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One Speaker at a Time

Building an Award-Winning Speakers Forum From the Ground Up

—by Sally Richards

Ronald Reagan, Cary Grant, Margaret Thatcher, Colin Powell, Benjamin Netanyahu, Sidney Poitier, Joe Montana and Queen Noor of Jordan may not have much of anything in common – anything obvious, that is. But they are all celebrities. Dr. Richard “Dick” Henning has invited to appear in his Foothill College Celebrity Forum speakers series.

Henning wins friends, influences people and holds tight to the reins of the program he founded in 1968 on the Foothill College campus, Los Altos Hills, California. Henning, then Director of Student Activities, had a challenge when students coming back from Vietnam and other liberal-types decided they didn’t want the community college lumping in the cost of student body cards into enrollment fees. His job was to convince that very same student body that the card was worth well in excess of the \$20 they were paying. When he was finishing formulating the perfect solution, the school was offering two new programs: a concert series and a speaker’s series.

The concert series included such greats as Big Brother & the Holding Company with Janis Joplin (four weeks before she died), The 5th Dimension, B. B. King, Taj Mahal, Joan Baez, The Doubie Brothers and the Grateful Dead which drew capacity student crowds.

The first speakers series, which featured Louis Leakey, Dick Gregory, Indira Gandhi, Pearl S. Buck and Alistair Cooke, also drew a capacity crowd of 1,500 but only about 50 students attended. The highly-educated, affluent and inquisitive residents around the campus, which is three miles from Stanford University, were happy to pay the \$2 entrance fee, and since each speaker’s fee was a flat \$600, the program was an immediate financial success.

Soon the single speakers’ series turned into two and the concert series was phased out. In the fall of 2004, a third series will be added at the Flint Center for the Performing Arts on the De Anza College campus. The 2,500-seat auditorium sells out quickly and Henning has a three-year wait-list. As well as the honoraria between \$35,000 and \$100,000, Henning also pays 1st class airfare, provides a limo and offers a suite at the Fairmont Hotel on Nob Hill in San Francisco.

The Celebrity Forum, now in its 36th year, is a highly-prized speaking engagement—every former president since Nixon (he wouldn’t take an honorarium, or questions) has spoken to Henning’s audience, and the list of the 250+ speaker alumni reads like *Who’s Who* of the 20th and 21st centuries. The success of the series is partially due to the demographics of the audience—97 percent have college education, 32 percent have studied beyond their masters’ degree. What most in the audience have in common is that they have been subscribing to the season tickets for years and have grown accustomed to the high-quality programming with such speakers as Larry King, Mario Cuomo, Bill Moyers, Dick Cheney, George Bush, Carl Reiner, Madeleine Albright, Jane Goodall, Maya Angelou, Rudy Giuliani, Tom Friedman, Garrison Keillor, Jane Pauley, David McCullough, Ken Burns, Gregory Peck, Lauren Bacall, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto, John Major and Helmut Schmitt.

With an annual budget of over \$2 million for the three series, Henning can go “shopping” internationally for stars. He says things were easier a few years ago, before celebrity fees increased exponentially. Back then, speakers only wanted sold-out, highly educated audiences, which he provided. But today, he says, “Big-name speakers want both...big money and the full audience; their egos are involved.” He recalls the day former Communist leader Mikhail Gorbachev came to speak. “You should have seen the way he pocketed that check; he’s now a bigger capitalist than Milton Friedman,” Henning laughs.

Besides money, what is it about Henning that

makes him so accomplished at attracting big name celebrities? Characteristically, Henning eschews credit, attributing his success to the educated and affluent local people, the high quality of the venue, and the dynamism of Silicon Valley. Yet many speak highly of Henning's attention to detail, his humble charm and his sense of humor.

Friend and mentor Dr. Adrian Stanga says, "Dick is meticulous in his preparation. He's his own man, and loves to be in charge. I've learned not to offer him advice. Who is going to argue with his incredible success?"

Henning's achievements are all the more surprising when you consider his humble beginning, growing up in the small, dusty Southern California oil town of Taft. He is almost overly modest of his achievements. "All I have to do is put a glass of water on the rostrum and pay the big bucks," he says.

But it takes a skilled taskmaster to weed through the stacks of potential speakers who can please his fickle audience. As well as finding the high-profile celebrities, Henning occasionally hunts down and bags the rare speaker such as Beck Weathers, the mountaineer who lost his nose and hand in an accident on Everest, whose tale of bravery and intrigue captivated the audience.

