Mark: Well, welcome back to the show everybody. I am thrilled to be talking to Michael Parrish DuDell, who's talking to us today from Nashville. Michael, welcome to the show.

Michael DuDell: Hey Mark, thanks so much for having me.

Mark: Boy, so are you getting ready for a talk today?

Michael DuDell: No, in fact, I split my time between New York City, and Nashville. So, sometimes you catch me I'm in the Big City, other times, I'm hanging out in the very lovely, chill vibe of Nashville Tennessee, which I can't tell you how much I love.

Mark: I love that you're either in front of the stage, or you're behind the stage, or you're, what I like to think of, as under, you're just recuperating, refreshing and working on your resilience.

When, you know, you're a young guy and you speak to millennials, you're kind of known for that. When did you discover you wanted to be a keynote speaker, or is it in your DNA, or someone said "Hey, Michael you'd be great in front of crowds."

Michael DuDell: Yeah well, the keynote stuff started, actually next year 2018 will be my tenth year-

Mark: No!

Michael DuDell: Which is crazy cause I'm only 34 so this has been since-

Mark: You look like you're 22 man.

Michael DuDell: Thank you very much, thank you I appreciate it. 34 years old, started when I was 24 with the keynote speaking. But I actually grew up on stage. My whole life I was an actor-

Mark: Really?

Michael DuDell: Since I was four years old I went to school for it. I majored in it. I'll get your credibility back later, I promise, if you're listening. I had a big career shift around 23, 24. Got involved in media, which led to, gosh, startups and tech, and all around the idea of, sort of, future focused next generation, back then we called it Gen Y. And that sort of laid the ground for this, but to answer your question honestly, I grew up on stage. I feel more comfortable on stage than I do almost anywhere else and here we are.

Mark: Are your parents in theater?

Michael DuDell: They're not, and they were not the kind of parents that you'd think would ask their kid to be. They were both therapists actually, which is a whole nother podcast.

Mark: Yeah I bet it is.

Michael DuDell: But it was my decision, it was something I always loved, and it's just manifested in this way today.

Mark: So, I'm gonna guess, you've stepped on quite a few stages, and you have that requisite amount of anxiety. What's your little trick in that step, just before the light hits you, that lets you know that everything's gonna be great?

Michael DuDell: Yeah, you know, I don't actually have that kind of anxiety that a lot of people have right before they get on. I do something, that's sort of strange, that I think it's because I've been on stage for so much of my life, that I'm very aware, and very prepared for what will happen when I step on stage. For whatever reason, about 15, 20 minutes before I go on, my body, just sort of, loses all of its energy. I can't really explain it.

Mark: Really?

Michael DuDell: I feel like I'm gonna fall asleep. Yeah.

Mark: No kidding.

Michael DuDell: So, I'll be back stage, I'll be ready to go, and I will feel so exhausted, so sleepy, all of a sudden, and then the second I step on that stage, that's gone. I think what it is, is that my body now understands the amount of energy, and the amount of effort, physically, that it takes to be on stage for an hour, hour and a half, that right before I go on, it just starts to reserve that energy to use when I go on

stage. This has been happening for five or six years now, that I've noticed. If I don't feel that, that is when I get nervous.

Mark: So, your body is really working with you, to support your speaking?

Michael DuDell: Yeah, you know, again, it's that thing that, because it's been so much of my life, it's just natural. It just, sort of happens, and it's nothing that I really control, but it works in my favor, for sure.

Mark: What about acting prepared you to give keynotes?

Michael DuDell: What's crazy, is that when I first got into business, I've had some great experiences. I worked for Seth Godin for a while, and worked for GE, and had my own company. I was so afraid when I started out into that path, to even talk about acting. I didn't hide it, but I certainly didn't bring it up, and the reason why, is I thought, if somebody hears that I have a background in theater, that I have a background in the arts, they're not gonna take me as a businessman, they're just not.

What I have found, and partially it's because I have some experience under my belt, but it's also because the way that we think about work has changed. That actually is more of an asset than anything else, these days. It's because when you go to school for theater, when you have studied it, when you learn it, what you understand, is you understand how to communicate, how to play a scene, how to walk into any room, on to any stage, in front of anybody, and very quickly assess who they are, who they think you are, and use that knowledge to share your message, in a way that is most heard.

