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Keynote Speakers Don't Have to Be Famous

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Mar. 13--San Antonio builder Ken Nietenhoefer shows fellow Texans "how to change your robots." Retired Army officer *Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch* helps corporate America consider how to "live and leave behind a legacy." And nurse Dierdre Fisher strives to give her colleagues "a brighter day to look forward to." Using their hands, eyes, oratory flourishes and vocal volume, they can command anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000 to deliver their one-hour messages of hope or humor.

Each is a professional motivational speaker whose job is to energize an otherwise pedestrian convention dinner, or inspire employees to feel good about their place of work, or to teach their listeners how to become better or "more balanced" people.

Throughout the nation, there are thousands of regular people who also know how to talk their way into earning a pretty good living as professional speakers.

"Our members get hired because of their expertise and their eloquence, rather than for their fame or fortune," said Mark Sanborn, president of the National Speakers Association, a collection of more than 3,500 regular people who speak for fees.

Sanborn also is president of Sanborn & Associates, a Colorado-based business that sells his speaking skills for \$12,500 an hour, in addition to first-class flights, lodging, meals and incidentals.

Before starting his company in 1986, Sanborn worked in sales and as a trainer for corporate America.

"Some of our members are well known but for their speaking skills, like Les Brown," Sanborn said. "But more often than not, our members may not be as well known." No, they're not like billionaire Donald Trump, who commands at least \$40,000 to talk about how he became one of the richest men in America; or like Olympic cyclist Lance Armstrong, whose minimum is \$100,000 for each speaking engagement; or like Secretary of State Colin Powell, who can talk about rising from poverty and living the American Dream for \$80,000.

But they are like *Castillo Kickbusch*, who can speak emotionally about how she became the first Hispanic woman in Texas to reach the Army's officer ranks.

Nietenhoefer uses folksy Texas humor to talk about building a successful business and changing bad habits.

Fisher reflects on decades of experience as a nurse to talk about stress management and "healing versus curing." For each of these speakers, it was a revelation to them that someone would actually pay them to tell their stories, talk about leadership or to speak on living a better life.

"I became aware of the NSA and then I realized that there were people actually making a living doing this," said Fisher, who joined NSA in 1997 and asks for \$7,500 for her keynote addresses.

Castillo Kickbusch said she learned about professional speaking when she retired from the military and volunteered to serve as a mentor at a middle school in San Antonio in 1996.

"I came and just started to talk to a few students, and a couple students felt like my message was too powerful to share with just a few," *Castillo Kickbusch* said. "And so the teachers said, 'We want the whole school to listen.' And they said 'We need to pay her, we have money for this.' And I said I didn't know this.

"Back then it was like \$200 for a session and it was like, 'Could you negotiate with us if you do three, and could we pay you \$500?'" Today, *Castillo Kickbusch* is president of Educational Achievement Services Inc. The for-profit company grosses \$680,000 a year from her parental training curriculum for school districts, as well as her

speaking engagements before corporate leaders, women's groups, Hispanic organizations and educators throughout the nation.

She's spoken to employees of Verizon, IBM, Dell Computers and Wal-Mart about what she calls "servant leadership," and "leading in the 21st century." In recent years, she learned that she could charge corporations up to \$10,000 for her message through a mentor, a veteran speaker based in Houston.

"Before he told me, I didn't know that this was a business where there was no set fee and that the fees were based on name recognition and the message, and knowing at what time you're at this point to charge this much," she said.

Nietenhoefer said that before he became a professional speaker, he delivered keynote addresses at local Rotary and Lion's Club meetings.

"Then someone asked me to do a convention and asked me what did I charge," he said. "And I asked him, what do you pay? I was a little nave. I said, 'What's your budget?'" Nietenhoefer spoke professionally every so often in 1986. Then the housing market soured in the late 1980s and he started promoting his speaking services.

Now that the market is back up, Nietenhoefer speaks occasionally again and keeps his engagements to venues within driving distance. Nietenhoefer doesn't like flying much these days.

"The whole idea of doing something I enjoyed that much and got paid for it was phenomenal," he said. "I could probably make more money speaking than building." The people who buy a speaker's time may be looking for motivation, inspiration, humor, information, an outside perspective or some area of expertise, Sanborn of the NSA said.

"The role of the professional speaker is not so much just providing information but also providing insight," he said.

The NSA formed in 1973 and has grown slowly and steadily over the past three decades.

It had grown so much that the organization tightened its standards, admitting only those speakers who earned a minimum of \$25,000 from their oratory abilities each year.

Fisher said she joined the group at the urging of a friend.

"Hopefully we're giving them something they want," Fisher said. "Sometimes it's entertainment. Sometimes it's information that they're wanting. People want information, and they are willing to pay for it. Sometimes it's hope, and we're giving them something to look forward to." *Castillo Kickbusch* theorized that the motivational speaking industry has been growing in recent years because workers are anxious about the poor labor economy, work force downsizing and the future in general.

"They're looking for that message of hope and that yes I can still be part of some change that happens and that I can live and leave behind a legacy," *Castillo Kickbusch* said.

There was a time when there was a glut of speaker "wannabes" trying to get into the business, Nietenhoefer said. But that time has passed.

"Some speakers think they can get rich and realize that they can demand the fee," he said.

Nowadays, with the still-poor economy, he said, "A lot of people are staying with local speakers so they don't have to pay for airlines or flights or overnight stays." So when he's telling listeners to "change their robots" -- to change their subconscious thinking in order to become the sort of people they want to be -- he's telling Texans within a 100-mile radius.

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