Henning acknowledges that he needs enormous tenacity to do his job. Sometimes he simply doesn't take no for an answer, going so far as to work with nervous celebrities to develop a less threatening format, or an approach to speaking in front of a crowd that will seem less like public speech and more like public chat. Dr. Bernadine Fong, President of Foothill College, says, "Dick has an inordinate capacity for persuading individuals who balk at speaking in front of a group to do so." He pursued Cary Grant for over nine years. Finally, one day, Henning received a telephone call from Cary Grant answering his many letters. He said he appreciated being invited, but the answer was "No." Grant said he would be too nervous to give a speech; Henning, not wanting to miss out in having one of the most famous legends of the film-industry debut on his stage, suggested a

Q&A format preceded by film clips of his famous movies. It was not for another year that Grant consented to appear; Henning believes Grant finally consented to show his young wife Barbara and daughter Jennifer, both of whom he loved dearly, that he could, at 78 years of age, command the adulation of thousands of people.

He answered questions for two hours, one of the Forum's longest and most outstanding programs. When a member of the audience asked him why he finally agreed to appear on the stage again, he answered, "To build my confidence."

Not only was Grant charming and extremely handsome, he exhibited an acute understanding of modern business practices and of world-affairs. He was the epitome of sophistication. Henning had him back when he was 80, and Grant went on to do 34 more of these programs before his death while rehearsing in Davenport, Iowa. He loved doing it. Henning says, "We became good friends, traveled together, talked often on the telephone and kept in constant contact. Cary Grant became my best sales agent; he contacted friends, such as Lucile Ball, Carl Reiner and Gregory Peck, and convinced them to appear in the series."

When a member of the audience wrote to Henning objecting to his scheduling former President Bill Clinton, he shrugged, "We may lose a couple of subscribers over this, but my feeling is that anyone who will take questions is welcome to speak. Clinton is going to impress a lot of people who think they are unimpressionable. The exchange of opinions is what is important. The Celebrity Forum is a market-place for the exchange of ideas, and those ideas are not always to everyone's liking."

All speakers must answer questions from the audience for 30 minutes. Henning feels this not only gives the audience an opportunity to challenge the speakers remarks, it also provides immediate feed-back to the speaker as to whether he got his points across or left out valuable material he should have included.

So who makes it onto Henning's list and why? Henning jokes that his definition of a celebrity

is “anyone who can sell tickets to the Forum.” He describes his job as alike making a mosaic, assembling a cross-section of people from politics, the arts and public life. Most importantly, he needs big names to sell those 7,500 tickets. “My ego is so tied up in this; I feel an enormous pressure to have an excellent lineup each year.” Does mingling with Queens, Prime ministers, Nobel Peace Prize winners and former US Presidents sometimes make Henning want to pinch himself? “Sure,” he says, “all the time. I keep telling myself, ‘I’m from Taft.’”

Every program has not been a success. “In some cases I wished I had done better homework. Several actors whom I was sure would give a polished performance did not. In fact, over the years, we have received more negative comments about movie stars than any other profession. I assume that is because they are use to being able to stop anytime and do retakes; several of them walked out to the rostrum, made a humorous opening remark and then read directly from their notes. There is nothing more offensive to an audience than reading to them, unless it is a famous author interpreting his own work.”

Because of the reputation the series enjoys and the ability to pay the large honoraria, Henning can be selective, but it is sometimes difficult for him to find out whether a person with a big reputation is any good as a public speaker. Recently, modern technology has been a help with previews on the Web, CD’s and videos which allow Henning to preview a potential guest. Henning says one important thing he has learned about celebrities is that they all have the same foibles as us. He says, “Our society tends to hero-worship entertainers, actors, politicians, writers, Nobel Prize winners without really knowing them; it is normal; it’s human nature, but in doing so, we demean ourselves.” Although he admits to some apprehension when first meeting a celebrity, he doesn’t have to guard against hero worship. “Every time I meet a celebrity, the notion gets reinforced that famous people are just like most of my friends...it’s just that their timing and luck were better,” he says.

White-haired and smartly dressed, Henning has

the calm composure of a diplomat, the quick intellect of a professor and a penchant for humor like that of his regular satirist guest, Mark Russell. He is refined and could easily be mistaken for an ambassador or CEO.

He personally introduces all of his speakers; he has not missed introducing one in the 36 years. He prepares a well-rehearsed introduction, usually with a bit of humor and gives the speaker a grand entrance, and then leaves to take his place in the audience. It’s in those first few minutes that Henning is most nervous not knowing what to expect, but hoping for the best.

“I’m a little tense during the speaker’s first 10 to 20 minutes. Years ago, I evaluated teachers, and I could go into the classrooms and within a very short time, I learned to assess the effectiveness of the teacher. It’s the same way with the speakers on the Celebrity Forum stage. Within 10 to 20 minutes, you know whether you have a success or failure. A success is short-lived, but my friends in the audience rarely let me forget a miserable experience, of which I have had very few.”

