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News

Confessions of a motivational guy



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Chicago

Audiences don't just want a great speaker. At this level, everybody's a great speaker. You've got to have done something different. I did that. I went from being a corporate guy to a creative person who speaks, writes and paints.

My first job was with Dole in marketing, then marketing surgical products with Johnson & Johnson. I was 27 and fast-tracking. It was so glamorous. You could make so much money. But I didn't like the lifestyle. Every time I set roots down, I'd get promoted and transferred. I had no girlfriend, no family nearby, nothing.

I would close a big deal and it didn't feel like a big deal. But I would do a training talk for a group of nurses about J & J products and I was jazzed. So I took a Dale Carnegie speaking class in New Orleans for 12 weeks. They promoted the idea of being yourself by talking about yourself, because that's what's easiest. They'd have you do goofy things like act out "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or be the Jolly Green Giant in front of the room. I loved it. I never dreamed you could make a living public speaking. My goal was to be a CEO like my dad. He ran a farm co-op in Central Illinois.

In 1987, when I was 31, I got an MBA and started thinking about what I wanted to do. I eventually took a six-month sabbatical, backpacking through

Costa Rica for a month and doing some oil painting and writing.

After that, I saw an ad seeking "an MBA with a heart" placed by Challenger Gray & Christmas. I got hired as an employment counselor working with executives who'd been laid off. I taught a two-day class on executive job search strategies and would follow up on the phone with one-on-one counseling. I was counseling executives from Coca-Cola, AT&T, all these Fortune 500 people who were stressed about the job search and finances. I was making contacts all over the country. I got eight dates with Pepsi speaking to their salesforce.

It's been 10 years since I started speaking professionally. My fees range from \$4,000 to \$9,000, depending on whether it's a one-hour keynote or a two-day workshop. I cracked a six-figure income a couple of years ago.

I've done 1,100 speaking engagements. Of those, 100 were for small-business owners, and I loved it. The corporate people have health benefits and salaries and can afford to be skeptical; they can wait to try out an idea. Small-business owners are like, "Give me something now, man."

I speak to business owners who want to attract the right customers. Everybody can work 80 hours a week and have a heart attack at 50. Let's do this with integrity, health, solid relationships. You have to say no to the

money if it's not right. The road to failure is trying to be all things to all people. Just like the speaking business, it's about your niche.

Audiences want practical ideas they can use today. I tell them to decide every morning what three things they need to do to meet their goal. I stole that idea from Bill Clinton. I'll talk about meditation, which is hard because most people can't still their minds for more than three seconds. But they can go for a run and consider a question like, "What idea do I need to keep this client?" Mow the lawn. Go for a walk. But do it mindfully.

I'll weave in "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" (by Stephen R. Covey) and Jim Collins' "Good to Great." I'll have them write down the ideas they connect with, then get an accountability buddy and make an appointment to talk with them in 30 days and review how they're doing.

I'll end my speech with something from the heart: Take it from a guy who tried to be somebody he wasn't.

As told to Emily Stone

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