



What's the Return on Investment for Event Keynote Speakers?

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors investigate the return of investment on event keynote speakers for companies and organizations. Organizations and companies hire keynote speakers who are experts in their field for a variety of purposes: to entertain, motivate, inform, and/or educate. Speakers' fees range from thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Even though companies are investing a great deal of money into keynote speakers, the benefit to these organizations has been not studied. This study attempts to lay the groundwork for future studies to understand the return on investment for a company when hiring a keynote speaker. Over 5,000 individuals were contacted who had booked a keynote speaker and 91 answered an anonymous survey. After analyzing the data, it was revealed that 40.1 percent of clients found a return on investment from 1 to 5 times the cost of the speaker. Furthermore, nearly two thirds of the client companies (65.3%) said a speaker's points were reinforced internally from 1–6 weeks or more after the event.

The Speaking Events Industry

The mission of a speakers bureau—talent agencies that connect professional keynote speakers with businesses—is to inspire and motivate change in organizations through presentations and workshops by experts and thought leaders. Speakers bureaus do this by matching (or trying to match) the right speaker with the right company and the right event. Successful matchmaking is important because professional speakers are expensive. Hiring a speaker can cost a company from \$10,000 for a thought leader up to six figures for a well-known celebrity.

Problem

When a company is investing a large amount into a speaker, and when a speakers bureau is guaranteeing a return, the cost for a speaking engagement has to be worth it. In theory, professional keynote speakers should be a great return on investment. Thought leaders can provide new ideas for creative solutions and industry experts can provide insights into new trends. But is the investment worth it?

We wanted to quantify the return on investment of a professional keynote speaker for a company. The anecdotal evidence is plentiful. Speaker bureau websites are full of testimonials from companies saying how great keynote speakers were. But aside from multitudes of platitudes, these websites offer little quantifiable data.

To answer the return on investment question, we searched the Internet and Google Scholar for studies on the subject. Our search turned up various speaking website blogs but no academic research. Speaker websites declared that keynote speakers can pay for themselves by boosting event attendance, adding credibility to an event, and creating social media buzz. At the very least, speaker websites implied a neutral return on investment—you'll get your money back. However, there was no concrete data even for this claim.

Therefore, we decided to conduct a study to determine the return on investment for a professional keynote speaker. As far as we know, this is the first study of its kind for the industry.



Method

To gather data, we created a nine question survey on SurveyMonkey. We then contacted 5,000 individuals who had either hired keynote speakers from our company or had contacted our company interested in hiring speakers. Each individual was provided with an email link to the survey.

We received 91 responses for a 1.82% response rate.

Participants

Respondents comprised internal company event organizers (46%), company executives (24%), third party event planners (8%), support staff to executives (7%), and other (16%).

Our participants had a variety of keynote speaker booking experience with most participants booking speakers for 1-3 events a year (61%). The remaining 37% were quite experienced: booking 4-6 events (20%), 7-9 events (7%), and 10 or more a year (12%)

Return On Investment

We asked 4 key questions on ROI. How would you rate the audience feedback, the type of speaker who resulted in best returns, estimate the return on investment, and how many weeks afterwards were the keynote points instilled by leadership?

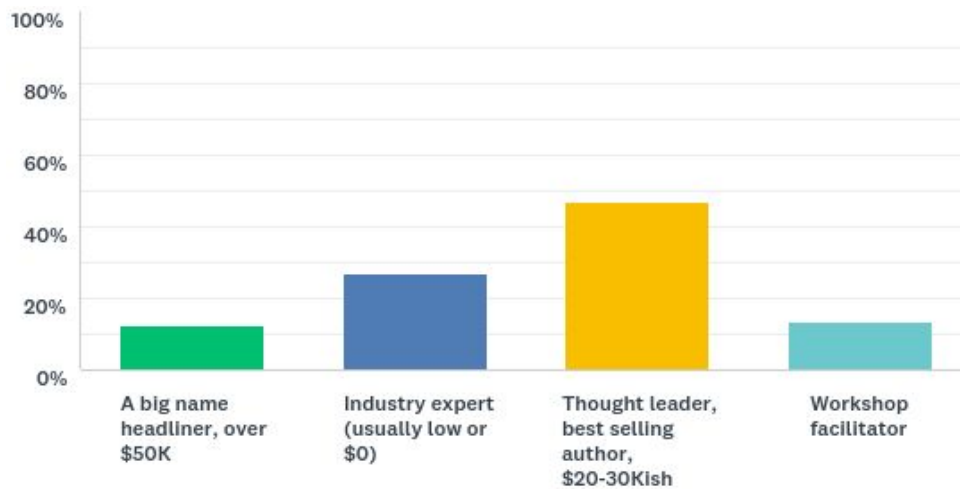
1. How would you rate audience feedback about paid keynote speakers from your last event?

We found 92% of clients reported audience feedback for a keynote speaker was positive, ranging from Good to Excellent.

EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	GOOD	FAIR	POOR	TOTAL
31.46%	46.07%	14.61%	5.62%	2.25%	

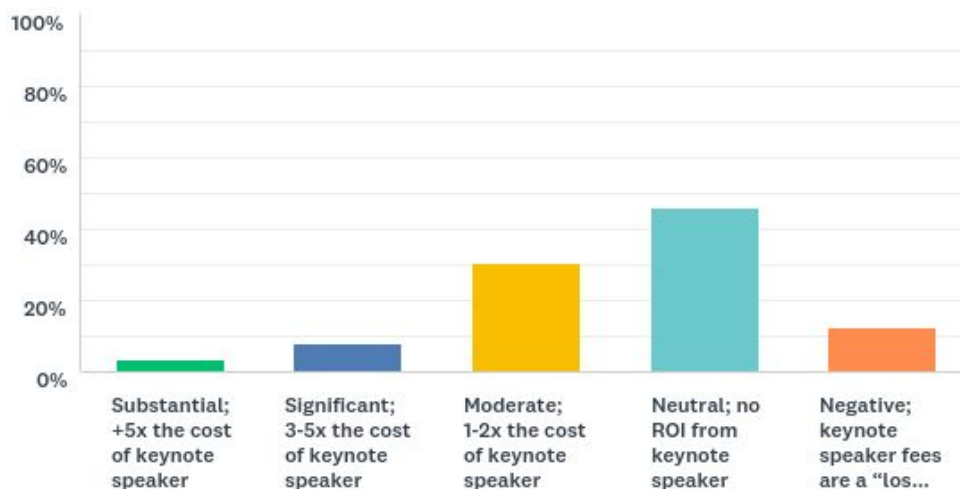
2. Which type of speaker has resulted in greater ROI at your company events?

When we asked what kind of speaker gave the best return, 45.7% of clients reported that thought leaders and best selling authors resulted in greater ROIs. The biggest surprise was that headliners were least popular in terms of ROI (only 12% believed they delivered greater ROI).



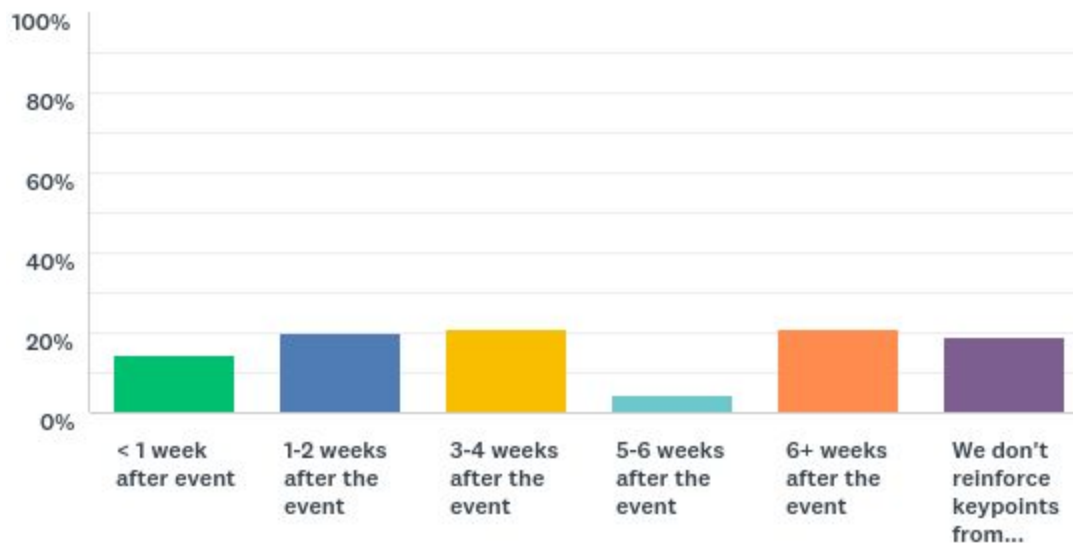
3. What is the typical post-event ROI a keynote speaker generates for the hosting organization?

When asked about the post-event return on investment, we found 40.1% of clients reported a moderate to substantial ROI (1–5x speaker investment) for hiring a speaker. On the other hand, 45% felt it was a neutral return.



4. How long are a keynote speaker's key points strategically reinforced by internal company leadership?

The most surprising discovery was how long the effect of a good keynote speaker could have on an organization. Nearly two thirds of the client companies (65.3%) said a speaker's points were reinforced internally from 1–6 weeks or more after the event.



Conclusions

The purpose of this survey was to determine the return on investment for keynote speakers. Is there a return on investment? The simple answer is yes. Up to 40 percent of our clients found a return on investment from 1 to 5 times the cost of the speaker.

Even more encouraging, nearly two thirds of the clients (65.3%) said a speaker's points were reinforced internally from 1–6 weeks or more after the event.

While more research needs to be determine the relationship between variables, such as cost, type of speaker, and return of investment, it is encouraging to see that keynote speakers are not merely a luxury or entertaining diversion, but instead an investment with potentially a large return for an organization.



Limitations

Due to the small sample sizes, the assessments made in this paper are not statistically reliable. With a larger sample size, it is likely we would see a change in the response ratios that would lead to different conclusions.

Another limitation of the research is we did not know the purpose of the company event. Some speakers are meant to entertain, while others inform or inspire change. The return on investment for entertainers—people telling a story or doing a musical performance, for example—would be expected to be neutral, while a change management speaker would be expected to have a higher rate of return.