For me, it's about, staying in the moment. It's about listening to my audience, as much as it is, talking to my audience, which you can actually do without the audience saying much by other cues. All of that was strictly theater stuff. That's stuff I somehow learned, and apply to this world today.

Mark: That's a great super power you have. I've been doing improv for the last three years, and I had no idea that it was gonna have such an impact on my ability to read an audience, because they're like the other part of the conversation, right?

Michael DuDell: Oh, absolutely. It's one of those things, that everyone talks, improv was big a few years ago, and I guess it still is. People said, "Oh I just gotta take an improv class, I'm gonna learn it." You say, "No, no, no, you have to actually invest in that improv training." Because it takes a period of time to really to let that sink in. Once you learn it, I've been playing improv games since I was in elementary school.

Mark: No kidding.

Michael DuDell: Actually, it's funny that you brought up improv. There's this one game that, if I knew how important it would be, I probably would have taken it more seriously. It's this game, you've probably played it, where you walk in a room, and you don't know who you are, and you don't know anything about the character, or the other characters in the scene, and just using context clues, and what people give you, you have to uncover all that information.

I've joked that, that is what my daily life is today. I walk into rooms as a speaker, as an advisor, as whoever I am in that room, and it's my job, to very quickly assess the situation, and cast myself in a role that's appropriate for that scene. That's strictly improv training right there.

Mark: There's a deep trick for us, right there, for everybody. You've written, you've been in business, how do you split your time between business, and out doing keynotes? What's that split look like now?

Michael DuDell: You know, it's pretty fluid. There's not a defined system of splitting the time. I book dates in advance, I have one or two clients, at the most, doing my consulting stuff. These days, most of it's speaking, a lot of broadcast stuff in New York. There really isn't a system. I'm flexible, I'm a single guy that lives by himself, and works for himself, so I have a lot of flexibility in my life.

The one thing I will say, and this is something that I think is a total privilege, and I feel very lucky to be able to say it. I made a decision very early on in my career, that the metric I was gonna use to determine success, was not gonna be quantity in any way. Truly, that's a hard thing to do in 2017, especially as a young person, especially in our industry.

Quantity matters, sure, how much money, how many gigs, how much X, Y, and Z, but I learned early that, that was no real indicator for success. I don't really think about it as much as quantity as I think about quality, think about doing the kind of work that I actually love to do, and the kind of work that inspires me, and I'd much rather do less of that, if it feels meaningful, than more of just doing stuff to do it.

Mark: That feels like you just described a big part of the millennial ethos.

Michael DuDell: Right. Yeah, it's a huge part. There are a lot of reasons, in fact, enough reasons to take up an hour long speech, as it turns out, but very quickly, I think for me, and for a lot of my cohorts in the generation, two things happened. One, is there's this idea of work life balance, which I'm very resentful of, and I don't believe in, and I'm an outspoken-

Mark: I'm with you. I'm with you on that.

Michael DuDell: And I'll tell you what the word is, the word is, work life fusion, because what this generation is claiming, is that the work we do, who we are as professionals, is

no different than the work we do in our personal life, and who we are, as people. What we look for, are solutions that are fusion based, not balanced based. That something, but the reason for that, I think, one primary reason, is that we saw what happened to other generations that devoted themselves to a company or an organization, that gave their life to something, that maybe they didn't love, but they felt provides stability.

Then all of a sudden, we watch that stability crumble, when we were getting out college, and we were getting out of high school. That was a very important factor in us setting long term goals and milestones. We stopped measuring things by this idea of stability, security, certainty. We don't believe in that anymore. So, we're looking for other things that can provide the same sort of comfort that those three things I just mentioned did to other generations.

Mark: I'm gonna guess that the subject of your talk, and that what you just said, I could listen to for an hour, but I'm gonna guess that, that is very much in demand for people who are looking for speakers now, because the workforce is so dramatically shifted over to the millennial generation.

