

Unaccustomed as I am: How to make it in public speaking

Celebrities speaking gigs are nothing new – many Victorian-era writers embarked on these events. But you don't necessarily need to be famous to become part of the speaking circuit. The Business Post asked some experts for tips on the techniques and skills needed to be an effective public speaker

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Bono's tour will take in theatres including London's Palladium and the 3Olympia in Dublin. But speakers can be hired for all kinds of venues and all kinds of organisations.

Picture: Bloomberg



These days, it's become virtually the norm for celebrities and public figures to try their hand at sideline gigs.

George Clooney makes tequila. Gwyneth brought us Goop. Brad Pitt is exhibiting sculptures at a gallery in northern Finland. And as for one of Ireland's most famous sons, U2 frontman Bono? He's set to embark on a 14-date speaking tour to launch his memoir *Surrender* next month.

While the ubiquity of the side hustle may be a modern phenomenon, speechwriter and communications professional Derek Mooney explains that the public figure-to-public speaker template Bono is following actually dates back much further.

"It's not a new thing," he says. "You would have had Charles Dickens speaking tours, and Oscar Wilde toured the States as a public orator. A lot of notable novelists of the late Victorian era and in the early 20th century would do public readings and then expand upon the reading."

But how does someone go about becoming a public speaker today? Susan Gavin is the founder of Speaker Solutions, a speaker bureau that connects clients with the right speaker for their event. Among the speakers the company represents are Bob Geldof, Sonya Lennon and Brian O'Driscoll.

"Usually when people join our books they would be established speakers and would have a bit of a profile," she says. But over the years the company has added to its portfolio in different ways.

"Sometimes clients come to us looking for a specific person and we would go and source that person. Other times we would keep our eye on the market and attend events and conferences, and also hear via word of mouth from clients as to who's good and who's relevant." Speakers themselves also approach the company on occasion.

In Ireland, sportspeople in particular are primed for making the crossover to public speaking – and they're very in demand. For former sportspeople, a career spent working on motivation means that inspirational public speaking "kind of comes naturally", according to Daniela Liebing of the London Speaker Bureau.

Ronan O'Gara, the La Rochelle head coach looks on during the Heineken Champions Cup Semi Final match between Racing 92 and Stade Rochelle at Stade Bollaert-Delelis in May.
Picture: David Rogers/Getty Images



Liebing cites Ronan O'Gara as an example of someone who can draw upon their experience in sport to inspire an audience.

As a former Heineken Cup-winning rugby player, O'Gara has the credibility to provide insights into "how to get your team motivated to perform at their very best". "For example, when we had Ronan O'Gara do a talk last week, he was all about leadership, motivation, how to push through, how to engage with your players or staff."

Even outside of sports, public figures who've tackled big challenges can be a natural fit for the world of public speaking.

Take former chief medical officer Tony Holohan, who recently joined Personally Speaking, a Dublin-based speaker bureau. Writing on LinkedIn, founder Frances Keane said that Holohan draws upon his experience as CMO and "offers valuable support for today's business leaders to help them navigate uncertain times and complex issues".

Susan Gavin says that despite a tough period during Covid, which was "quite shocking and difficult for anybody in the live events industry", public speaking has bounced back stronger than ever. "The last few months have been the busiest we've seen in years. People are really keen to get back to in-person events."

Bono's tour will take in theatres including London's Palladium and the 3Olympia in Dublin. But speakers can be hired for all kinds of venues and all kinds of organisations. Gavin says that Speaker Solutions work with a wide range of clients, "be it motivational, after dinner, conference, wellbeing events, employee days: it could be for anything – for all sizes and types of organisations in Ireland and internationally".

Trends in public speaking tend to mirror what's going on in the wider culture; for example, a contemporary interest in mental health and resilience. Gavin explains that she's seen a lot of companies focus on wellbeing events for staff over the last few years "given the circumstances people have been working in and under".

Another dominant theme just now is the future of work. "So looking at strategy, looking at performance, looking at motivation is coming back – companies are looking at trying to motivate people again now that we're sort of through the rough few years. It's trying to get people looking forward again."

