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SHOW ME THE MONEY

The bigger the name, the bigger the speaking fee. Here are some notable figures cashing in on the lecture circuit today.



BILL CLINTON
FORMER PRESIDENT
\$350,000



KEN BURNS
FILMMAKER
\$50,000



DEBORAH NORVILLE
TABLOID-TV HOST
\$25,000



JESSICA LYNCH
FORMER POW
\$12,500

1 Man, 1 Hour, \$50,000

The Boston Globe

That's what filmmaker Ken Burns commands to talk about his popular documentaries. But at least he's famous. Plenty of no-name speakers like Tony Alessandra (who?) get \$15,000 or more, raking in hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on the fiercely competitive lecture circuit. Is this the best way for companies to be spending their money?

By Carlene Hempel | September 26, 2004

An hour before he takes the stage, Ken Burns gathers himself behind the stage at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Florida. The filmmaker is arguably the best-known documentarian of his time, having scored two Emmys for *The Civil War* and one for *Baseball*. But he's not here to raise money for public television's annual fund drive. Burns has flown south from New Hampshire to deliver an hourlong address to 3,000 members of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons. As he sits in the dark, trying to tweak his script, he can't help but be distracted by a short slide show -- not one of his own -- projected on a massive screen in the auditorium.

A woman's bare behind is being operated on, as a booming voice on the PA rolls on about sciatic-nerve injection injuries.

"Did you see that?" Burns will say later. "Someone carving into someone's butt?"

He can poke fun at the moment, but Burns isn't about to dis his gig for the day. The filmmaker, with his trademark beard and a soft voice born for PBS, knows he's no Tony Robbins, the muscular, super-slick star of the motivational speaker circuit. And yet here he is, for a fee of \$50,000, to talk for an hour to a bunch of brain surgeons.

"People want to hear me not because I'm a professional speaker," Burns says, "but because I've

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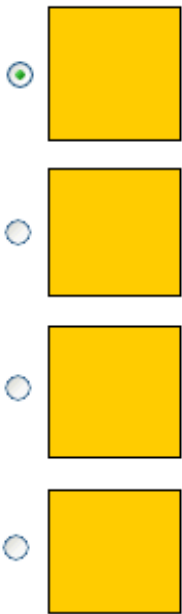


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made some films they've seen.

"He's in high demand. In the weeks before the Orlando talk, Burns went to Phoenix for a national gathering of chain-drugstore operators, and the week after, he'll head back to Florida for a speech to a national association of trial lawyers. Though he turns down many offers because of a lack of time, Burns takes about 12 paid speaking dates a year. He does it in part, he says, for the evangelical opportunity, as a filmmaker who wants to remind others to value the past. But he also signs on for a more practical reason. He's just put a daughter through Yale, and his younger girl is looking at colleges now.

He says he works for PBS, but "this pays the bills."

AND AT \$50,000 A POP, Burns actually comes relatively cheap.

Fees, which can vary depending on the event, are generally closely held industry secrets. Lance Armstrong, George Foreman, and Jack Nicklaus pull down big bucks each time they deliver a speech. Former president Bill Clinton gets up to \$350,000. Then there are the grunts. Daniel "Rudy" Ruettinger, known for making a single tackle 30 years ago for Notre Dame, needs to grind out more than 100 dates at \$20,000 per talk to earn his comparatively paltry multimillion-dollar annual income.

All of them -- the football stars, politicians, 15-minutes-of-famers such as prisoner of war Jessica Lynch (reportedly \$12,500) -- make up the thriving and fiercely competitive speaker industry.

There's nothing new about colleges and conventioners looking to hire a head-turning keynote speaker. The profession, in fact, dates to before the Civil War, when on February 27, 1860, Abraham Lincoln took a fee to deliver the Cooper Union Address in New York, a speech so well received it launched his presidential campaign. Ralph Waldo Emerson, when he wasn't ruminating in the woods, charged \$5, plus all the oats his horse could eat, to read his work aloud at public meetings.

But there was a difference back then. The speaker scene, until the 1970s, featured mainly academics and writers. "You had people like

Mark Twain, who was really keeping himself afloat by going on the lecture circuit," says Robert Thompson, a pop-culture professor at Syracuse University and himself an occasional speaker. "Charles Dickens made an extraordinary living based on doing readings of *A Christmas Carol*. It even goes back to the old vaudeville tradition."

These days, you don't need a song-and-dance to cash in. Even though the economy is still faltering and industries say they're trying to tighten belts, the market for celebs-for-hire is larger than ever.

The official shift occurred about 30 years ago, says Don Walker, president of the Harry Walker Agency in New York, one of the industry's oldest and most prestigious speakers bureaus. Walker's firm boasts exclusive rights to Clinton, who is now the most expensive speaker in the world.

"The big change -- and I happened to be there at the birth of it -- was during the early '70s, around the time of the oil crisis," says Walker, whose father, Harry, was director of the Jewish Community Center in Quincy when he started his agency in the late 1940s by hiring Boston-area professors and clergymen as speakers.