Michael DuDell: Yeah, I think you're right. I always say, when I talk about millennials, I say, it's sort of a red herring, because millennial is just a synonym that I use for this new kind of employee, this new kind of consumer. This is not something that starts and stops with the millennial generation, and that's the important thing to understand. There is this, in fact, these characteristics, these trends, this new, frankly, life cycle that we are pioneering, that is going to last beyond our generation. I call it the pre-dult, so you have, infancy, childhood-

Mark: Pre-dult? Is that what you said?

Michael DuDell: Pre-dult.

Mark: Pre-dult, I love that.

Michael DuDell: Pre-dult, which is the period of time between teenager and adult. It's the pre-dult. That's somewhere between 20 and 27, 28 where we're constantly reevaluating. This pre-dult thing, these trends that we're seeing, yes they were started by millennials, yes they were something that millennials pioneer to this day, but it's also going to effect every generation that follows below us, and frankly, it's effecting the generations above us, too.

When you look at any sort of cultural change, it's either transformational, situational, or generational. So, you have to understand that when you look at the scope and say, something transformational starts with the generation and bleeds out. Something situational, is based on the life phase that the generation's in. For example, if you say, "Oh, well, all 20 year old millennials are poor." That's not really true. All 20 year olds are poor. That something that's situational.

Generational, is something specific to the generation that only the generation experiences, or embodies. Any sort of change we look at, we have to parse through those lens.

Mark: That an interesting way to break it down. I'm curious about your process. Someone books you-

Michael DuDell: In life, or in speaking?

Mark: In speaking, well, we'll do another show, and I wanna get you on one of my other shows. When you're talking with someone, and you're understanding what their goals are for the event, what their objective is, and what the outcome would be. Ideally, when they finish listening to you, something great is gonna happen. How much of your talks, and you've got several that you do, how much of them do you reserve for customizing for a given audience?

Michael DuDell: I like to make sure that every speech has a lot of custom elements to it. Of course, anyone that's a speaker, you would know, that you can't recreate a keynote for every event. Basically, what I do, the very short version, is the first section or so, and sometimes the first two, depending on what we're covering, it's relatively frozen, it's relatively static.

Let's say I mention five or six things, chances are, I have about 10 to mention, but I take five or six that are most relevant to the audience, to the category, and I will plug that it. If you go a little bit further into the speech, maybe the third and fourth section, those are things that are very specific to the industry, very specific to the challenges that the industry or the category faces.

That's sort of, wraps it all up. I make sure there's a piece that sort of, static and that is frozen, and that is something that is sort of, evergreen, and relevant to anybody who's in business. Then of course, you have to have the pieces that's more custom. I try to mix it that way. Then I'm a huge proponent of Q&A. As someone who's spends a lot of my time on camera, and in front millions of people talking about things that sometimes I know a lot about, and sometimes, frankly I know nothing about. There's nothing I love more than that organic moment that happens in the Q&A.

I think it's so important. I always try to throw Q&A in, even if it's not scheduled in that hour, if they have time, I like to throw it in there, because I think that's really when the valuable stuff happens. With millennials, there's such a stigma around millennials, that I always tell an organizer before I go on, "Just so you know, before I walk on that stage, about 15% of this audience, they don't know me, but they don't like me."

I know that going into it, and it's because they're resentful of this idea of millennials, and they don't love the topic. Hopefully by the end, I've won at least half of them over, hopefully more, of that 15%.

Mark: Right.

Michael DuDell: That's my job, my job's to go up there, and to not only present, but to answer questions that are hard to answer. I've gotten some of the media stuff in Q&As so I love the Q&A section.

Mark: What do you think is your secret for winning over that seven and a half percent?

Michael DuDell: Being totally authentic, being totally transparent, and not trying to be, I always draw criticism on this, I hate this culture of expert that we're in. Even though it's how I've made my living, I'm very, very, very resistant to it, and I'm the first person to put air quotes around the expert in my title, I will tell you that right now.

The first stigma that I have to get over, and you mentioned this when you were introducing me, is that I'm 34 years old, I think I look around 30 ish. Most of the time, I'm speaking to audiences of people that are, maybe there are a few 30 year olds, but a lot of times it's 50 year olds, 60 year olds, captains of industries, CEOs, directors, all these folks.

