The Power of Referrals

by Beth Watson Foulk (www.genealogydecoded.com)

As genealogy speakers, we can fall subject to the power of the call for papers (CFPs) as our only means of getting in front of crowds of eager genealogists. And while the CFPs are very important, I'm not convinced that they are the only means of promoting our skills.

Have You Ever Referred or Been Referred?

We join societies like the Genealogy Speakers Guild, the Association of Professional Genealogists, or our local genealogy society for any number of good reasons, but one I'd like to highlight is the tool of networking and referrals. It is through these gatherings of like-minded individuals that we learn about other speakers, and their skills and specialties. Further, we often have the opportunity to hear each other speak. It is from these professional networking opportunities that we have the tool of referrals at our disposal.

Have you ever referred another speaker to an association? Have you ever been referred? Now that's powerful, when you as a respected genealogist who has a good reputation and a positive relationship with an association can lend your name in the benefit of helping a fellow speaker. I have recently had the opportunity to do just that. Allow me to share a brief story or two.

Helping the New Kid on the Block

I'm located in the Greater Kansas City, Missouri, area and have been speaking on a regular basis for the last five years at the local genealogy societies, Midwest Genealogy Center, and the National Archives – Kansas City. I now have great relationships with all of these venues. But I remember how hard it was for me to find my way around and establish relationships. So, when a fellow genealogist who was just starting to do presentations expressed an interest in speaking in Kansas City, I was more than happy to pass his name around to these societies. I had heard him speak and felt quite confident that I would be doing both the societies and his burgeoning speaking career a favor. As it turns out the societies and the speaker were very grateful for the connection. It was a win-win for everyone.

Now you might be asking yourself, "Isn't she sacrificing her own opportunities to speak at these locations by referring other speakers?" It's possible, but I don't think so. The societies typically have 10-12 monthly meetings per year, and I certainly can't fill all of the slots nor would I want to. It's my belief that there are plenty of opportunities to go around, and the goodwill and enhanced reputation as a professional speaker with similarly well-qualified colleagues far outweighs any risk of detriment to my speaking business.

I Can't Be Everything to Everyone

I had an extended conversation about marketing with a known "A List" genealogy speaker. I took away a lot of good advice, but one point that merits repeating here is to develop a specialty. It's not hard to think of "A List" speakers and quickly associate a subject for which they are known. That's good branding, and a subject for another discussion. My point is that no matter how big or broad my lecture portfolio is, I can't be the expert on everything. No one can do that.

This realization and the willingness to recommend other speakers served me well. I've had the good fortune to be the featured speaker at several state conferences in the last year. Naturally, the conferences would want a new speaker the following year, which opened the door for a referral. Here was an excellent opportunity to recommend another established speaker with a different expertise. The conference may not be aware of all of the speakers upon which they could draw. They aren't networked through GSG or APG, nor are they in the "business" of knowing all of the speaking talent available. They typically welcome a referral because it makes their job to find a speaker easier,

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and they feel better relying on a recommendation over picking an unfamiliar name. Again, it is a win-win situation. The society gets a good speaker. The referred speaker gets a new gig, and my reputation is enhanced for the referral.

Pay it Forward

I can't say that my exercises in referrals have directly or immediately added to the bottom line of my business, nor would I have expected them to do so. For me doing this is more along the idea of pay it forward or sending good energy out in the belief that it will come back at another time in another form. I'm good with that.

Thinking back, I know how pivotal it was in my speaking career when someone, who, to no direct benefit of her own, vouched for me to a couple state conference chairpersons. I don't know that I wouldn't have been submitting CFPs for years without hopes of ever making it onto the state-level stage had this person not gone out of her way, extended her reputation, and referred me. So, refer a speaker today. You'll be glad you did.

Beth Foulk

Happily accepts referrals for colonial and frontier genealogy presentations at http://www.genealogydecoded.com

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