

# Finding your Topic

**A selections of ideas  
taken from  
The Speakers Compass  
how to navigate the  
professional speaking maze  
written and contributed by a variety of  
*National Speakers Association of Australia*  
members**

dedicated to  
the memory of  
**Kerrie Nairn**  
**1951-2005**

## BRAD CORK

### **Passion: The Key to Topic Selection**

#### **Find your passion:**

The old question “If you had unlimited time, resources and money, what would you do?” is a great place to start. Hopefully, part of that answer will be helping others. (If it’s not, maybe you should consider changing your career to fulfil your passion.) If your passion is to help others, then your passion is likely to be your best topic.

#### **Turning your passion into your topic:**

Think about (or asking existing or potential clients) what the top eight questions are in your area of passion. Cull this down to a much tighter set of five questions. Allocate some time to a terrific opening, and a conclusion that will leave them wanting more, then divide the rest of your time between answering the five questions. Presenting the answers to those questions

will deliver value by providing your audience with things they want to hear, and will leave them wanting more.

*One of the most helpful tips I was ever given, and which I still give to others starting out in the business, is to do research, more specifically, to go to the National Speakers websites.*

*Camille Valvo*

### **CAMILLE VALVO**

One of the most helpful tips I was ever given, and which I still give to others starting out in the business, is to do research, more specifically, to go to the National Speakers websites (NSA, NSAA, PSA). I recommend people select their topic, select CSP/CPAE, and just take some time to browse thru the websites of the people who are writing, consulting, speaking and training (successfully!) in their area of interest. Quite often they have publications (or recommendations), e-zines, articles, and lots of great ideas. Not only does this help with professional awareness, but it's an eye opener as to what the market is demanding, particularly in those countries with larger populations, and thus more competition.

I still do this myself occasionally, to keep up with the movers and shakers in our industry.

### **SARAH CORNALLY**

The best advice I ever got was to think for myself, and make decisions based on what I wanted to create with my speaking career.

Having said that, for me, the toughest part of my speaking career was finding my topic. That proved to be quite a

challenge, because although I knew what the general area of my topic was – leadership – I found it difficult working out my unique angle.

I developed a set of questions, which I call “Value Through Expertise.”

1. What fascinates you so much that you can't stop thinking about it? There is no “off” switch.
2. What do you know, having learned through experience & achieved, that, if others knew, would make a difference for them?
3. What knowledge, attitude or skills can you give them?
4. What's the value to them of that?
5. How would you present that so it makes sense, and people feel confident they know what to do, are eager to do it, and are likely to succeed when they do?
6. What questions would you ask someone to lead them to discover the answers through their own thought processes?

7. How do you think about your subject? What are your opinions, observations, realisations?
8. What are your credentials? What evidence do you have that you are capable and competent in this area?
9. Who are your peers? Who do you feel equal to?

I continuously ask myself these questions, and find that as I develop new skills, knowledge, and insights, my topics evolve to meet the needs of my clients.

I've found that the work tends to come to me as I become clearer about the value I have to offer; not as some magical occurrence, but rather because I think about it, speak about it, and am on the lookout for it. It is so much a part of me that it occurs naturally in conversations, I'm moved to write about it, and as a result, clients start to ask more about it.

## ANN VILLIERS

### Check the obvious first

Sometimes our strongest topic is staring us in the face, but we choose to ignore it to explore 'more interesting' pathways. I've had a best selling book on the market since the late nineties, a specialist publication that has played a large part in establishing my reputation and expertise. Up until early this year, I had regarded this subject as just one of my suite of offerings.

As I worked towards releasing the fourth edition the book, it dawned on me that I'd failed to fully tap the potential of this topic. As a result, I've now expanded my web site, and have developed coaching services, teleseminars, and ecourses, with a strong marketing campaign planned for the near future. While foreign lands may look exotic and enticing, and the local neighbourhood can seem uninteresting

because it's so familiar, your richest nuggets may be lying in your own backyard.

*What makes you  
unique, what special  
skills and past  
experience do you have  
that will be a  
commercial commodity?*

*Catherine De Vrye*

### **CANDY TYMSON**

It's important to have a niche – even if that's not all you speak about. Don't be concerned if this takes time, sometimes even years, as often a niche evolves from recognising a new trend. For example, as a communications expert, my niche is gender differences in communication. Peter Sheahan is now developing a niche working with Generation Y, something that didn't even exist five years ago.