"American businesses began to understand that what happens overseas will affect their daily business," Don Walker says. "So at the time . . . we were able to convince major trade associations and corporations that instead of scheduling a quarterback to talk about teamwork, [they could] bring in a government official with some experience about what was happening in the world."

The Walkers courted former secretary of state Henry Kissinger and former president Gerald R. Ford to join their roster. The Coca-Cola Co. was among the first to buy into the idea, calling it "mind-stretching exercises" for top executives. The modern-day racket was born.

So was a pecking order. Sports legends and heads of state sit atop the payment pyramid. From there, look for names that are familiar but with a limited cachet among the intellectual elite. That includes *Sweatin' to the Oldies* creator Richard Simmons, Hall of Fame catcher Johnny Bench, and tabloid-TV host Deborah Norville. They can be had for as little as \$25,000. Just as scandal can knock a speaker down a notch, cultural shifts and unexpected circumstances can kick a B-level yakker into the majors.

Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, for example, was set to join the Washington Speakers Bureau as he prepared for an exit from office. The company shopped Giuliani for \$50,000. That's when, in 2001, the American Association of Neurological Surgeons tentatively reserved the mayor for its April 2002 meeting, according to Stan Pelofsky, an Oklahoma City neurosurgeon who then served as president of the organization.

"But after 9/11 happened, people didn't remember conversations," Pelofsky says, "and the price went way up." Washington Speakers Bureau, a giant in the business, suddenly demanded \$100,000 for Giuliani, Pelofsky says. The surgeons took a pass, bringing in Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's former prime minister. (A Giuliani spokeswoman says that there is no record of such an arrangement.)

Thompson, at Syracuse, says he isn't surprised to hear that Giuliani's price tag doubled because of his role after the terror attacks or that so many groups -- Giuliani is booked through next year -- can justify paying it. "A lot of these companies have been cash-strapped, but then, of course, these meetings have a certain reputation of being a little bit luxurious and hedonistic. The big overflowing bowls of jumbo shrimp aren't really consistent with hard times, either," he says. "The very idea of these meetings, which are bringing people in from across the country, are hardly bastions of Benjamin Franklin-like savings."

Don Walker won't talk about fees. But he will defend his industry. "When Tip O'Neill joined my agency after literally 50 years in public service, he told me that his entire life savings was \$2,900 in the bank," Walker says of the former House speaker and Cambridge native. "He wanted to make a living. He had a family to support. So he wrote a book and gave some speeches."

IT SEEMS AS IF just about any old jock can be a public speaker.

How else to explain the attraction of Vince "Be Inevitable" Poscente, whose claim to fame is having competed in the 1992 Olympics as a speed skier. Poscente gets \$16,500 a talk. So does Peter Vidmar, a pommel-horse gymnast who in 1984 led the US men's team to a gold medal in the Olympics. Vidmar talks about risk, originality, and virtuosity to more than 100 groups a year. Clients have to pay extra so Vidmar's pommel horse can come, too.

But it takes more than athletic skills to land a spot on the circuit.

Mark Castel, president of Boston-based AEI Speakers Bureau, gets hundreds of audition tapes each year from aspiring professional talkers. All of them propose their fees, of which AEI -- or any agency -- would take 20 to 25 percent.

On a recent spring morning, Castel allows me to watch as he and six of his colleagues critique the wannabes. With bagels and coffee, they sit around a small TV and VCR at the company's Allston office. Castel, who is witty and can have a sharp tongue, isn't a sucker for big names. Sure, he's got the requisite jocks on his roster, but he also books a couple of jugglers.

Of the 30 or so tapes they review that morning, they'll sign on three speakers. Luke Yankee, whose late mother, Eileen Heckart, won the best supporting actress Oscar for 1972's *Butterflies Are Free*, does a show called *Diva Dish!* in which he talks about her Hollywood days. AEI is going to pitch him as a good bargain (\$3,500) to women's organizations. Henry Pankey, a Shakespearean actor turned award-winning school principal, will be hired out for \$3,500 to talk about staff development. And

swimmer Mark Spitz, famous for winning seven gold medals at the 1972 Olympics, also makes the cut. He'll be a higher-end speaker, offered for \$20,000.

Then there are the rejects. A staff member pops in a tape sent by Mark Manney, a self-described expert in deterring retail shoplifters. Within 15 seconds, Castel has had enough.

"OK, first off, this guy has a flip chart," he says. "Anybody with a flip chart is immediately rejected. Goodbye."

Among the others: an illusionist, a martial-arts performance group, and a new-age guitarist. There's also Yvonne Bornstein, a woman who was taken hostage for 11 days in 1992 while on a business trip to Russia. It was a harrowing experience, but that doesn't count now.

"Oh, man," Castel groans when Bornstein's tape begins to play. The image wavers like a bad wedding video. "Can I send that to a client? That's ridiculous."

