Imagine this: You receive an e-mail from your library director. She has just charged your publicity committee, of which you are the chair, with finding a speaker for next summer’s centennial event. “What do I know about finding an interesting speaker for an event?” you ask yourself. Then your imagination takes off: “Anne Rice and Dave Barry would be terrific. And I hear the writer of that play being done on campus grew up here. Maybe we can get him to speak.” It is not long before others on the committee stop by your office with other suggestions: mystery writers, artists, and political activists. It quickly becomes apparent that you need a plan.

Many of us will be confronted with the job of finding a public speaker at some time during our careers. The challenge may be a bit off track from one’s usual library job routine, and like much of library life, not covered in the usual library school courses. Moreover, handy guidelines for finding library event speakers are not readily available in the library literature. A search of a major library science database will reveal how little has been written on this subject. Though a number of articles have described the protocols of booking authors through publishers and agents, only a few articles directly address the subject of how to decide upon and then find a public speaker for a library event.¹ So where to begin?

Booking a good library speaker can be challenging to say the least. However, with an action-plan checklist (see page 73), plenty of planning time, and adequate financial support appropriate to the speaker chosen, the task of securing an interesting speaker for that special event can be not only manageable but an exciting adventure as well.

**Know the Budget Limits for the Speaker**

Monetary considerations are paramount. First off, the money an organization has available to spend on a speaker will determine to a great degree who cannot be invited. A rule of thumb—though there are exceptions to everything—is that the more popular and famous people are, the more it will cost to engage them to speak.
If funds are limited, then a lesser-known or local figure is generally in order. Speaker committees often spend too much time considering speakers who are far beyond their available funds. We all tend to aim high with such ambitious suggestions as: “I love Ken Burns’ documentaries; he would be a great speaker for the event;” “How about inviting Noah Adams or Nina Totenberg of NPR?” or “Maya Angelou would be perfect.” An investigation into the amount big names charge for speaking can be sobering. The cost of booking a celebrity speaker can be in the tens of thousands of dollars or more. Addressing the financial question immediately will save time, needless disappointment, and fruitless labor.

Do not dismay, however, if you are still determined to bring a well-known and potentially expensive figure to an event, even if only a modest stipend is offered. Many important and interesting speakers are willing to appear for less than their usual fee if they feel they are doing important work for a good cause and will be appreciated for the effort. Some speakers even plan to do a number of engagements off their usual tour schedule as quasi-pro-bono work. Our speaker committee at Appalachian State University Library once had a lengthy phone conversation with a well-known political columnist who offered to come speak for half of her usual $10,000 fee.

The Best Type of Speaker for the Occasion
Once the speaker budget is determined, the committee can move on to deciding what kind of speaker would be most appropriate for the particular event within those financial limits. A brainstorming session where suggestions can be banded about is an excellent way to begin freely discussing all of the possibilities. Some information should be used to frame the discussion. The demographic composition of the audience is an important factor and should play a part in choosing the speaker. For example, an audience composed primarily of book club members would be a natural match with an author. The rationale for the event is also critical. For instance, if the speech is part of an arts festival, a working artist might be an appropriate choice. The committee can consider whether the speaker should be nationally recognized, regionally known, or perhaps someone from the local community. Bringing these elements together should direct the committee to the speaker best suited for the occasion and the audience.

Solicit Input from Others in Your Organization
At this stage of the quest, the committee can benefit by inviting suggestions from members of the library organization outside the committee. Given the six degrees of separation principle, there may be someone at or associated with the library who knows someone, so to speak. It helps to have someone with a personal inside track. Ex-affiliates of the library or associated institutions, such as alumni, previous board members, and long-time patrons who have become notable are excellent potential speakers. They may be eager to make a contribution to their old.
If the sky is the limit (or just for fun), click on the Web site of a mega-agency . . . where, for a hefty price (five or six figures), such speakers as Larry King or Archbishop Desmond Tutu can be obtained.

library, alma mater, or hometown by way of a presentation. Often there may be someone in the area who has done something remarkable but who does not generally make public presentations. For example, our library committee came to the realization that we had an excellent speaker in our midst: A local professor had recently written an ecological history of our surrounding mountains. His talk was a hit with the community and the cost of hosting him was minimal.

Prioritize the List
Once names for potential speakers are gathered, the committee should convene to narrow and prioritize the list. The speaker candidates should then be contacted one at a time, starting with the most desired. Patience is crucial at this stage of the process. Resist the urge to save time by calling multiple candidates simultaneously. This avoids the uncomfortable situation of a speaker candidate assuming an implied invitation and later having to be told that someone else was chosen.