### **CATHERINE DE VRYE**

Have a firm idea of what it is you want to speak about, and what *benefits* it would bring to an audience. Being passionate about your topic is a given, but meeting planners want speakers with a specific area of expertise, and are unlikely to be impressed by someone who says they can speak on any topic. Look for a niche that matches your talents. What makes you unique, what special skills and past experience do you have that will be a commercial commodity. Go with your strengths. For example, I started speaking within IBM for free on customer service and quality, because I'd lived in Japan at a time when service quality was a relatively new concept in the Australian marketplace. Then other IT companies and IBM clients hired me, based on word of mouth. Folks asked

for handouts (which I don't believe in), and then suggested I write a book – and I must say that having a #1 best-selling book really gave me an edge over other speakers on customer service, as it provided me with unique credibility as a service 'expert'.

It was many years before clients asked me to speak on other topics, and only then did I develop new material on change, and turning obstacles to opportunities. Without realizing it, I had developed 'street cred', working from my initial base of experience. The more 'street cred' you have, the better. And remember, you need to use *original* stories and humour to convey your message.

### **CHARLES KOVESS**

What are you passionate about? What spontaneously arouses your interest? What excites you? When have you been so enthusiastic about something that you would risk everything to pursue it? These are the questions, applicable to your entire life since birth, that will give you the clues to what your speaking topic could be! And the answers are indeed just clues, to show you what your soul's journey is during your life. Will you live a life that is driven by your mind, or by your soul?



My definition of passion is ‘a source of unlimited energy from your soul that enables you to produce extraordinary results’. If you find your clues and act on them, you will be able to speak on topics that will move your audiences.

I learned from top football coach John Cahill that ‘when you speak from the heart, you reach the heart’. For me, heart and soul are synonymous, so when you’re passionate about your topic, you will reach the heart and soul of your audience.

Discover your soul’s journey by looking for the hundreds of clues in your life, and you will then be able to easily craft speaking topics that are both meaningful and fulfilling for you, and marketable to appreciative audiences.

## **DAVID PENGLASE**

### **Don’t Sell a Speech, Solve a Problem**

Clients don’t buy speakers, nor do they buy what we say, or how we say it. I have no doubt that the secret to long term success in the professional speaking industry, whether you’re a keynoter, trainer, facilitator or whatever, is to know that what you’re actually selling isn’t a speech, workshop or seminar – it’s what that speech, workshop or seminar will do for your audience.

So if you want to get more paid speaking engagements, first find problems that people have, and then speak about how they can solve them.

### **Become an Expert in Your Field**

Above all else, the market place is demanding speakers who are not only experts, but more importantly, speak in ways that capture audiences on both intellectual and emotional levels.

You need to find your unique angle on whatever topic it is that you speak on. Here's a great way to find your niche:

1. Write down three problems that you can help people solve
2. Write down three potential causes of each of these problems
3. Write down three ways to fix each of these potential causes
4. Once you've done this, review what you've written. Underline key words and phrases, looking for those that are yours alone – for ways of saying things that you're pretty sure are unique.
5. You've just found your niche – now write and speak about that.

## IAN BERRY

The late, great Earl Nightingale said “an hour of study a day on a given subject can make anyone an expert in five years.” For more than 30 years I’ve taken his advice to heart and practiced what he preached. Doing so is the major reason my clients see me as not just an expert, but more importantly, an authority, in the field of leadership.

Being uneducated in the traditional ways, I initially read everything about self-development and business I could get my hands on. Over time, I taught myself speed reading, which enabled me to absorb much more information. Of course, the wonder that is the Internet means that research and study is now so much easier.

Over years of practicing what I learned, I discovered that one of my passions was leadership, in particular how success had a lot to do with leadership’s interface with management, and the positive and productive impact this can have on people. Even now, I read a lot of self-development and business material, but tend to focus more on my specific field of leadership and management.

Clients often ask how come I know so much. My answer is simple: I devote an hour every day to learning, and intend to continue to do so for the rest of my life. The majority of my clients want to learn things they don't know. I'm able to help them, simply because I read widely, and apply what I've learned more than they do. In fact, some clients have learned to rely on me for reading and application of meaning so they don't have to bother! Of course, through all of this, I'm continually developing my topic.

Translating knowledge to wisdom (applied knowledge) is the key to topic development. I've learned, through study and application, that there are certain principles that never change, yet they can be applied in ever-changing ways. My presentations are simply a series of stories that inspire others to find their own unique way to apply these unchanging principles.

Anyone can choose any topic they are passionate about to become an expert in, however to be successful in professional speaking requires us to become experts in fields people see as sufficiently valuable in order to pay us handsomely to obtain the benefits of our years of study and application.