The time of year is also a major factor in determining the speakers and topics that are in demand. "Going into November, it's International Men's Day, and that has always been very, very strong for really interesting male speakers. Then for International Women's Day, which is in March, the same applies. There are very, very strong female speakers out there."

Tickets for Bono's Irish date clock in at a pricey enough €61.95. But this is for the literary circuit, which is small fry in comparison to political and corporate arenas, where the volume is turned up to 11 for entrance prices and speaker fees both.

Bono is listed as a speaker with the Harry Walker Agency, where small mention is made of his music and arts background, but instead the focus is on his work in relation to humanitarian and political causes, and on his capacity to influence governments. His price? It's on application, they say, as with all the higher level figures on the circuit.

What is known is that put them at the right conference, and former politicians such as Barack Obama and David Cameron can reportedly earn six-figure sums for giving talks.

A pathway to riches?

Is public speaking a pathway to riches then? Not necessarily. It is, as Susan Gavin explains, “a really broad market.” The profile of the person will naturally determine the fee they can command. Gavin works with speakers with a good profile in Ireland, and speakers with tried and tested experience and a knack for telling a story, “and there's a lot of value in that”.

What does that mean in terms of euros and cents? “I suppose the average fees that we would see in Ireland would be anything between €3,000 and €15,000. I'd say that's where you're generally looking at for the speaker market for a lot of companies. But then, the big names do command huge fees.”

Nikki Bradley. Picture: Jay Doherty



Nikki Bradley is a motivational speaker and cancer survivor who regularly gives talks, often relating to motivation and resilience.

She says that while it is possible to make a living from public speaking in Ireland, getting to that point, as with anything else, takes time. “I was told very early on by well-established speakers in Ireland that if you do want to do this as a career, be prepared to do it as a hobby first. And I did see that early on.”

What are her thoughts on famous faces making big money from speaking? “They will charge astronomical fees, but for people of their profile that's quite normal,” Bradley says. “I think that when you have a huge audience, you have already earned your title.”

She explains that hearing these figures talk about their experiences has a specific value. “Every speaker is different, and what they speak about is truly unique to them for the most part, especially if they bring a personal element, which I believe is important.”

For the would-be public speaker, giving a talk can seem a daunting task – so much so that speechwriter Derek Mooney says: “*The two things that people supposedly find most traumatic in life are moving house and having to make a public address or having to speak in public.*”

For those who're looking to write a good speech, Mooney advises that focusing on a definite structure in its simplest form, “a beginning, middle and an end”, is key, while it also helps “not to be afraid of repetition”. And perhaps most importantly of all, just start somewhere, anywhere at all. “Just get something down on the page and then edit it,” he says.

Taking some time away from what you've written can also really help you to hone what you've written. “You'll write something, you'll leave it alone for a few hours, you'll come back with a fresh pair of eyes and you realise that, okay, that would work better there, that would work better there, now I've a flow to it. So editing is a big part of it.”

Imbuing your speech with some story and personalisation also helps bring it to life, much as Bono will presumably aim to do on his speaking tour, where he'll "bring the stories of his life to life". Mooney cites a quote from Roman historian Cato the Elder as a guiding principle: *"If you have the belief, the words will follow."* Passion and personalisation give an audience something to connect with, and something that feels authentic.

Bradley would agree. Along with humour, which she says helps relax the audience and gets them to really listen, she thinks authenticity is absolutely essential. "If they (the audience) feel anything other than authenticity coming from the speaker, they will see through it immediately, and you can nearly see a barrier going up. So I think being authentic is absolutely number one."

Personality and connection

But writing a good speech is only half the battle. After all, a public speech is made to be delivered, not read. Personality and connection are similarly important in your delivery, according to Iryna O'Hanlon of SpeechCamp presentation skills training, who coaches people in public speaking.

"The good public speech, first of all, is about your personality as well," she says. "You can get all the skills that you want, but remember, at the end of the day, it is you who are delivering the speech. The materials are very important. But you are the one who connects. If you have the connection – and that means if you are present, if you are really present, and your voice belongs to you, your thoughts belong to you – then people feel it, this connection. It's all about the connection."

