Public Speaking: Competition or Cooperation

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Consider the various occupations in the world: many have some element of competition. People in sales compete for customers and businesses compete for clients—those in the same profession are our competitors. Is our work as genealogy speakers any different? If I get a speaking job that means someone else didn't.

For years my husband and I worked part-time as square dance callers. If we turned down one dance, we could presume we'd never hear from the group again. Besides that, one gig usually provided us with others, as people in attendance would take our cards and recommend our services to other groups.

When I first started speaking in the genealogy world, I had that same mind-set: if I turned down a booking, I might never hear from that society again. It took me a while to learn that if people wanted to hear one of my presentations, they'd book me for a different month. And when I recommended another speaker for the time they first requested, I was not hurting my business in the least. Initially, I went so far as to try to rearrange family activities in order to avoid turning down a speaking engagement. It took a little time to recognize that I didn't need to do that. Instead, our local speakers are a rather tight-knit group: we help each other and cover for each other when someone can't make an engagement.

Conference speaking is a little different, however. Of course we cannot all be speakers at every conference. I have been reading some interesting comments and having some lengthy conversations about conferences and who is or is not chosen to speak. I hope that those of us in this field will take the high road and never say negative things about the speakers who are chosen when some of us aren't. Look, instead, at the many groups who *do* book us; obviously it is not our lack of ability or professionalism.

So take a moment to consider the selection committee members and all that they must look at. They have a limited number of slots to fill. And those filling the slots need to meet the parameters of the program theme. Yes, you probably put in the perfect submission, but who else did? (Here's the competition part, like it or not.) The hosting societies have speakers that need to be included in the program. And there are the sponsored speakers from the various organizations that are represented, also. If the conference is paying the transportation and lodging for speakers coming in from some distances, the committee needs to make sure that its money is well-spent and that said speakers present as many lectures as feasible. That way, instead of paying for five speakers to give ten presentations, being paid per diem as well as travel allowances, it costs significantly less to pay two speakers to give five presentations each, plus their per diem and travel. It's a fiscally responsible decision.

So, while we may feel as if this is a competition, it is more an issue of economics, logistics, and (I'm sorry to admit) politics. There's no way to have all those involved come out smiling. But, as speakers, we need to take the rejections a little less personally and show a bit more compassion for the committee members who truly have the hardest task. As for me, I am much happier to be a speaker (on the "presenter list" or not) than a member of a selection committee!

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