## KERRIE MULLINS-GUNST

The best advice I received as a speaker was to tell my own stories, yet it was hard advice to take. My own stories seemed so ordinary, and when I started speaking it was tempting to repeat others' stories that had made a powerful impact on me. However, I soon realised that these stories never had the same impact when I re-told them as they had had on me. Perhaps it was because I had to try so hard to remember all the details and get the story 'right', but I suspect that it was really because they weren't really 'me'.

When I tell my own stories, not only do people listen more attentively, but it's also much easier to re-live and share my experiences. My ordinary stories have enabled me to connect with my audiences. I tell the leaders I mentor and work with that "Integrity is about bringing who you are to what you do," and I think this also applies to speakers.

*Translating knowledge  
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topic development.  
Ian Berry*

## **HELEN MACDONALD**

In my first months in NSAA, while I was working hard at developing my topic to a marketable stage, Winston Marsh CSP asked me what I spoke on. “The Happiness Habit,” I responded naively. “You’ll starve,” he said. His advice was to take what I was passionate about, and focus it onto an area of pain for my potential customers, in such a way that they would be reaching for their wallets in order to hear my solutions for their problems.

## **MAGGIE DENT**

As a new member to NSAA back in 2000, I was intrigued and overwhelmed by the range of talent and variety among the speakers I met. My first national conference was in Sydney, and I was really blown away by the abundance of ideas, knowledge, and styles of many of the speakers whose presentations I was privileged to experience.

Indeed at that time, I struggled deeply with feelings of inadequacy in the company of such talent, especially those with books and associated products! I felt completely intimidated in the presence of such skilled, successful speakers. This girl from the back blocks of rural Western

Australia seriously wondered what she was doing wanting to join this impressive body of professional people.

During one of the breaks, I expressed my concerns to Robyn Henderson, CSP and Nevin Award winner, and in her warm and indomitable way she gave me the best words of advice I ever received - “Maggie, just be yourself –don’t copy anyone else, because you’re not them – you’re you. Stay passionate about what you believe in, and if that’s your clear intention, the rest will follow.”

Simply be the best “you” that you can be. These are great words of wisdom, and ones that I often fall back on.

## **LINDSAY ADAMS**

### **My First Topic Found Me!**

I began my journey as a speaker slowly. I joined the NSAA whilst still working full time in a non-speaking role. People used to ask me what I spoke about, and I would say, “Actually, I’m not a full time speaker yet. I don’t have a topic!”

At a farewell function for a work mate, I was musing over what I could speak about with a colleague when he said to me, “You should talk about influence – you’re good at that! I’ve watched

you, and you always seem to get what you want, plus, you have the knack of getting others to come on board with your ideas. Why don't you document your influencing techniques?" This set me to thinking and researching. I now have a large collection of books on influence, and have developed a keynote and supporting workshop around this material. So if you're trying to find a topic, ask your trusted friends and colleagues what they see as your key strengths, and work to them. If you're going to be an expert, you might as well choose a topic that you are already seen to be an expert in.

### **RODNEY MARKS**

Make your topic something very close to your heart: your passion will drive your skill development.

### **PAT NAUGHTIN**

#### **Be aware when you care!**

I don't think that it really matters what you speak about, as long as you're passionate about it.

In my case, I found my topic by accident. I was asked if I could help a building company with their metrication program, and innocently I agreed, not knowing that this would lead to a lifetime



fascination with the mental, moral, and social processes that individuals, groups, companies, industries, and nations use to effect profound changes. Just be open to how you feel about the issues you confront – be aware when you care! In a way, rather than me finding my topic, it found me.

Once you've found a topic you care deeply about, develop your knowledge of your topic at the same time as you develop your presentation skills.

## MARY KING

### **Couch as Coach Can**

The best advice I received in my professional speaking career was to work with a coach. We can all benefit from having a mentor to *coach* our topic out of us, and guide us to *couch* our topic and content into our showcase talk. I was fortunate enough to be directed to just such a person. My mentor understood show business, and had many years of experience and success in the field. I was able to focus on my goals, and achieve them quickly and profitably. My mentor was a master, who was able to lead me effectively through the professional speaking maze to achieve my own successful outcomes.

## MICHAEL LICENBLAT

### **Be original in your choice of material.**

Create your own message and tag lines - don't use other people's.

Be original in your key messages, your anecdotes, statistics, audience interaction pieces, jokes, and stage presence.

Resist the safety of rehashing the same material and examples that everyone else uses.

Have the courage to be yourself.

Dig deep into your heart and mind and become clear on where your expertise lies.

Make it part of you - see life through your message. Live it, breathe it, eat it - become your message.