Practice is also important to developing confidence, and as with writing the speech, it's essential to just go for it when actually delivering it – to fake it until you make it, basically. "How do you get the confidence? You deliver your speech even if you feel like your throat is dry, you have butterflies in your tummy, even if there's this kind of silence and you don't want to start. But then slowly but surely it changes," O'Hanlon says.

Face-to-face engagement

Does the art of public speaking, which dates back to ancient Greece and Rome, still have a place in the screen-saturated culture of today? Mooney thinks it does. Public speeches, he maintains, are "better persuaders" than other modes of address.

"I think it [public speaking] has the ability to move people along, to move discussions along and to move debate along." Unlike the "continuous stream of assertions" with no give and take that characterise social media platforms, face-to-face engagement, and in particular spoken word, encourages us to engage a bit more – and with more respect – with those with whom we differ. "I think that's the advantage," Mooney says.

Susan Gavin founder of Speaker Solutions. Picture: Bryan Meade



Susan Gavin of Speaker Solutions is similarly positive about the impact that a good public speech can have upon listeners. "People need to be inspired – we all need that. It's so easy to get into a rut on a personal basis, it's so easy to get stuck in your day-to-day routine. And a really interesting talk takes us out of that, even if it's for a short period of time. It gets us resetting our own mindset."

Public speaking is potentially a less daunting prospect when you're the lead singer of one of the world's most successful rock bands – and when your sold-out audience is made up of adoring fans. That said, O'Hanlon is adamant that it's not just for the likes of Bono, saying "everyone can become a great public speaker".

"I believe in this. Really, I do. Some people are more shy by nature: they're more introverted than extroverted. But everyone can become a good speaker if they really care what they talk about – if it resonates with their heart."

But while public speaking can impact an audience, so too can it impact the speaker. If Bono's "evening of words, music and some mischief" goes well in the 3Olympia this November, how can he expect to feel afterwards? What's it *really* like to deliver a powerful speech?

"Unbelievable," Bradley says, who has years of experience of public speaking. "If you feel a talk went well, and, more importantly, if you feel that your message landed with your audience – it nearly doesn't matter how big that audience is – you will see it on their faces."

"You'll see on the front row, you'll just see it in their faces that whatever you said resonated with them. And that feeling is incredible."

Bigger than Bono? What the top speakers around the world can earn

Former president Bill Clinton, left, speaks with Derek Shearer during an event at the Pizzitola Sports Center at Brown University in Providence in April. Picture: Craig F. Walker/The Boston Globe via Getty Images



* Bill Clinton pocketed a cool \$750,000 for an address to telecom giant Ericsson in Hong Kong in November 2011.

* Prince Harry is rumoured to have received \$500,000-\$1 million for a speech at JP Morgan's Alternative Investment Summit in 2020, according to Forbes.

* Tony Blair is another ex-politician who earns big on the speaking circuit. In 2007, the former British prime minister reportedly earned \$500,000 for a 20-minute talk in China. That's \$25,000 a minute.

* Boris Johnson: the New York Times reports that the recently ousted British prime minister is expected to earn "as much as \$250,000 per speech, and even more for his first outing or two".

Former US President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle arrive at the Obama Foundation Summit in Chicago, Illinois in October 2017. Picture: Jim Young/AFP via Getty Images



* Barack isn't the only Obama who can command a staggering fee. Former first lady Michelle Obama is also said to have netted around \$200,000 for speaking events.

* Closer to home, Enda Kenny, Graham Norton and Bob Geldof were all listed in the highest "on application" price bracket (fees of €22,000 and above) by the British Speakers Associates agency in 2017.

Adele performs on stage as American Express present BST Hyde Park in Hyde Park in London in July. Picture: Gareth Cattermole/Getty Images for Adele

* Fancy booking songstress Adele or talk show host David Letterman? Be prepared to shell out anything from \$100,000 to \$1,000,000, according to celebrity acquisition and talent buying agency Celebrity Speakers Bureau.