Later, Castel explains what separates the ones who make it from the ones who flop. "This business is sort of like show business. If a person is a good actor, he can be a good speaker. A lot of speakers end up taking acting lessons." The other factor, he says, is shtick. "You're not going to find out anything groundbreaking when you listen to these guys, but they've got the sizzle. That's what it comes down to."

ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL B-level speakers on AEI's bill is Tony Alessandra, a 57-year-old sales and marketing specialist who books for \$15,000. In mid-May, Alessandra had a gig at the Chatham Bars Inn on Cape Cod, speaking to sales representatives at the Northborough office of Metso Automation, which makes equipment for paper mills.

Alessandra arrived the night before, chauffeured from the airport. He stayed for free in a \$250 room at the inn that had a king-sized bed and, at his request, a feather pillow. He's set to speak for 90 minutes just after lunch to 100 or so Metso people, so he has the morning to lounge around in a lovely dining room that overlooks the water. After the speech, he'll go back to his room for a conference call with another client -- for eight of these calls, he charges the same \$15,000 fee -- and then head to a Metso clambake on the beach.

"I've been told I have a gift for speaking, and that I shouldn't give it up," says Alessandra, who is medium height, slightly overweight, and has thinning hair but is still moderately handsome. And he won't, with these kinds of returns: He will net \$750,000 this year from his speaking business, he tells me over complimentary coffee, eggs Benedict, and fresh fruit. He's building a \$4 million, 5,400-square-foot Tuscan-style home with 2,000 square feet of decks (which are all outfitted with water misters, in case it gets too hot) on the edge of a manmade lake in Las Vegas.

Alessandra says he's honed his performance -- which he delivers from his standard speech template with a booming, electric voice -- by keeping in mind a few lessons he's learned: It's important to package a message in easy steps to remember; every so many minutes, he needs to elicit an emotional reaction of either laughter or tears; and -- this one, he learned from motivational speaking great Zig Ziglar -- he has to develop compelling personal stories.

"The best speakers tell their own stories in a meaningful way," Alessandra says. "And over the years, they embellish their stories. It takes a pretty poor speaker not to tell a story better than it happened."

BACK IN ORLANDO, Burns is ready to talk. He's made the most of the gig, spending the night before in his luxury suite, ordering a tuna steak and a slice of key lime pie from room service and watching the latest episode of *The Sopranos*. In the morning, after snacking on a fruit basket left in the room, he burns 6 miles on an elliptical machine in the hotel's gym.

For this appearance, Burns chooses a casual blue blazer, khaki pants, and a pinkish, splotchy tie.

He has about five speeches he rotates -- high, compared with industry standards -- depending on the group and the event. On this day, for the American Association of Neurological Surgeons, he takes out what he calls "the trilogy," which includes anecdotes from his jazz, baseball, and Civil War

projects. He talks for nearly an hour, and the room of 3,000 conventioners seems enthralled.

But is it worth \$50,000? That's what I ask Pelofsky during a chichi VIP lunch after Burns is done.

"There's not a neurosurgeon who walks away from a session with Ken Burns or Benazir Bhutto, or any of the humanities speakers that we have, [for whom] it doesn't add to their professional lives, their personal lives, their social lives. We get it," says Pelofsky. "People think we're not touchable in that we know it all. But we know we've got lessons to learn; we've got humanity to give and share and be part of."

For Burns, the speaker circuit is anything but a sellout.

He long ago made peace with the important role money plays in the creative process. As a political leftie, he wouldn't take a dime from Dick Cheney's old energy company, Halliburton, yet Burns is proud of his longtime relationship with corporate giant General Motors, which has helped him pay for much of his work by serving as an underwriter. He takes a similar approach to his talks. They don't just feed his bank account. They give him a chance to meet interesting people. They clearly massage his ego, too.

At the end of his talk, about a dozen people move toward the stage, like schoolkids at Fenway hoping to score an autograph. This always happens, Burns explains afterward. Sometimes, they tell him something personal about their relationship to baseball. Others might share a story about someone in the family who fought in the Civil War.

Among the first in line on this day is Emily Friedman, a physician from Oklahoma City. Though she's standing in front of him, she's too choked up to speak. Burns takes her hands in his and waits.

Friedman has been moved by the way Burns talked about baseball. He told the audience about his admiration for Jackie Robinson and the stars of the Negro leagues. He also said that baseball can't truly be considered everybody's game because it excludes women.

Friedman tells Burns that she's one of very few women in her field and understands how it feels to be in the minority. She asks him to consider making a film about how women have built the country, too. (He has, he tells her: *Not For Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*.) She's trying to tell him something else but has to give up. "I'm a brain surgeon," she finally musters. "I put my hands inside people's skulls for a living. I'm not supposed to get emotional like this."

Later, I ask her the \$50,000 question. She agrees that it sounds like a lot of money. But there he stood, she says, an artist in front of 3,000 physicians at a scientific convention. "Yet he was still able to command our attention without a single slide."

She chokes up again and half turns from me, embarrassed. Finally, she answers that of course he's worth the check. "He's so moving as a speaker. He's a dramatist," she says. "He makes your heart soar."

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