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The Magic Mouthpiece

Creator of The Wealthy Speaker System

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Jane Atkinson

The Magic Mouthpiece

One of the few things that many high profile authors and millionaires can agree upon is their speaking careers would have been unsuccessful were it not for tutelage from one woman.

Jane Atkinson is one of the world's best known-and best paid-business coaches who deals exclusively with professional speakers, celebrities and CEO's.

During the course of her career, she has represented celebrities, authors and high profile business people like the President of Washington Wizards Basketball, Susan O'Malley.

She has frequently taken speakers from 0 to 80 engagements a year and made them wealthy along the way.

I recently spoke with Jane about her magical marketing formula and unmatched ability to cultivate speaking talent.

By Bruce Hunter

There are a lot of great speakers in every profession, so how do some make a lot of money as a speaker, while others struggle and make little money even if they're an incredible speaker?

Being great on the platform is first and foremost when it comes to actually getting paid to speak. But many speakers who are good, lack focus and positioning. If they lack focus in the speech, the audience may have liked it, but not been clear on what the benefit was. That makes it harder to tell other people and word of mouth is stalled. Poor positioning might also cause someone to struggle. My friend Brian Palmer of National Speakers Bureau says "clients no longer want to hire speakers, they want to hire smart people who happen to speak".

What does it take to make it as a great speaker in the age of multi platform media?

Honestly, a microphone and a stage should be all that you need. And then if you use Powerpoint, or video, or something interactive, it's a bonus. If you ask yourself "if the power goes off in the venue, could I still do a great job?" and the answer is "no" then you are leaning too heavily on technology. The stories you tell should paint a picture for your audience, the teaching you offer should be clear, concise and well organized. A speaker who shows up with their voice and uses their body and the stage to convey something riveting can be just as effective as someone giving a high tech slide show.

Does it take excellent content to be a great speaker or does it take someone who has had an incredible life experience?

Well, there are a lot of business speakers out there who have a particular expertise. For instance Steve Little who speaks about business growth. He's run successful companies and therefore people want to know what he knows. He's also learned how to present his information in a captivating manner. But then there's someone like a Paul Templer, who's had his arm bitten off by a hippopotamus, Crazy right? He was a river guide in Africa and had this horrendous accident where he was lucky to live. Paul's message is all about how you respond to adversity, whereas Steve's message is going to be about growing a business. Completely different, yet both get hired at good fees.

Can a person who just has the desire to speak be an effective speaker?

Absolutely. The old Seinfeld joke is that 95% of the people at a funeral would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy. Many people fear speaking so having the desire is the first step. Technique can be learned

through practice. The key is having a message that people want to hear and to speak on something about which you are passionate and knowledgeable. And if you want to make money at it, you need a message that people will pay for. A lot of people join clubs like Toastmasters as a first step, just to get comfortable standing in front of a crowd. It's a good learning ground. Then, if they decide they want to get paid, they usually transition over to the National Speakers Association which is all about growing your speaking business.

Tell us a little bit about yourself. Where did you come from? What was your experience before you first got started in business?

I worked for many years at multiple jobs, always bartending on the side because the tips were so good. I had worked as a temp for a dozen companies from radio stations to large corporations. And being quick to pick things up, my employers always liked me.

Around 1990, I was working at 3M on a contract when I saw a speaker named Les Brown on a PBS special one Sunday afternoon. I recorded it and watch it about 20 times. He was talking about having a positive attitude and removing the negative people in your life - and at age 25 - those ideas had never crossed my mind. I wrote to Mr. Brown and told him that I would like to work for him, but his office sent me back an order form for his products. But I had planted the seed and within two weeks, I found a motivational speaker named Betska K-Burr and I went to work for her.

For three years I worked in a basement office on straight commission. It was a sink or swim situation but we doubled business annually. As someone who could sell speakers, I became a hot commodity in my industry. I went on to represent a magazine publisher named Peter Legge in Vancouver and then got recruited to Dallas to work for former Olympic skier Vince Poscente. Vince's wife owned a speakers bureau and I worked for her for my last two years in Dallas. I was there for six years and it was an amazing learning experience. From there I was able to start coaching full time and now have a solid business model.

What was your first year in business like?

I know most people say that it was a struggle, but my coaching business took off very quickly and I moved to the top of the pay scale within a very short period of time. I'm glad I didn't charge a lot right out of the gate, because I wasn't as good at the start, but I made a good living right from day one. And of course, working at home kept the overhead low.

I do recall, however, feeling lonely that first year. I had moved from Dallas where we had a staff of about 25 to Calgary where I worked by myself from home. It was just too quiet. I had to schedule a lot of lunches and go to the gym to replace the water cooler conversations that I had taken for granted in Dallas. I've since gotten used to working solo.

What were/are some of the obstacles you have encountered (overcome)?

I think the biggest challenge was writing the book. It took a year from start to finish with about 3 months of intensive writing and going back and forth with the editor. I had to learn discipline. I think it was Sam Horn or Cathleen Rountree (both writer's gurus) who said that you should choose a third spot to write. Not your office or your home, but somewhere completely separate. I chose to write my book at Starbucks, which was located in a Chapters bookstore. I'd put on my earphones and crank James Blunt and it just seemed to pour out of me once the ball got rolling. But getting that ball started was tough.

What is the most unique aspect of your business? And what do you enjoy most?

I think compared to other entrepreneur situations, what's unique is that my business doesn't run me. I set my own coaching schedule Monday through Thursday 11-2 and take every Friday off. Most people bend with their clients and many, like retail owners, don't have a lot of choice. But I do, and surprisingly, my clients are totally cool with the way I work. I've also got systems in place selling my books and product online so that I can make money without lifting a finger. It's the best feeling in the world to be sitting on the porch sipping a glass of wine and hear my laptop go 'cha-ching'. That means I made a sale. That transaction also goes to my shipping depot in Utah where they send the product out.

