

WHAT ARE YOU sell



BY TIM HYLAND

EVERY SPEAKER IS DIFFERENT. BUT, ACCORDING TO MARK SANBORN, CSP, CPAE, **ALL SUCCESSFUL SPEAKERS SHARE ONE KEY TRAIT:** THEY KNOW WHY THEIR MESSAGE MATTERS, AND THEY KNOW HOW TO MAKE IT MATTER TO OTHERS.

What are you selling?

from a strictly business perspective, it is perhaps the single most important question faced by anyone hoping for a career in the speaking business: What, exactly, are they *selling*?

Are they selling a product?

Are they selling a message?

Are they selling a service?

Entertainment? Knowledge?

Or are they selling something else entirely—perhaps even an amalgamation of all of the above?

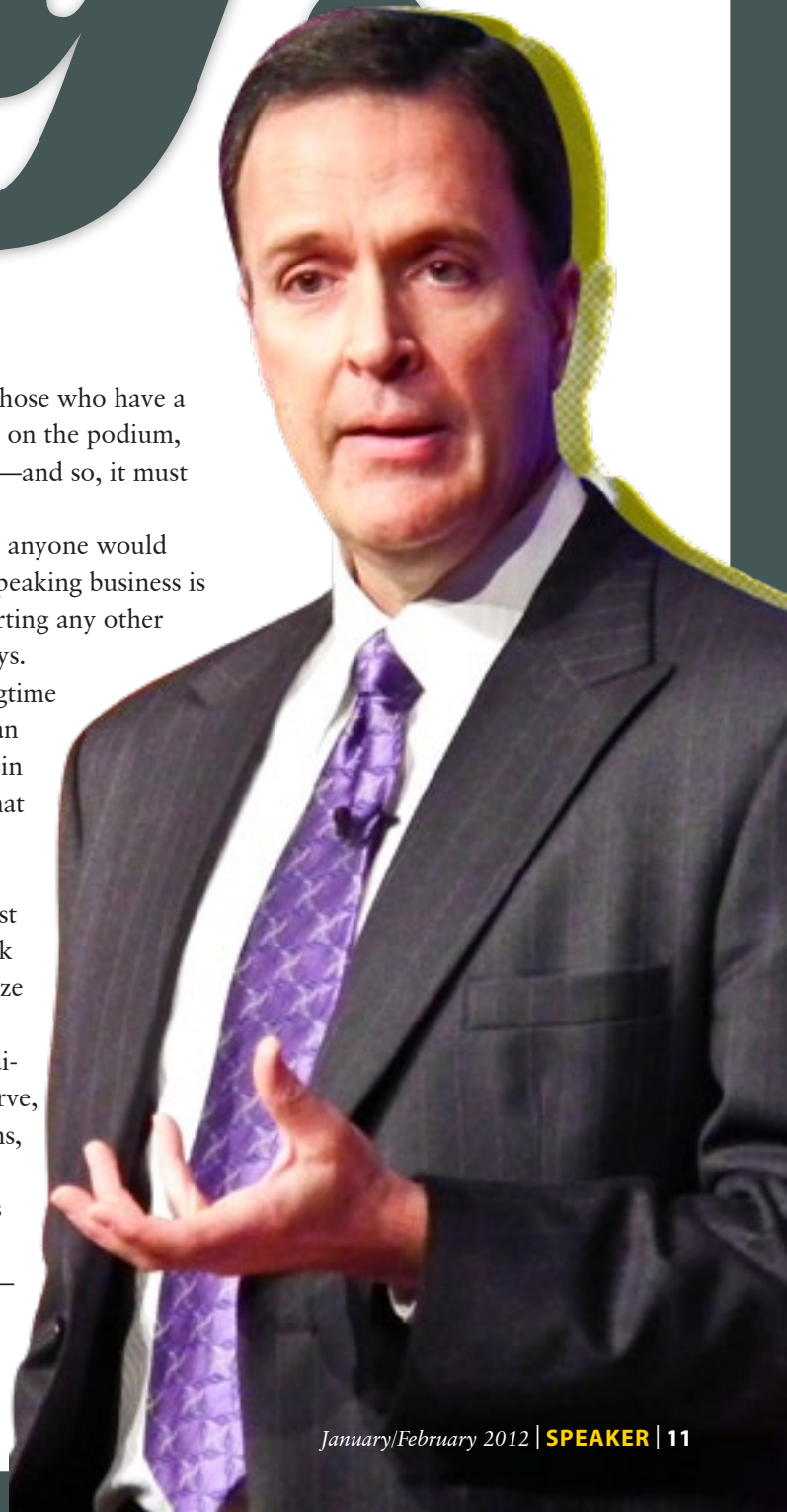
It's a difficult question to answer, of course, and in the ever-complex, ever-diverse speaking industry—an industry populated by speakers from myriad backgrounds, telling myriad stories, sharing myriad messages—there really is no one, universal answer.

