

How to Make the Most of Your First Speaking Gig as an Alumnus



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There is nothing more valuable than connecting with people as a first-time speaker as an alumnus at your university or college. By virtue of being invited to speak, you are clearly an example of the success cherished by your alma mater.

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You know your audience better than most because you have been a member of that audience not too long ago. What you say to them matters a lot because most of these students are likely to see themselves in you, the career path you chose, and how you dealt with the challenges and successes in your professional life. [Speaking as an alumnus](#) also gives you an opportunity for sowing new relationships with current and future alumni.

Here are 6 tips for making the most of your speaking opportunity:

1. Recognize you are an authority in more ways than one

Once you take the stage, realize that you are the authority on your topic. Smile and be confident. Your college brought you back to speak because they saw that *something special* in you, and they are looking for knowledge and inspiration. The audience wants to hear the reality of any struggles you faced and the actions that they can take away and immediately implement. By sharing your post-graduate real-world experiences, you'll give students a relatable, authoritative view of life after university.

2. Leave time to answer questions

You have reviewed and practiced your speech, and unless it's a keynote at a graduation ceremony, there will be [questions from your audience](#). Think back to how you felt sitting in those seats and what you wish you had known to prepare yourself for life after graduation. The future graduates may want to learn what you did to become successful in the eyes of the alma mater to come back to speak to them. The students may ask about what you did, what you did not do, and what you wish you had done to get your first job. Allotting enough time for questions allows you to get to know new people without the pressure of seeking them out. Structuring your presentation well also sends a positive note to the organizers and attendees that you respect their time, which may get you asked back at a later date.

3. Cultivate new contacts

In addition to the alumni you know in the audience, there are always [new people you will meet](#). These students will quickly become professionals, so be prepared for them to request your business card. Do not pass your cards out at random. If anything, bring more cards than you usually carry, but give them to those who ask for one or when they ask for your contact information. Even if you are speaking on a topic unrelated to your company, bring your cards since it builds your credibility. While the students may not use them right away, they may reach out to you when they need your advice or help.

4. Bring information about your company to the event

This is an excellent opportunity to share your company's information with the audience after you speak. Most companies have referral bonuses for new hires. When I hired people at my last company, internal referrals were significant because they came from a known source. When I received a personal recommendation of a candidate for a position, it resulted in a referral bonus for the person making the recommendation upon hiring while I would get qualified candidates who were more than just a resume. It was a win-win for all of us.


5. Follow up after the event with the college

Once your speaking engagement is over, thank the organizers and the volunteers with a handwritten thank-you note for asking you to participate in such a significant event. Follow up with the new connections with a personalized LinkedIn request. Continue to keep in touch with alumni friends in your network. Keep in touch with your university—you never know when you might be asked back for another speaking event or any other opportunities.

6. Finally, follow up with your manager at work

Once you return to work, provide an overview of the event to your manager. It may play well into your performance evaluation to speak as an alumnus and as a professional. By positively representing your company, even if you did not talk about something your company does or had done, reflects well on your company in a way that marketing or advertising dollars cannot.

Speaking engagements are great opportunities for personal and professional growth. When you speak as an alumnus, you are not only a speaker or an alumnus, but also a reflection of the college. Enjoy your time and remember to connect both professionally and personally with your audience. This speaking engagement can open doors for you well past speaking as an alumnus.

 *Have questions or feedback for us? Write to us at hbrascend@hbr.org*

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