

Public speaking

Keynote speakers thrive in a booming virtual market

Authors, academics and thought leaders who lost income when live events stopped have become a pandemic success story

Jill Martin Wrenn JUNE 13 2021

The coronavirus pandemic is reshaping the lucrative global speaking market. Speakers who could command six-figure fees for in-person keynote addresses before March 2020 now find themselves accepting a fraction of that amount for a virtual event.

Author Nilofer Merchant, who has been speaking professionally since 2010, says that the influx of free digital content that has emerged during the pandemic — including the [rise of audio app Clubhouse](#) — together with the wider availability of regional events through digital platforms, has drastically changed the speaking industry for her. “It hasn’t been as lucrative,” she says. “It has not been as plentiful either.”

Merchant is a prolific speaker and writer who focuses on the changing nature of work and inspiring innovation. She says she has had to decide whether to go forward with speaking commitments when organisers have cut the fee to a quarter of the original offer after the event became virtual. In one instance, Merchant decided to proceed with the online speaking engagement at a reduced fee, in part because she believed in the cause that the event supported.

“I think the digital events have been a delight in certain ways, because you get to talk to different groups of people,” she says. “That said, I don’t think you communicate in the same way when you’re staring at a tiny little green dot, and not

feeling the room.” Without the applause, smiles and laughter offered by an in-person audience, many speakers agree that talking to a screen is not as gratifying as a physical audience.

Agencies weathered the crisis

Leaders of speakers’ agencies say that these extraordinary times will change the industry forever. Don Walker, president of the Harry Walker Agency, which represents celebrities ranging from Barack and Michelle Obama to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, has led his family’s agency through many turbulent times, but none like this.

Nilofer Merchant delivers a TedX talk before the pandemic © Chris Holloman 2018 -

“Though we have been through many crises — this is my 47th year in the business, and my family’s 75th — we’ve been through wars, recessions, terrorist attacks, financial meltdowns, they all interrupted our business,” Walker says. “The pandemic transformed it. And it transformed it for the better.” He notes that the industry had been poised to change before the pandemic, with the rise of technology that enables large-scale online events.

Even as lockdowns lift in some parts of the world, and large-scale in-person events resume, Walker believes that the shift to virtual events will continue. “I don’t think we’re ever going to go back to the way it was before,” he says. “Strangely enough and counter-intuitively, people actually enjoy the virtual events. And this is very counterintuitive — there’s something very intimate about a virtual event.”

Digital events also offer audience members the chance to catch a glimpse of luminaries’ private lives. “You kind of get a peek into the speaker’s home, see what books they’re reading, what pictures they have on the wall,” Walker says. And that includes all of the event attendees. “Everybody in the audience has a front-row seat,” Walker says. The screen separating the speakers from their audience, though, presents challenges for those who had planned to interact face to face with attendees after their speeches.

Abandoned book tours

Authors and thought leaders who used speaking engagements to sell books in pre-pandemic times have had to adapt to the new reality. For Michelle P King, an author who studies and speaks about gender equality in the workplace, the

pandemic took hold just as her book, [*The Fix: Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work*](#), was published in March 2020. She had been looking forward to using in-person events to promote and sell her books.

“My book came out and then the world shut down,” she says. “For me, virtual speaking is really what saved the book, and it required quite a lot of persistence.” King has delivered nearly 300 keynote speeches during the past year, organised by the London Speaker Bureau, as well as events she books herself.

King took part in 20 speaking events around the latest International Women’s Day in March alone. That included five speaking engagements in one day, starting in Asia, then ending up in the Americas. “I actually followed the global timelines,” she remembers. That transcontinental schedule would have been impossible for in-person events.

Author Michelle King was preparing to promote her new book at speaking engagements just as the pandemic took hold © Eric Knecht

Though she was at home, King still found the schedule demanding. “One event is about an hour and a half long, because you do a 40-minute keynote, then you do Q&As, and they always run over,” she says. “And it’s exhausting. You’re talking in an animated way for that period of time. And it nearly broke me.” While King appreciates the ability to accommodate back-to-back speaking gigs around the world, she says she misses the connection with the audience she gets from in-person events.