Even still, says Mark Sanborn, much is clear: All speakers must ultimately ask themselves, and answer, that oh-so-important question. Because until a speaker knows what he or she is selling, says Sanborn, they don't have a business.

And yes, even for those who have a true passion for being on the podium, speaking *is* a business—and so, it must be treated as such.

“I don't know why anyone would think that starting a speaking business is any different than starting any other business,” Sanborn says.

For Sanborn, a longtime speaking circuit veteran and renowned expert in business leadership, that key question—“What am I selling?”—was answered in the earliest days of his career, back when he came to realize that, for *his* speaking career and for the audiences he wanted to serve, he was selling solutions, ideas, and problem-solving. Or, as he puts it, he was selling “an actionable narrative”—storytelling that leads to actionable ideas.



THE VALUE OF NOW

This is hardly news to anyone: The economy is stuck in neutral.

The world has yet to recover from the global economic collapse of 2008, and as a result, the speaking industry is enduring some hard times as well.

Mark Sanborn knows this. He knows the industry has changed, and he knows that more turmoil may yet be ahead. But, Sanborn is not going to waste much time thinking about that potential turmoil, or even trying to make proactive plans for what *might* be, in another two or three or five years.

Instead, he'll spend his time worrying about what he can control—how he performs in the present. And he suggests other speakers follow his lead.

"I looked at the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* today, and you know what? I didn't see any story there that I had any control over," he jokes. "I saw a lot of things that may have an impact on my life and on my investments. But I'm not going to worry about it."

In the end, Sanborn says, each of us can only really control what we do, and how we perform. So those are the things we should worry about.

"I'm not a futurist," he says. "I'm a presentologist. I try to focus on what I know for sure is happening. I'm not speaking against the idea of looking ahead. I'm just saying it's awfully hard to predict the future."

He adds: "What do I know for sure? I know for sure that people will always have difficulties and challenges and will always need solutions. I know that people will aspire to be better. If I can help them solve their problems, then I figure I'll be fine."

Sanborn has been delivering that actionable narrative for 25 years, and it has served him extremely well. His list of more than 1,500 clients includes such titans as FedEx, Harley Davidson, KPMG and the U.S. Postal Service, among many others. He is the author of seven books and a member of the National Speakers Association's CPAE Speaker of Hall of Fame®.

Now, it may not be entirely true to say that Sanborn has succeeded only because he knows who he is, and what he's selling. And it may not be entirely true that Sanborn's career has endured for the past two decades only because he knew the answer to those key questions almost as soon as he hit the podium.

But that knowledge certainly hasn't hurt, he says.

Speakers who seek similar success would be wise to follow his lead.

"In the world of speaking, we need to provide cherry flavor in the cough syrup," he says. "You don't buy cherry-flavored cough syrup because you like the taste of cherries. You buy it because you have a cough. The flavor just helps the medicine go down. So for me, I've always tried to make sure that my speeches are not about what I did or what I learned, but what my audiences can learn and what they can do to be more successful. That's the information the audiences really want to know."

FUELED BY FEAR

To hear Sanborn tell it, getting to the heart of what his audiences "want" to know has been at the very center of his speaking from the very start.

Sanborn had been making seminar presentations for years before he decided to make speaking his career—he made his first speech, at the age of 10 during a 4-H contest—but even though he was an experienced presenter by the time he went pro, he was most definitely not an experienced businessman.

Only 27 at the time, Sanborn says he understood on a very fundamental level that, because of his relative youth, his business-world audiences—men and women with years of managerial experience—were going to question his credentials. Indeed, Sanborn recalls feeling that sense of "doubt" hanging over the room in those early days, with grizzled old vets thinking to themselves, "What can this kid tell *me*?"

