Pay Speakers. Why? (Part 1)



by Charles S. Mason Jr., CG[SM]

Why should we pay speakers? is often an on-going question for many genealogical societies. You might wonder why a society might ask this question. Just as any other person performing a service, speakers expect to be paid. I have found that it is often the lack of knowledge of what it takes for a speaker to put a program together that prompts the question of why they should be paid. We, the speakers, have to educate the public about our services. In this article I will address some of the issues I have seen as a speaker, make suggestions about how we can better educate the public, and suggest how we can build a better working relationship with genealogical societies.

Background

I joined my first genealogical society in 1994. A year later I became the board secretary. So, early on, I knew that they paid the speakers for the monthly meeting programs and a new annual conference. When I joined the second genealogical society in 1997, I was surprised to learn that they did not pay the speakers for their monthly meetings. For the purposes of this article I will refer to the first society I joined as "society one" and the second as "society two."

I became a member of the board for society two in 1999 and president in 2000. When I became president, I appointed several new committee chairs and one of them was the program committee chair. As is true of most organizations, the president is automatically a member of all committees. Both societies had a policy that the outgoing vice president of programs for society one and the program committee chair for society two were responsible for planning the first two meeting programs for the next year. This allowed the new person some time to get their committee together and working.

Society two began to pay speakers in 1999. The program chair at that time was having a hard time finding speakers who would come out for free and she presented this to the board. They approved money to pay speakers. Although it was a small amount, at least it was something.

The new program committee chair for society two formed a committee of about six people to determine the programs. During the meeting one of the members of the committee asked, "Why do we have to pay speakers? They already have the lectures." The discussion moved on as I quickly did some math. A few months before, I presented a lecture for which I had kept rough track of how much time it took to put the lecture together. This included research time, time to create the handout, and time to create the PowerPoint presentation. The lecture was on guardianship records, and I had done some research to learn about the records prior to deciding I wanted to present the topic as a lecture. The lecture required more research. I multiplied the number of hours it took to do the research, handout, and put the lecture into PowerPoint by my hourly client research rate and got a total. Then I subtracted what I had been paid for presenting the lecture to two societies. Of course the amount came no where near what I would have made doing client research. I explained this to the committee and they began to understand why speakers should be paid for their lectures.

I also explained to the committee that once a speaker finished a lecture and presented it, their work is not done. If they are going to give the lecture again there will be work that needs to be done. Every lecture must to be updated as changes happen. The speaker needs to be aware of changes in websites, changes in where the records may be kept, new rules related to researching the records, and new indexes to the records or new books published on the topic. These all require additional time to check and update

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handouts and PowerPoint presentations. Often, fees do not even cover the time to update them.

The hardest thing to keep updated, and perhaps the most time-consuming problem the speaker faces, is websites. Because they can change often or just disappear altogether, the speaker must check them shortly before turning in handout or syllabus material. But the job should not stop there; they also should check them as close to the day they will present the lecture as possible. If web addresses change or are no longer available, the speaker needs to know so they can tell the people attending the lecture. I once did a lecture about the National Archives and checked the website the morning before the presentation. During the lecture someone's hand was raised to tell me something I had just said was no longer true. They quickly added that a change had been made the afternoon before the presentation and after I had checked the website.

That was not the last time that the question of paying speakers was raised by a member of society two's board. Although I am no longer a member of the board, the issue came up again last year. The vice president of programs contacted another member speaker and myself to get our opinion on what they were considering. Obviously this is an issue that will be revisited as new members become involved.

Paid Speakers vs. Free Speakers

One member of society two's board felt that they should be using more free speakers. Free speakers might come from local government agencies, local public libraries, family history centers, other genealogical or historical societies, and, in this case, the National Archives, Library of Congress, and the DAR Library.

In my reply, I told the vice president that I have no problem with using free speakers but questioned how many times a year a society will be able to get speakers to come for free and asked whether the free speakers would be able to cover enough topics to hold the group's interest. Programs need to be new and interesting to hold the interest of the members. Therefore, you would not want to repeat the same program every year. From my experience, a topic should not be repeated any sooner than three to five years. During this time period you will have enough new members that the topic will be of interest to the majority. While it never hurts to refresh people's memories, if you repeat topics too often your current members will lose interest in your programs.

