The Genealogy Speaker Specialist

by Beth Watson Foulk (www.genealogydecoded.com)

You may recall in my last contribution to *Speak!* a reference to a conversation with an "A List" genealogy speaker about specializing. His point was that as a matter of good branding, it is almost essential to tie your product (your speaking skills) to an identifiable, unique attribute. In marketing that's called the USP or "unique selling proposal." What makes you different?

Tie your product, your speaking skills, to an identifiable, unique attribute.

A Speaking Specialty

Because so much of what a genealogy speaker does (i.e., creating handouts, using PowerPoint presentations, speaking for 50-60 minutes, being well versed on the subject) is common among all speakers, one of the best ways to be unique is to have a speaking specialty defined by your subject. What do you think of when you hear the name, John Colletta? Immigration and passenger records. I have a genealogy speaker friend, who is a walking encyclopedia on the Civil War. He would be my go-to person for anything related to the Civil War. Instead of trying to be all things to all subjects and all audiences, these speakers and many others have decided to create a unique selling proposal wrapped around a particular subject, which they know very thoroughly. It makes them unique and very marketable. You'll notice I didn't say they have to have a monopoly on the subject. You don't have to be the only speaker talking about Native American Genealogy to specialize it in. There's room in this market for more than one, and interestingly each speaker brings their own take to the subject, which would make each Native American Genealogy speaker unique in his or her own right.

Put Yourself in the Conference Planner's Shoes

I had a conversation with the president of a state conference the other day. I asked her about her plans for the 2015 conference, and I mentioned a friend whom she should consider for the speaker. Her first and only question was, "What does she speak about?" If you put yourself in the shoes of those hiring you, the first and primary question they want answered is what you can talk about. If your answer is "everything," you may get a deer-in-the-headlights response from the conference planner because that's a tough proposition to sell to their selection committee, let alone their membership. Imagine this brochure: "Our speaker will talk a little bit about a bunch of different subjects … come one, come all." It doesn't make for a compelling argument or a reason to get excited about the conference as a potential attendee. Now imagine a conference about New England Genealogy or German Genealogy. It's a piece of cake to determine whether this event is going to help you, the eager genealogist.

Time Out! What about the National Conferences?

The national conferences (i.e., NGS, FGS) do have a broad range of subjects under one event. But they also have a focus that is typically consistent with the location. For example, the NGS 2013 Family History Conference in Las Vegas had tracks devoted to western American genealogy. The east coast events have tracks that focus on east coast research and resources. RootsTech leads with technology classes.

But back to the subject of specializing as a speaker. Wouldn't it be easy to determine which proposals to submit and which conferences to propose to if, when you see the CFP come out, you can review their needs and quickly reconcile it with your specialty. I'm not a national conference

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This article originally appeared in the November 2014 issue of *Speak!*, volume 23, number 4, pages 10-11

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planner, but I would guess that they are looking for unique presentations that stand out and support their vision for the conference. Exactly how is your "Beginning Genealogy" class going to be unique and, on its own through your proposal, make a compelling case to the planners to be selected? Now as the "Appalachian Genealogy Guru," your proposals on Appalachian Genealogy would probably get a second or third look at any conference held in and around this mountainous range.

A Place for the "Beginning Genealogy" Class

While I hope I've made a reasonable argument for creating and communicating a genealogy specialty, I don't want to dismiss the need for a good reservoir of general or ancillary classes in your portfolio. There will always be room for a "Beginning Genealogy" class in a lecture menu as long as there are beginning genealogists. Maybe you have done a great deal of personal research on Southwest Missouri Genealogy as the late Marsha Hoffman Rising did. Great. Add it to the portfolio, but lead with your specialty. Even John Colletta has a class or two on writing a family history over and above his focus on immigration.

What do the pundits and politicians say about campaigns without focus? Their message doesn't "make a great bumper sticker." What does your bumper sticker say? If it is, "I'll teach classes on anything," or "I speak on this, that, and some of that other stuff," you might consider tightening it up a bit. For example: "Need a Civil War Speaker? Call me" or "African American Genealogy Expert for Hire" are both more powerful statements.

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This article originally appeared in the November 2014 issue of *Speak!*, volume 23, number 4, pages 10-11