You have a very interesting background. How has your experience, credentials and background helped you in marketing to new clients?

I was lucky to fall into an industry that few people know a lot about. And I set about making myself an expert in speaker marketing. In the beginning I was a sponge and luckily, I was surrounded by very smart people! I would read books, attend workshops, listen to tapes and watch any videos I could get my hands on in order to learn. And later, that paid off. Many speakers know how to perform on stage but struggle with marketing and that's why they are willing to pay me – to solve their problems. I think this is transferable to any business. If you choose

an aspect of the business and become one of the most knowledgeable about it, then you start to have more control over your career. You have become an expert. This is true even if you work for a big corporation.

Who is your ideal client/customer?

My ideal customer is someone who is willing to take all of the steps required in order to grow their business. They don't expect that it will be quick, or handed to them on a silver platter. It takes three years to launch a speaking business. Most importantly, they are willing to look objectively at their talent and improve their speaking skills.

What, if any, significant partnerships have played a role in your success?

My success is mostly due to my industry's generosity. The National Speakers Association hosts an annual convention and I've been going for more than 15 years. I've learned more about the industry from successful people who were willing to share their secrets, than from anywhere else. Whether it be about sales, marketing, speaking skills, or writing a book, it's quite amazing that people would just give it up like that. But our profession is extremely open and giving.

What do you enjoy most about what you do? On a personal note, what do you enjoy doing most outside of work?

Seeing people have success is a cool thing. I used to get a thrill from cooking up a "deal" or negotiating a contract. That's no longer as important as seeing people start to earn a really good income and be able to live a comfortable, secure life with their family. That's really my favorite part of this business now.

I recently got married and my husband and I have a little lake getaway. Watching a sunset, or sitting by a campfire is our way to unwind. And our families are hugely important to us so we host a lot of dinners or take everyone bowling or golfing – we like to laugh a lot and have a good time. If I didn't have a lot of time left to live, I highly doubt I would be wishing I would have worked more. That being said, I'm pretty happy with the legacy I've created in my industry.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

Well not many people know this, but I actually believe I'll be making a transition over from consultant to writer. After my first book, *The Wealthy Speaker*, I realized how much I enjoyed putting pen to paper. I have another

book due out next year on dating called “99 Frogs” www.99frogs.com which I hope will result in some new opportunities. If it all goes as planned, I’ll still be helping people, only in a more personal way and perhaps on a larger scale.

Tell us about some of the leaders you admire.

Well, I know a lot of people would choose someone like an Oprah Winfrey, and certainly her empire is to be admired. But I like to keep it small and simple. One leader I admired when I first got into this industry was a real estate expert out of Washington State named Barb Schwarz. She and her husband were on the road speaking 200 days a year. They had a bunch of employees, all of whom had families. After a few years of working their butts off to support all of the infrastructure, they were burnt out and decided to downsize. I remember Barb saying “no one ever said bigger was better”. After they downsized, I heard that they made more money working with just the two of them and an admin person than they did with all of the employees. I never, ever forgot what Barb had said. So my goal has always been to change the world, while still keeping my business small and simple.

Do you have any role models and did/do you have any mentors? If so, what impact did that have on you?

I had a personal coach named Rich Fettke for many years. He helped me visualize and makeover my life several times. I’m so grateful for him....he even inspired me to get into coaching and turned me on to CTI (Coaches Training Institute) which had excellent training.

My current coach, Chris Scappatura keeps me very grounded and aware of how I am being in the world. We focus more on the person I need to be in order to have the success that I desire. It’s interesting to have someone stick a mirror in your face once a week.

Oh, and also a great industry mentor for me has been an author named Joe Calloway. He’s really running the kind of business that I admire with terrific revenues and low overhead. He’s a great writer too.

What does success mean to you?

Success to me means freedom. Being tied to every sale means that you are willing to sacrifice family or personal time in order to satisfied a customer and earn that income. I love being in the position where I can say no in order to put what I really value first.

I think for many years I worked hard in order to appear successful to other people. However, once I started to get things aligned internally, that no longer meant so much. So what if the people at my high school reunion see me as successful? I’ll probably never lay eyes on them again in my life.

What is coaching and why has it become so popular?

In my eyes there are many different types of coaching. Personal, business, career, etc. I think that it’s caught on because people tend to need someone to help them stay focused and be accountable. Those are two things that are hard for many people. When you see someone who is living the kind of life that you envy and they say that their coach helped them get there, you take notice. Basically, coaching is meant to help people move forward towards what they want in life. There are many stories, both positive and negative, so like anything you have to do your homework and make sure that you choose a coach carefully, and match up their expertise with your goals.

How long must someone commit to working with a coach?

It would vary with every coach and how they like to work. I suspect some coaches would like to have a client for 3 months, some for a year. Personal coaching is quite different from what I do, which is strictly business. And I have created a flexible plan that allows people to buy credits (coaching hours) and use them on an as needed basis. I used to lock people in to three months, but this new way is working quite well for me and my clients.

What are some of the programs/resources you offer clients to compliment your coaching, speaking and training?

The Wealthy Speaker System is really my main resource. And the book, which is a part of the 3-piece system is a prerequisite to coaching. I wrote it for people who might need a step-by-step plan to help them start or re-launch a speaking business. Everything I know is in there. And it’s gotten amazing feedback so I’m quite pleased with that. I also do a quarterly teleclass for my clients on various topics and put out an eTip once a month which gets published to my blog. There are probably 30 articles on various topics there – all free. My goal is to stay in front of people with new ideas so that when they need help, they think of me first.