Brilliance for a bargain

“It’s been a fascinating experience,” says Tom Kenyon-Slaney, chair of the London Speaker Bureau, an international speaker agency, as some speakers have reduced their fees from \$100,000 to \$10,000. “It’s been fantastic value for corporations,” Kenyon-Slaney says. “It’s a real market for dealmakers.”

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Tom Kenyon-Slaney, chair, London Speaker Bureau

opportunities.

He founded London Speaker Bureau more than 25 years ago. Since then, he and his team have been booking keynote speeches across the globe. “I think we’ve done close to 40,000 now around the world in probably about 80 or 90 countries,” Kenyon-Slaney says. “And then Covid came along.” His team had to cancel or reschedule 2,500 events globally last year. But the rise of virtual events presented new

“I’m not saying it’s perfect,” he adds. “I’m always asking my staff in all our countries, and they’re all saying the same thing — their clients want to get back to live events, live meetings.” But the virtual events are here to stay, Kenyon-Slaney says, as environmental concerns contribute to business travellers wanting to travel less. And virtual events can offer more straightforward schedules, without the complicated world travel that globe-trotting speakers used to manage.

“It’s a brilliant market. There’s no travel, no visas, no logistics, and no missed planes,” says Kenyon-Slaney. “This industry which I thought could really collapse, but I’ve actually realised — we’re going to come out much stronger.”

Opportunities for independents

The pandemic and global lockdown changed the market for independent speakers, as well as those who book engagements through agencies. Many are happy to sharply increase the number of events they undertake, even at reduced fees. What many speakers have discovered is that online bookings offer the chance to reach new audiences on a global scale that they never dreamt possible.

“I would say that I’ve actually earned more money during this pandemic than before,” says Tony Taylor, a motivational speaker based in Olympia, Washington. “And I feel horrible . . . because I know that there are a lot of people who have suffered financially.”

Taylor, who speaks about overcoming adversity, drawing on his experience as a marine and as a fire captain for the US Department of Defense, says he feels conflicted about his recent success because it’s a direct result of the pandemic. “I know there have been a lot of people who have suffered a lot,” he says.

Taylor says he was able to more than double his number of engagements, even as his fees dropped dramatically. “Let’s say there is a gig that I normally would get \$10,000 for,” Taylor says. “Now it would be anywhere from \$5,000 to \$4,000.”

But he has managed to increase his overall earnings by more than 30 per cent during the pandemic by increasing his volume and reach.

“I can have a conversation . . . or a speaking engagement, then in the next two hours, I can I have another one in Dubai, and then I can have another one in Turkey,” he says.

Even as restrictions lift, Taylor and other speakers say they will continue to offer virtual speaking options. But in-person events are already on the horizon. King says: “I’m already being booked for in-person events from September.”

Launching a speaking career from home

If you want to become a keynote speaker, you will need to make sure potential clients are aware of your ambitions.

Mention that you are available for and capable of speaking engagements, whether on your personal website, your social media profiles, or in your email signature. “These are all places that you could signal to the world, ‘I am a public speaker,’” says Vanessa Valenti, co-founder and chief executive of Fresh Speakers, a boutique agency that represents women and people of colour. She is also a speaker herself.

“Put yourself out there,” she says. “And this is where the virtual shift actually has been an advantage.” If you **create a short talk**, even a video containing clips of one or two-minute remarks from your living room, then upload it to YouTube, that video will show your speaking style to event organisers. “It’s the first thing that event organisers will look for when someone recommends a speaker,” she says.

Use your existing network to hunt for opportunities. “The most effective way that you can get more speaking engagements is through the relationships you already have,” says Valenti.

The author is the host of the podcast ‘How to Build a Village’