*The most important criterion when  
selecting a subject is not how much knowledge  
you have, as that can be developed,  
but how much passion you have.*

*Phillip McKewin*

## **PHILLIP MCKEWIN**

What is something you feel very passionate about that you find yourself sharing with your closest friends or family; something that makes you feel really good when you know that your contribution has been heard; maybe something that you feel people you care about should know about. It will likely be something that enabled you to really find your voice; something that feels very purposeful, and very fulfilling for you.

Once you find some areas that you enjoy sharing with people, ask yourself, “What is the common theme here?”, as there will generally be a series of aligned messages related to the things that you love sharing. The most important criterion when selecting a subject is not how much knowledge you have, as that can be developed, but how much passion you have. Select a subject into which you can put your whole heart.

## **MARIE FARRUGIA**

First, figure out what you’re passionate about – if you’re going to build a business around this topic, then your energy has to remain high to sustain longevity. In order to do that, the topic must be one that you are truly passionate about. Research it – what are others doing, both in this country and overseas?

Secondly, it must be a topic that is commercially viable – in other words, who will pay for your message? Doing some market research helps – run your ideas past some prospective clients, and gauge their reaction. Also, running your idea past some senior colleagues at NSAA is invaluable. Sometimes it's only a matter of changing a title, so that your presentation is acceptable in a commercial sense.

### **ROBYN PEARCE**

#### **Choose a topic, and drill deep.**

Most of us, when we begin to speak or train, believe we can provide value on many topics, just because we understand them. If we use that as a business strategy, we become a generalist rather than a specialist. Look at the medical world - who gets the big fees? Our profession is no different. Buyers seek out those who really know their subject, not someone with a good all-round working knowledge.

Once you're really skilled, and have a sound profile in your specialty area, you may choose to enhance it with a related topic, but build that strong foundation position first.

## COLIN PEARCE

My first tip about finding your topic is a harsh one.

If you have to find a topic, it's probably best you don't start looking. If you've got nothing to say yet, suddenly finding a topic won't give you a voice.

Speakers who have the best topics, get the best response and get on the most stages, speak from their passion and heartfelt belief in their topic. They merely give voice to what is burning inside them.

My second tip is even harsher.

If you can't already speak confidently and competently, don't imagine that merely finding a topic is going to turn you into an orator overnight. You have to build your platform skills. If you're not already engaging, join Toastmasters, or take a speaking class.

My third tip is to encourage you to start somewhere.

Given that at least 20 people not related to you have told you that you are an interesting and engaging communicator, pre-

tend that you've found your voice on a topic. After all, that's how many trainers manage to earn their living. Get excited about what people want to hear. Apply the little you know about the topic with what you know about life, and offer to speak on it. That's what I did with one of my oldest topics, related to use of the telephone. I've probably earned \$500,000 or more from it over 20 years by generating an interest in how it should be done. Not a bad sideline, hey?

### **ROB SALISBURY**

Why do some people find discovering what to speak, teach or write about as natural as breathing, and yet for others, this decision stifles them from taking their first tentative steps into the world of speaking?

Here's are a few tips on finding your topic:

1. Take out a blank piece of paper and list all the areas that pique your own interests. By starting from this list, it will be easier to narrow the options to what will be your starting point.

2. What qualifications, education or experience do you have to draw on to help create the content and stories that will engage your audience, and lead them to want to know more?
  
3. By going to the NSAA website ([www.nationalspeakers.asn.au](http://www.nationalspeakers.asn.au)), and then clicking on 'directory', you can review more than 100 topics that over 600 NSAA members speak, train, teach and write about.

Finding your topic can be as simple as providing a solution to an obvious neighborhood need.

Ever known anyone who owned a dog that barked?

Sylvia Wilson of Dapto, NSW did, and began teaching dog-behavior workshops to the owners of dogs that barked at odd hours, or at anything that moved.

Sylvia and husband Danny are known experts in dog training and behavioural psychology. In response to growing demand, they created their Bark Busters franchise system in the 1990s, and now have over 300 Bark Buster offices in eight countries. *Sylvia has written two books, The Bark Busters™ Guide to*

*Dog Behaviour and Training*, and *The Bark Busters™ Guide to Puppy Rearing and Training*, and has now sold hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide.

Their company motto, adapted from the 1984 movie 'Ghostbusters', is '*Who Ya Gonna Call: Bark Busters!*'

Today, the Wilsons are pioneers of in-home dog training, and acknowledged industry experts.



- Finding your topic
- Presentation skills
- Creating paid and free speaking engagements
- Networking for speakers
- Sales and marketing
- Product development
- Setting up and operating a speaking business
- Health and fitness tips for the road warrior
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