

THE business environment has changed significantly over the past six months, a fact Susan Thornber has noted in the content of speeches delivered by her high-profile speakers. The marked slow down in the economy, combined with the less vigorous property market has, at least for a while, changed the tone of most speeches.

"Organisations are now requesting serious motivational speakers for in-house events," she says. "Popular keywords used by event organisers include 'innovation', 'motivation', 'teamwork' and 'energy'. Speakers with a combined business and motivational background are highly sought after and their remit is usually to inspire delegates to become more innovative in the workplace."

Companies no longer want a standard, 30-minute motivational presentation, but are looking, instead, for a speaker personally experienced in challenging economic conditions, she says. "They are looking for business people who have a good understanding of changed markets." Thornber cites Formula 1 professional, Richard West, among her most popular speakers, at the moment — a motivator who draws parallels between the exciting world of F1 racing and business.

"It's the sport and business lesson that works, and how the two interact," she says. "Employees in companies can relate to that, plus it has proven effective at getting them to think outside their own routines. Companies want speakers who can inspire, speakers who can deliver a message of innovation, and seeing new opportunities in a different way, both inside and outside the company."

Justin Hughes, another popular speaker, is a former team leader of the Royal Air Force red arrow acrobatic team, who advises corporations how to get ahead through teamwork, leadership, and achieving targets under pressure. "Corporations are booking these speakers to re-invigorate their workforce and to encourage innovation at every level," Thornber says.

"In short, speakers who provide real substance, who can help audiences perform better in their work and personal lives, or better understand the world in which they operate, have seen an increase in speaking opportunities."

The interaction between business and sport has become even more pronounced in the modern corporate context, she says: "it seems increasingly a two-way street, where you have sports people taking lessons from the business world and putting them to work in the sporting arena, and vice versa."

"In the past, famous sports people brought a 'wow' factor simply by showing up, but, nowadays, companies want more and are determined to get added benefit from their spend on these events. They want impact and for their employees to take something tangible away from the day."

While a downturn in business may

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Occupation:

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Background:

Speaker Solutions was established in 2007 to provide client access to the world's leading speakers. She is a former CEO of the Institute of Directors.

force companies to trim bottom-line benefits in many parts of the corporate house, Thornber says the value of good speakers has become established, regardless of the economic climate. "Companies are still very much inclined to bring outside expertise and experience, but are now very definite on the kind of speaker they want, and how that fits into the structure. They certainly want to get their money's worth," she says.

According to Thornber, Irish entrepreneurs and CEOs are also extremely popular on the circuit. Large client events and business conferences have a big interest in the new breed of business celebrities emerging from TV programmes, such as *Dragon's Den* and *The Apprentice*.

Individuals, such as Peter Jones, Rachel Elnaugh and Gerry Robinson, are all popular, with Ben Dunne and Brody Sweeney also in high demand, both at home and abroad. "While the speakers' market in the US and the UK is long-established, it is still a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland. Irish business leaders have been quite shy about speaking in the past, and there was no formalised structure in place to go about hiring them. That situation was effectively what inspired me to set up the company."

It was during her time at the Institute of Directors that Thornber saw a niche for a professional speaker bureau in Ireland, providing event planners

with an efficient link to the world's speakers. "I saw the need for an organised resource that could put the expert speaker in touch with the client. On the speaker's side, there is a wealth of talent in Ireland in the areas of entrepreneurship and leadership, but, the concept is not yet firmly established, there are not as many of the leaders involved as we would like."

Speakers booked by Thornber, at the moment, include Frankie Dettori, Alan Whicker, Des Lynam, Gordon Ramsay, Ranulph Fiennes, Mary Robinson, Murray Walker, Duncan Stewart, James Charlton, Michéal O'Muircheartaigh, Debra Searle, Larry Hochman and Paul Falvey. Favoured after-dinner speakers hail from the world of sport, business and politics.

Sporting speakers are a big draw in 2008, and, with the Beijing Olympics fast approaching, former Olympians and sports stars are in big demand for corporate events. On the cost scale, a speaker can run from "€2,000 to 'how high do you want'," she says.

"Some of the really big international speakers will run to €75,000 with travel expenses, hotels and first-class travel arrangements as extras. For the better known Irish speakers, it can run from €5,000 to €10,000, on average — but depends hugely on what kind of personality the company wants."

Speakers need to be topical and recognisable, with a broad appeal, she says, especially at conferences of 200 people or more. "Being in the news certainly helps, and, given the increasing number of reality television shows like *Dragon's Den* and *The Apprentice*, the profile of those business people has grown enormously, to the point where they are almost celebrities."

While good diction, amusing anecdotes, and persuasive delivery are vital components in the speaker's arsenal, they also need well-developed people skills for the meet-and-greet moments that follow their presentation.

"Usually, the speaker will attend the dinner at which they are speaking," says Thornber. "Networking is a big part of the process and goes hand in hand with speaking. Most speakers realise they will be expected to meet a certain amount of special guests at the conference or event, and are usually very comfortable doing that."

While many companies approach Thornber with a definite speaker in mind, she does concede that finding the best fit between profile and organisation remains a large part of her work.

"About 80% of the work that I do is providing companies with options they might not have considered. That's very much where the expertise comes in, at the corporate end, you really need to understand the audience and what they need to get from the speaker. Advising event organisers and companies to best find what will suit their needs is where this business really begins and ends — the speaker needs to be tailor-made to the audience."