Make Direct Contact with the Speaker
Another rule of thumb, when public speaker money is limited, is to avoid the middleman agent altogether, contacting the speaker directly. Speaker agents are in business to make money and are unlikely to bargain a special deal on their designated fees. But if the speaker is contacted directly, he or she may make an exception to the standard speaker fee. And many lesser known writers, artists, and public figures do some or all of their own speaking arrangements. As librarians, we can use our skills in searching traditional library and online resources to find contact information for speaker candidates. This is often simpler than one might imagine. Check the Web to see if a given speaker maintains a personal blog or Web site that contains contact information. A magazine article with a biographical or interview focus on a potential speaker may include information about the person’s e-mail address or even full contact information.

Who’s Who directories and subject encyclopedias can also be sources for contact information. I used the Gale Dictionary of Literary Biography on one occasion to find the address of an otherwise elusive poet. But it was a simple, online white pages directory that led our speaker committee to the home phone of the nationally known political writer who became interested in coming to our event for a reduced fee.

Using Intermediaries
If direct contact information for a speaker cannot be located by searching the Web or library resources, one can always do the traditional thing and contact the publisher or agent of the speaker. Some publishers have instructions on contacting and booking their writers on their Web sites. A phone call to the publishing house will usually be routed to the publicity department or the library-marketing department. If your library is on an author’s tour route or offers the potential for book sales and publicity in a new market, the publisher may be swayed to add your library to the tour.

Another avenue for finding authors for library events promises to simplify the process for both library and publishers seeking venues for book tours. The Association of American Publishers hosts a database, Authors @ your library, at www.AuthorsAtYourLibrary.org. Librarians interested in booking authors are asked to enter their library’s information into the database. Eventually, the database should provide libraries with such things as key contact information and tour schedules while providing publishers with awareness of which libraries are interested in their authors. Depending on the speaker budget, the committee can also consider lists of professional speakers hosted by speaker agencies. If the sky is the limit (or just for fun), click on the Web site of a mega-agency such as American Program Bureau (www.apbspeakers.com) where, for a hefty price (five or six figures), such speakers as Larry King or Archbishop Desmond Tutu can be obtained. While online, shop the celebrity gallery of Allen Agency (www.speakerbooking.com) or
Speakers Platform (at www.speaking.com), whose featured product the day of my perusal was Al Franken. But as much fun as it is to browse the inventory of these speaker stables, the budget for most library events will preclude hiring the celebrity speakers on finds through these Web sites. Dream, sigh, and then return to the task at hand.

**Write the Speaker Candidate, Then Call**

With contact information in hand, it is good practice to first write a conventional mail letter or e-mail to the speaker candidate inquiring into availability and willingness to take part in the given event and requesting a follow-up phone conversation. Of course, if the speaker was suggested by a close friend or relative of the speaker, it may be advantageous for that person to make the initial inquiry. One must be careful, however, that the friend or relative of the speaker, in his or her zeal for a favorable outcome, does not go beyond inquiring into the speaker’s interest and availability and make a premature offer. To avoid double billing or embarrassing misunderstandings, offers and arrangements should be handled by an officially designated contact.

If a candidate agrees to speak, it is important to clarify as soon as possible all the basic matters related to the event. These include the amount of the honorarium to be paid, travel expenses to be covered, the itinerary of the event, and any related social events, such as book signings or meetings with small groups of library supporters. It is good practice to get a commitment in writing, if possible, and to make payment after completion of the event.

**Conclusion**

I’ve discovered that though the prospect of searching for a public speaker may feel daunting at first, the process soon becomes manageable with a good plan, team work, and appropriate financial support. It can also be an interesting and rewarding project outside the usual library routine. The library event may not end up with a Dave Barry or Anne Rice but it should, nevertheless, be an enriching and memorable event for the library community.

**Note**

1. Some of the more useful recent articles on the subject of bringing public speakers to the library include: Beth Dempsey, “Literary Festivals, Library Style,” *Library Journal* 130, no. 3 (Feb. 15, 2005); Alison Follos, “Making an Author’s Visit Your Best ‘Good Time,’” *Teacher Librarian* 31, no. 5 (June 2004); Wilda Williams, “Booking Authors: Advice from the Pros,” *Library Journal* 128, no. 3 (Feb. 15, 2004); and the article, “When Authors Pay a Visit,” in *The School Librarian’s Workshop* 24, no. 6 (Feb. 2004).