Budget cuts present another problem in finding free speakers. The federal government and many state, county, and local governments are facing severe budget constraints. These cuts result in shrinking staff, so letting staff leave the office to speak to a society will result in problems for the business that needs to be done.

Another potential issue to consider is the quality of some free speakers. Being knowledgeable at one's job does not make them a good speaker. I have seen a number of poor quality presentations done by people from various government agencies and libraries. Although they are knowledgeable about the records, they may not be comfortable speaking in front of a group. Additionally, they may not know how to put together a coherent, quality presentation. One particular presentation comes to mind. The presenter took pages out of a book that was printed in 10-point type and made slides. They were trying to point out an item on the page on the screen. They could not find what they wanted to show the group even though they were standing right in front of the screen. Needless to say, the group gave this presenter a very poor evaluation.

Other problems I have encountered with speakers include time management and depth of knowledge. In one case a speaker was told they had an hour for the program and questions and in twenty to thirty minutes they were finished. In other cases speakers were not truly knowledgeable about the topic for the lecture and were unable to answer some of the audience's questions. These were often general questions that they should have been able to answer. Of course this can and does happen with paid

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speakers as well, but the word will get around to other societies and that speaker will not be invited to speak in the future.

Why Pay Members Who Are Speakers?

Another issue the person on society two's board presented was not paying speakers who were members of the society for programs they presented for the society. The thought behind this was they should be volunteering their time to the society. The vice president did explain to the group that both of us are professional genealogists and do this as a job. Therefore he felt we should be paid just as we are by any other person who hires us to do work.

Society one did not pay members of their society who spoke when I first joined the society. I do not know how long this had been their policy, but it did not last very long after I became a member.

I do not know any volunteer who does not do a fair share of work in any society. In fact, the harder you work, the more you generally are asked to do. Both the other member who is a speaker and I have put in countless hours as officers, members of various committees, and assisting with other activities. This includes doing free classes for the society. The education committee is responsible for finding people who will offer classes to the society members. There are a number of people who are society members who offer classes.

My opinion and that of a number of other people, both speakers and non-speakers, is that not paying a member of your society to speak is telling them you do not value their work. It is one thing if the speaker refuses to be paid or asks that the money be donated somewhere, but if they work as a professional they should be paid.

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Pay Speakers. Why? (Part 2)



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Part 1 of this article appeared in the February 2011 issue of *Speak!*. Charles discussed some of the issues he has seen as a speaker, regarding paying speakers, particularly for programs at society meetings. In part 2, he will discuss the value of member benefits, what speakers can do to educate societies, and what to do if the society cannot pay speakers.

The Value of Member Benefits

The issue comes down to what is the value of the benefits and services provided to the society's members? How are members' dues spent and are they getting the best value for their money? The two most expensive items for most genealogical societies are the cost of newsletters and the programs presented. The cost of paper, printing, and mailing has gone up at an alarming pace for most genealogical societies. Many societies have been able to cut costs by either e-mailing their newsletter or by putting it on a members-only portion of their website, or both. By lowering the cost of publishing the newsletter, many societies are now able to spend more on programs and other services.

Sometimes societies really need to look at the whole picture and evaluate where they are spending their money. Is the amount of money spent on various services evenly distributed? If a greater amount of money is spent on something, does it benefit the majority or just a small group of the members?

In the case of society two [see part 1], they have a library supported in part by the society budget. But a greater portion of their financial support comes from donations. When I was on the society board, the library chair was always asking to have the budget increased to support the library. One of the ways of increasing the budget for the library was to cut the amount spent on programs.

As a part of evaluating the increase to the library, the board looked at the number of members using the library and the number of members attending monthly meetings. Each time anyone, member or non-member, came to the library they were asked to sign in. After duplicate names were removed from that sign-in list, less than twenty-five percent of the members were shown to use the library, fewer than attended the meetings. Again last year the library was asking to have their budget increased, and cutting the program budget would give money to increase the library budget. However, the board decided that library usage did not justify a budget increase.

