

Do you have a passion to speak?

So many times after a presentation, an audience member approaches me and says, "I would LOVE to do what you do! How did you get started?" Due to the crowds of people and short breaks between speakers, I rarely have the opportunity to effectively answer their questions. Recently someone asked if I had information on my website on how to become a full-time speaker! What a great idea!

So in response to all of you who have asked - here is my story. (The short version)

As far back as I can remember I enjoyed getting up in front of people and speaking. My speech teacher in high school, Mrs. Connie Darfler, was a real supporter of my ability to use words and creativity. But it wasn't until 1989, during my career in ophthalmology, that my manager asked me to give a presentation to a group of optometric assistants. One program and I was hooked!

From 1989-1992 I worked in healthcare full-time and gave many presentations as a part of my job. Our facility was known for customer service and patient relations. Out of the blue a local bank called and asked me if I would be willing to come to the bank and talk to the seniors group on something "motivational" and fun. I wasn't sure why they were asking me until the bank staff member, Sally Scott, told me one of her senior club members had heard me speak at a healthcare function and thought it was good.

Having the chance to speak on something other than eyecare was a real joy for me. My first talk was called, "20 Ideas that Can Change Your Life" and was so much fun! The audience loved it and I have to admit I did too. There are not many people who can say they love their job and receive applause and praise for doing it! That's all it took and I was ready to chase my dream of speaking for a living.

From 1992-1994 I tried to figure out how a person makes a career out of speaking. I read lots of books, attended programs and talked to other speakers. Then one day a friend told me about the National Speakers Association. From there my journey really took off. I attended a national convention of the speakers association in 1994 and by 2002 I was able to leave my full-time job and speak professionally. Now I am blessed with the best of all - flexibility to be a mom and wife when I'm needed, an opportunity to travel nationwide and most of all the gift of meeting some of the most interesting people.

But enough about me right? What you really want to know about is how you can learn to be a professional speaker. Here is my 10-step program to get your started.

1. Determine what you have earned a right to talk about. In what field are you experienced? Have you survived a particular hardship? Are you a funny? Are you an expert on something?
2. Is there a market for the topic you plan to speak on? For example, you may be an expert kite flyer but it will be hard to find an audience willing to pay to hear about it.
3. Make a list of the reasons that someone would want to hire you over a more experienced speaker. You must be unique. Do your homework. Something that you may think is unique to you may actually be very overdone on the speaking circuit.
4. Start making a list of all the places you can present for free for the experience. Service clubs, volunteer organizations and chambers are great places to start. It takes time to craft your work and nothing gets you in shape faster than presenting in front of a live audience. Always collect evaluation sheets and see critics as your coaches! Make adjustments and go at it again.
5. Find an experienced speaker to serve as your mentor. Many speakers are willing to help others. If your budget allows, considering hiring a speaking coach not only for your presentation training but also for business development. I've always felt that there are three things you must master to be a success in this business

Ability to perform on the platform with content

Sales and marketing expertise

People skills to meet the needs of the program planner and audience

6. Always use original material. It is an industry no-no to use other speaker's materials and signature stories as if they are your own. Listen to speakers to learn styles, pacing and design but then craft your talk with your own original stories.
7. Many speakers encourage others to join [*Toastmasters International*](#). Their toll-free number is 800-993-7732. Toastmasters groups meet in cities and towns all over America, at all different times. It's inexpensive and very helpful. By the time I discovered Toastmasters, I was too far along in my speaking career to benefit as much as I might have if I'd found them earlier—don't make the same mistake!

If you're already charging a fee for your speaking and want to learn more about how to "get the word out" about your availability as a professional speaker, you might want to contact the [*National Speakers Association*](#) in Tempe, Arizona. Their number is 1-480-968-2552. This organization is for those who speak professionally, so the membership fee is fairly steep, but the educational benefits are worth the investment. They also have fabulous, affordable tapes of their conference speakers, a great way to jump-start your learning. When you contact NSA and request their prospective member information, you'll get info about the tapes, their upcoming national events, and the NSA chapter nearest you.

8. Many beginning speakers worry about what they should charge for their services. That's a very individual decision, based on your talents, your experience, and how in demand you are as a speaker. My advice is to choose an amount that is fair to all involved (including you and your family!) and quote the same fee to everyone—speakers call it "fee integrity." As experience and demand dictate, your fees can move up, although your greatest goal should be providing the right message for the right audience.

9. Learn the options for promoting your business in the first year. Most speakers start with a flyer style of information called a "one-sheet." This is an inexpensive way for you to list your program title and description, short bio and contact information. Be careful not to print too many at first because I promise you things will change before you get the chance to use them up! I clearly remember my first one-sheet was so expensive I hesitated to even give them out because my eyes saw quarters on all the chairs! Looking back I realize how foolish it sounds to hold on to promotional information because of the cost. The only reason to have the piece is to get it in the hands of people who can hire you.

10. Read Dottie Walters book entitled, *Speak and Grow Rich*. All the basics of getting started are right there waiting for you.

Finally, I encourage you to surround yourself with people who believe in your dream. Find other people with the same passion for speaking that you have and the rest will fall in line. Don't quit your day job too soon. I had a year worth of salary booked before I considered leaving my "real job." Even after years of doing this, there are still months when I look ahead and see too many open days on my calendar. For anyone who may wish for this career because it looks fun and easy, please note that like any job there are good points and then some not so good. I tell people all the time - "They don't pay me to speak. They pay me to get there." Frequent travel, packing supplies and keeping your energy up to the necessary level is as challenging as any day in my "real job." On the flip side, there is nothing more rewarding than doing what I know I was put on earth to do - mother my two adorable children and speak.