Because of another series he set up 15 years ago in San Mateo for Bruce Vogel, Henning often is able to hear a speaker before the appearance in the Celebrity Forum. Several times, Henning has made suggestions, usually small things having to do with the proper use of the microphone, speaking with more enthusiasm, shortening answers to questions, but sometimes, the speech needs to be over-hauled. Two, un-named but well-known celebrities, relied on Henning to re-write their speeches completely for which they were extremely grateful. He says he regrets not taking 10% of their fee.

“I always have apprehension when first meeting a celebrity and then elation when the speech goes well, which it almost always does. These emotions never wear off no matter how long I have been doing this. The standing ovation is a reward for both the speaker and me...the audience loved the speaker and that validates my selection. If the talk does not go well, I don’t feel well for three or four days.”

When asked what makes a successful speaker, Henning has a variety of answers. “Margaret Thatcher, whom we’ve had three times, uses no notes. She goes around the world where there continue to be ‘hot spots’ and tells the audience what she would do to solve the current conflict. Immediately, she has the attention of the audience, and her material is not only compelling and fresh, it is unique...it is Margaret Thatcher!”

“The talk doesn’t have to be given in the present. Doris Kearns Goodwin, Ken Burns and David McCullough are three of the most engaging speakers, and they talk about U.S. History; while they may talk about events we already know, they add their own flavor, details, descriptions, and humor. Every member of the audience leaving the theater feels smarter than when he or she came in.

Henning, a former Professor of Speech, says, “Successful speakers use variety in their talks: anecdotes, short stories, humorous references, quotes of famous people, philosophical viewpoints, emotional appeals, patriotic conclusions, etc. The audience wants to be informed, but they also want to be kept interested, entertained and, at the minimum, kept awake. Because of the internet, using canned jokes is dangerous and can be a disaster if the people in the audience have just heard it. Some jokes stick around forever, but the speaker is always taking a risk if he uses humor just to get a laugh. The joke must tie into the talk and should be structured so if there is no laughter, the speaker is able to blend it into the theme of what he is saying.

One advice Henning use to give his students was to write the conclusion first. He recalls the evening Harry Belafonte’s lecture dragged on and on. Henning laughs as he describes the evening. “He just couldn’t stop; he did not have a conclusion of any sort...he missed several good opportunities to sit down; people started to walk out, but he was oblivious to them. The next morning, I received a handwritten fax: It read, “Day light come an’ I wanna go home.”

“The first thing they teach in a speaking class is to know your audience,” Henning empha-

sizes. “While I rarely dictate the topic to a professional speaker, I do the best job I can in describing the demographics of my audience. It is comprised of middle-aged to older men and woman who are highly-educated, well-read, inquisitive and astute. When I told this to Henry Kissinger, he said, ‘What are you trying to do intimidate me?’ ”

Henning continues, “Telling the speaker the exact timing of the program is essential. I tell the celebrity that the total program including my introduction is an hour and a half, and he/she will speak between 45 minutes and an hour and take questions for the remaining time. I always adhere exactly to this established schedule. It would be unfair to ask a speaker to shorten his remarks in order to accommodate a problem that arose. Most speakers work very hard at tailoring their remarks to the time-schedule. If the speaker is suddenly asked to shorten his remarks by even five or ten minutes, or if he is informed that the Q&A period will be cancelled, this not only places a difficult burden on the speaker to mentally rearrange his presentation, but, even more importantly, it detracts from the quality of the presentation. Without fail, I begin every program exactly on time; the members of the audience have learned to be in their seats before time.”

Henning, who had a triple major of English, speech and drama was a honed speaker by the time he left high school, but he realizes that many young people these days don’t get the chance to build their speaking abilities. He says, “One of the first things eliminated in the school system —along with art and music — was public speaking. This makes Toastmasters, Dale Carnegie and similar organizations that much more important in today’s society. It provides an opportunity not widely available in public schools to develop public speaking skills in a friendly, supportive, caring atmosphere for very little time and money. One’s ability to speak well in public is vitally important to success. I am a perfect example of that. I would not have been hired by the 20 person committee at Foothill College in 1966 had it not been for my numerous speaking appearances in the community at local clubs and organizations.

“Public speaking is something you do all of your life. At one time or another, we will all be called upon to make a toast at a wedding, give an eulogy, thank colleagues at a retirement, describe your life in 5 minutes at a high school reunion, or introduce the speaker at Rotary. To be able to speak with eloquence and style leaves an incredible impression; it makes you appear to be more intelligent than you are!

“Speaking well in public is one of life’s most important skills. Toastmasters International is offering an invaluable service by giving people the opportunity to develop and increase their public speaking abilities. The way we speak in public is a snap-shot that reflects our personality; we want that image to be sharply-focused.”