What Can Speakers Do To Educate Societies

As members of our local genealogical societies, we can educate the board about the value of paying speakers and the problems they may encounter with free speakers. If the board does not know what it takes for a speaker to create a lecture, you can tell them what is involved. You do not have to have great details, just a simple example like I outlined

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for the program committee of society number two [see part 1] should be sufficient.

You should be able to give them guidance on budgets and the value of membership benefits. Some of that advice may include guidelines for paying speakers, how many speakers should be paid, and how much. Depending on the availability of speakers in the area, the society may need to pay travel expenses for speakers living a distance from the meeting. What expenses can the society afford to pay and for how many speakers?

What does the society need to provide for the speaker and what should the speaker be expected to provide? At a minimum, the society needs to provide a podium, AV cart or table, a screen, and, if the room is large, a public address system. Today most speakers provide their own laptop computer, LCD projector, and a handout. If the society has a projector and/or laptop computer, the speaker may or may not want to use them.

I have always believed that both the society and the speaker have responsibilities to each other to ensure that the best possible lecture is presented for the program.

Most government agencies do not allow their employees to accept payment for lecturing on the records of the agency. Although I believe they should be paid, you have to accept their employer's regulations. You certainly should have them lecture on the records they oversee, but you must not take advantage of them. Although you cannot pay these speakers, a letter thanking them and a letter of appreciation to their supervisor are always in order. By showing your appreciation, you create goodwill for your organization, and the agency will usually help however they can.

You may be asked to recommend other speakers and, if so, you should be honest in your evaluations. You should not recommend someone you know will not do a good job. You should also make societies aware that, as speakers, we also evaluate and compare the societies where we speak. If they are not living up to their responsibilities you may share that information with another speaker who may ask your opinion of the society.

Assisting Small or New Genealogical Societies

I have always believed that both the society and the speaker have responsibilities to each other to ensure that the best possible lecture is presented for the program. The society has the responsibility to provide the needed equipment agreed upon; promote the program to members and the public; keep the speaker informed on any changes including date, time, and place; and provide copies of the handouts.

As speakers we have a responsibility to the societies to provide the best lecture we can. It should be educational; in most cases a little humor is appreciated, and, most important, be as up-to-date and informative as possible. You need to begin on time and finish on time, get your handout material in on time, and do everything you can to assist the society to have a successful program.

What If the Society Can Not Pay?

Some societies may not be able to pay or they may not be able to pay the going rate in the area for a speaker. What do you do? Do you turn them down or do you try to work with them?

A number of years ago I had the program chair of a fairly new society say to me, "We would love to have you come speak to us, but we cannot afford you." I replied, "How do you know you cannot afford me?" They told me how much their society was paying and what they knew several older societies paid. I told them that that amount would be OK. They questioned why I would take only about half of what other societies paid and come speak to the society?

I explained that I knew they were trying to get the society going and could relate to their struggle. I believed that, as a speaker, I should assist them in

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that effort if I could. The meeting place was a considerable distance from where I lived, and before I went to speak the program chair called me to say they had approved additional money to pay for my gas to come to the meeting. I am pleased to say that they have grown and are now able to pay the going rates for speakers. I have continued to be invited back to speak to them.

By working with them, I created goodwill and that is part of why I have been invited back as often as I have been. The other motive I did not share with the program chair was my desire to build my resume. I believe that speakers need to show that they can speak at a number of meetings and conferences. These lectures should not just be in areas where you live and may be well known, but in areas where you are not a known speaker. Another part of evaluating a speaker and deciding to have them speak is often how many times they have been invited back to speak at other societies.

Conclusion

As speakers we can do a number of things to promote ourselves and other speakers. Most important is making the public aware of what we do and why we should be paid. The way we work with the societies to bring about a successful program speaks volumes about us and the profession of speaking. Repeated successful speaking engagements are the best advertising for why a society should pay their speakers.

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