"When I went full time, most of my audiences were older than me," he recalls. "The average age of a manager has come down over the years, but back then, they were all a bit older, and I always had this fear that somebody would just stand up in the middle of my presentation and say, 'This is B.S.! He's 27, I'm 52, and let's be frank, he doesn't have a clue!'"

It was, quite justifiably, Sanborn's biggest fear at the time—the thing that kept him awake at night and kept the butterflies churning right up until show time.

But in the end, it was a fear that served him well. Sanborn anticipated questions he might be asked so that he had solid answers, and he aimed to turn himself into a true encyclopedia on the topic of business management.

His goal, he says, was to make sure that every time he took to the podium, he was giving his audience something they *wanted* to know. Sometimes, he jokes, he probably gave them more than they wanted to know.

"I had a fear that drove me like a crazy person," he recalls. "If anything, I probably overwhelmed people with good ideas. I wanted to make sure that nobody left that room and said, 'You know, I sat through three hours and I didn't get much out of this.' I would rather hear them say, 'I got too much—my head is spinning.'"

As a young speaker, Sanborn says he was acutely aware that his career was on the line each time he took to the podium. He knew he had to deliver,



“ I DON'T CARE HOW MUCH YOU PRACTICE. YOU GET GOOD, ULTIMATELY, BY BEING ON THE PLATFORM. ”

because with each audience, and each presentation, his name, his brand and, yes, his business, had a chance to grow—or flop.

He was also aware that, in order to get better as a speaker and make more money as a business, he was going to have to keep on speaking. And the only way to keep on speaking, he said, was to keep getting more gigs.

The business of speaking and the passion for speaking, he knew, were intertwined.

“More often than not, the reality is that, as a speaker, you're just going to have to be out there,” he says. “In those early years, you need income, and you need exposure. It's through [doing more speeches] that you get good at this. I don't care how much you practice. You get good, ultimately, by being on the platform.”

WATCH YOUR DASHBOARD

The economy goes up, and the economy goes down.

Sometimes, business is strong. Sometimes, it's awful.

Technology changes, and the demands of corporate customers change, and the whims of speaking audiences change.

But, as a 25-year survivor of this business, Sanborn is convinced: Once speakers find their niche and understand what they're selling and how to sell it, they can endure pretty much everything.

The marketing, sales and networking skills may not be the most desirable part of the job. Sanborn understands for some speakers, including those who simply love to speak, the behind-the-scenes, day-to-day business chores probably aren't fun at all. But those things are just as crucial to long-term success as one's performance on the podium. They cannot be ignored.

“You may not be passionate about marketing, but you'd better do it if you want to be able to continue to be passionate about speaking,” he says. “That's the business side of it, and it's important. In a way, speaking is an art, and we all know people who are wonderful artists who simply can't make a living. Well, there are plenty of people out there who can make a good speech, but they just can't make a living off it, either.”

Of course, the question that many speakers struggle with is how much time they should spend on their speaking chops, and how much they should spend on business. As with that key central question—“What am I selling?”—there is no simple answer, Sanborn says, but over the years he's come up with a handy visual aid to help people—both speakers and his audiences—conceptualize that tricky balance: A car dashboard.

On every dashboard, there is a series of dials and indicator lights, each of which offers a small window into the

internal workings of your car. None of those dials can be ignored, of course, because if they are ignored, the car will eventually sputter, cough and die.

It's the same, he says, with business.

Once you figure out what your “dials” are—whether those dials track sales or happy clients or gigs or anything else—you have no choice but to keep tabs on them ... and make adjustments when things go wrong.

“It's all about those dials on the dashboard,” he says. “There are many different metrics in business—a lot of things to measure. But ultimately, you'd better be looking at those dials. If one of your dials is your number of bookings, for instance, you'd better be tracking what kind of effort is required to maintain that level of bookings. Maybe the question you need to ask yourself is, ‘How do I make sure I'm top of mind for people who could hire me?’ There are many tools out there for people in our business, but I would say that one of the tools you should use is the idea of the dials on a dashboard.”



Tim Hyland's work has appeared in numerous publications, including Fast Company, Philadelphia City Paper and Philadelphia Life.

Hyland lives in Flourtown, Pa., and can be reached at timothyhyland@gmail.com.