



THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

The Venerable Venues Keep Up with the Times: A Benchmarking Report

Smoke-filled rooms no longer, modern American city clubs have changed their focus even over the last five years. Here's a speechwriter's guide.

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In the age of Twitter and 24-hour news, Davos and TED Talks, city clubs like the Detroit Economic Club, the City Club of Cleveland, Town Hall of Los Angeles and the Commonwealth Club of California definitely have the whiff of pipe tobacco.

But if you think you know all about them, then it's you who's behind the times, and you who will struggle to place your client as a speaker or a panelist.

For instance, did you know the following about the most influential American leadership forums?

- Some are raising their ticket prices, some are lowering them, some are keeping them the same—but all are enjoying higher attendance to more annual events.
- Technology is changing the way they do things that some of these clubs have been doing for more than 100 years, but their essential role in civic life remains unchanged.
- After years of listening to their members cry out for more local programming, they're nevertheless finding new ways to put influential butts in seats for speeches on national and international topics—and looking farther and wider to recruit speakers who can address those issues.

If you don't know those things, it seems to us that, as an executive communication professional whose speaker would love to appear in one of these venerable venues—you should.

We obtained a benchmarking study conducted five years ago by several prominent U.S. city clubs: the Commonwealth Club of California, Town Hall of Los Angeles, the Detroit Economic Club and the City Club of Cleveland.

We asked the heads of those four clubs to update the information in the original study, to reflect changes happening over the last few years—providing you with a snapshot of what's happening in some of the most established speaking forums on the world.

THE PRICING VARIES, BUT ATTENDANCE IS UP ACROSS THE BOARD

Founded in 1903, the Commonwealth Club is the oldest of these four forums (the youngest being Town Hall of Los Angeles, born in 1937).

The Commonwealth Club is also by far the most prolific, holding 400-500 meetings per year. (The next busiest club is Cleveland City Club at over 120.)

The Commonwealth Club also packs 'em into meetings that sometimes exceed 3,000 attendees.

The Commonwealth Club's attendance is the highest partly because its per-event ticket prices are the lowest, ranging "from free and \$8 – \$50 for members; from \$12 to \$60 for non-members," president Gloria Duffy reports.



The City Club of Cleveland raised its prices incrementally (usually \$20 for members, \$35 for non-members), but they also do a number of free events, and they've seen their attendance steadily grow. CEO Dan Moulthrop reports that typical forums average 150 attendees, but every year, they do three to five events with 800 or more in the audience. Meanwhile, Town Hall of Los Angeles raised ticket prices, to \$55 for members and \$75 for non-members, and their attendance is up too, from an average of about 150 to something above that, with crowds of as many as 250 flocking to some meetings.



THE CITY CLUB OF CLEVELAND

And Detroit Economic Club meetings mostly maxed out at about 300 five years ago, but routinely draw from 300 – 700 now, with the occasional star speaker drawing more than 1,000.

All the city clubs buttress their ticket fees by various and increasingly numerous combinations of membership fees, sponsorships and program underwriting, grants, fundraisers and facility and AV rentals.

TECHNOLOGY LETS FORUMS REACH PUBLICS FAR BEYOND THEIR MAHOGANY WALLS

Town Hall of Los Angeles and the City Club of Cleveland stream meetings via YouTube to libraries and other locations where interested citizens can watch the proceedings. They also occasionally use technology to bring in remote panelists to appear at meetings.

These groups also have partnerships with local TV stations, and the City Club of Cleveland is even doing podcast event called, "Happy Dog Takes on the World," which features simultaneously serious and fun world affairs conversations recorded before a live audience in a local bar.

Of course, it's not just technology that makes forums more inclusive—it's an

inclusive spirit. At the invitation of the Detroit Economic Club, between 80 and 100 high school or college students attend each meeting, says president and CEO Beth Chappell.

HOW ON EARTH ARE THESE ANCIENT INSTITUTIONS GETTING MORE RELEVANT WITH AGE?

As they always have, these city clubs balance very carefully the number of programs they do that appeal to parochial and civic-obsessed members, with the ones that excite public intellectual types.

The Detroit Economic Club's target market is "business people in Southeast Michigan," says Chappell. Some of these people are interested specifically in "industries and political issues here in Southeast Michigan," but others will sit for speeches on broader issues that concern that concern the region.



As these city clubs are expanding the scope of their subject matter, they're also changing their mission to be more communal than purely educational. Town Hall of Los Angeles officially changed its mission from "to expose the community to new points of view through a vigorous exchange of ideas," to "promote civic participation through public discussion of issues of regional, national and international significance." A subtle change, but surely amplified by City Club of Cleveland CEO Dan Moulthrop, who has added this to his group's value proposition, "Knowing you're a part of something bigger than yourself, part of a tradition of civil civic dialogue in service to democracy in Cleveland and Ohio for over 100 years and being part of a community of like-minded people who value free speech and spirited engagement."



But community isn't the only promise these clubs hold out, nor is it all their members value.

"Be in the Know," is the tagline at the Commonwealth Club, where the focus is helping members get an early jump on trends, ideas and technologies "before they are well-known."

These forums are always straining to be as topical as they possibly can. Town Hall of Los Angeles President Kim McCleary said people show up for “compelling current events and timely issues.”

HOW TO HELP THESE CITY CLUB DIRECTORS HELP YOU HELP THEM

What are city clubs looking for from potential speakers and their speechwriters?

Cleveland City Club’s Dan Moulthrop asks himself these questions about every speaker or panel proposal he gets: “Does this advance a conversation the community is having? If not, does it help to launch a conversation the community needs to have? And is there a constituency for this conversation? (In other words, will people show up?)”

Answer those questions for a member of a major American city club, and you’ve answered some questions for your speaker and yourself. Get your speaker in front of one of these clubs, and you’ve associated him or her with prestige and modernity both.