When I walk out on stage, I know that the first thing they're thinking is, "Why should I listen to this guy?" Knowing that, and understanding that I have to win over my audience before I can effect change with them, I have to joke about that, I have to be self-deprecating, I have to acknowledge the fact that I'm a 30 year old person, standing in front of people that, in some ways, know a lot more than me, and in other ways, maybe they don't.

I have to convince them that I'm worth listening to. I think a lot of that is self-awareness, is not taking yourself too seriously, and is understanding that you are there to convey an idea. One specific, or many specific ideas along a category, and you're not an expert on everything. Having that humility when you walk on stage, I think it's critical.

Mark: That first sentence, is where you build trust with them.

Michael DuDell: Absolutely, and if you wanna know a speaker trick, what I do, is I stand in the back, about 20, 30 minutes before I go one, and I listen to the introduction, I listen to the speaker before me. I listen to any kind of reference that's made in the room, and I start every single speech with something that is ... I try to make it funny, but it's not always funny. So, if it's not funny, then I make fun of myself for not landing the joke, but something that is completely unique to the room, that just happened, because what I have found is that by doing that, automatically, they look to me as somebody who has a shared experience.

I always remember the name of the person that intrudes me and I thank them by their first name, "Thanks so much Bob, thanks so much Sally." Then I start

with some sort of humor that it topical and relevant. That seems to draw them in.

Mark: What do you like most about standing, I mean, other than the feeder back round and being on stage, and being very, very comfortable on stage. What is it that really gets you going about giving these talks?

Michael DuDell: That's a really good question. From a personal side, I think that I do my best thinking, I think I do my best work shopping, not when I'm sitting in a board room, not when I'm sitting in my office, not when I'm staring at a blank Microsoft Word screen, but I think I do my best thinking when I'm standing in front of people, and the pressure is on.

I'm somebody who really loves a high pressure environment. The personal side of it for me, is that I will leave stage with 10 more insights than I had for the last month, sitting around and thinking about it. It'll just come to me when I'm in that environment.

From a professional standpoint, I love that I can walk into a room, full of people that might be skeptical, or that might be uncertain, or might be unaware of a topic, of an idea, of an approach. By the end, just 60 minutes, I can convince them to try something, to take a step in the right direction, and when that works, which often it does, to be able to hear, "Hey, I walked in to this room, and 60 minutes later, I had something that was valuable to my organization today, valuable next week, next month." That's incredible. That's 60 minutes. There's some real insight there. That becomes really addicting when it happens. For sure.

Mark: Making a difference is like that right?

Michael DuDell: It is.

Mark: When it's clear, I mean, I love that you said, it's about a single idea, it's not 10 ideas, it's a single idea, so that's one of the reasons you're as effective as you are. Let me bring it around to BigSpeak for a second, and I'm curious, how did they find you?

Michael DuDell: You know, I think like any sort of great relationship, it was through somebody else. Erik Qualman, who's a speaker, an amazing dude, who has been ... I mean, talk about a guy that is as generous with his time and energy, as he is talented. One of my favorite guys.

We met through somebody, and he ... this was a few years ago, he works with a few different bureaus, he said, "Look, I really love what they're doing over at BigSpeak, happy to give you an intro." BigSpeak was great, they were welcoming and I mean, I gotta say, I've worked with a lot of speaking bureaus, and I have

been very resistant, hesitant to trust, frankly, agencies. If you have any experience working with agencies, you feel my pain on that.

I've had a great time with BigSpeak, and they've consistently delivered, and I like the people, I like the mission, I like the way they run the organization, and again, for somebody who cares more about that stuff than making sure that I'm booked Monday through Friday, seven days a week for two years. That's something that's valuable to me.

Mark: Michael, thank you so much, I'm gonna look forward to ... I'm gonna put you on my playlist here, and I'm frequently engaged in these kinds of conversation with millennials, and you certainly, in a short period of time, gave me some things to think about. I really appreciate it. You'd be great on stage.

Michael DuDell: Thanks so much for having me Mark, it's been a joy being here.

Mark: Okay, take care.

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