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ENTREPRENEUR



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Jodi Solomon earns a 10 percent to 35 percent commission on bookings when she matches her clients, public speakers who tout mostly liberal philosophies, with colleges and forums.

Speaking her mind

Solomon finds wisdom in booking celebs

BY JULIE CARRICK DALTON
JOURNAL STAFF

Jodi Solomon never had a mentor, and she doesn't consider herself much of a public speaker.

Maybe that's why she surrounds herself with inspirational people who like to talk to crowds.

"Nothing is more inspiring than hearing someone I admire talk about how they've overcome obstacles," said Solomon, owner of the Jodi F. Solomon Speaker's Bureau.

The company acts as the booking agent for speakers, and represents organizations such as colleges, companies and meeting planners seeking public speakers.

She has booked Spike Lee at Rutgers University, the late Allen Ginsberg at Kent State and the high-profile list goes on.

Solomon, 39, prides herself in being selective about who she represents. All of her clients must convey liberal ideas she personally believes in.

Her client list includes Coretta Scott King; Patricia Ireland, president of the National Organization for Women (NOW); Attallah Shabazz, daughter of Malcolm X; and the

"What these people say is a direct reflection of who I am. I have to believe in their message," she said.

She started her company seven years ago with a handful of clients she met while working for another now-defunct speakers bureau. One of her first clients was Lee.

Today, Solomon brings in more than \$1 million annually in revenue, although she declined to reveal specific figures. She earns a commission of between 10 and 35 percent for every placement she secures. Depending on the client and the type of engagement, her speakers earn between \$1,500 and \$45,000 per appearance. She has more than 1,000 clients.

The list has since grown to include Pulitzer-winning journalists, politicians, actors, activist and news makers.

"I've met so many remarkable people who really inspire me," she said.

But working with high-profile personalities often can be exasperating, she admits, noting that she has several "high maintenance" clients.

Working with controversial figures keeps the job interesting.

"He couldn't make it because he was in jail. He got picked up on charges dating back to 1994," she said.

Working with Sea Shepherd, Watson polices international waters looking for illegal fishing or whaling boats. When he finds them, he disables them, hence the charges.

It's clients like Watson that give Solomon the most satisfaction.

"I get to help focus and open the minds of people by introducing them to current issues," she said.

Solomon said she and her staff of seven make all decisions together. "My staff has similar political beliefs, so I don't make any decisions alone. I want this to be a place where people love to come to work and feel good about what they are doing," she said.

Bill Fargo, who joined Solomon when she first started the business, agreed that the staff is aligned with Solomon philosophically, but stays with her because of the way she runs the company.

"She lets everyone work independently and treats them with a great deal of respect," he said. "She doesn't fawn over her clients. She talks straight to them and I think that's why they stay with her."

Her straight talk has kept clients such as Lee from being wooed away to other agents. Rebecca Strippling, Lee's assistant, said he trusts Solomon to make the sacrifices necessary to get him the right jobs.

"She's familiar with what her clients' needs are. She doesn't put square pegs in round holes," Strippling said. Last year, Solomon booked Lee, for 15-20 speeches.

Fargo said joining Solomon's start-up company was risky, but he had enough confidence in her to leave his previous job at the

University of Bridgeport.

"It was a leap of faith. Little lecture bureaus pop up like mushrooms, and just as quickly disappear," Fargo said.

Solomon said her staff is part of the reason she is able to compete with large international firms.

"One thing about this business is there are no rules. The industry is subject to swings, but so far we've done well. Over the past couple of years we've seen a 20 percent increase every year," she said.

After years of coaching people on public speaking, Solomon recently made her first public appearance.

Speaking before the National Women's Summit sponsored by the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, Solomon talked about what it is like being a woman entrepreneur and business owner. "There are so many things no one told me, like how difficult it would be, that for the first few years, that I wouldn't do anything but think about my business."

"A lot of my success came from learning from myself, finding my inner voice and self confidence," she said. "I wish I'd had a mentor to help me."

Now she wants to help other women find that confidence, volunteering her time with entrepreneurial groups.

"If I can make the path a little easier for someone else, that would be great," she said.

"One of my challenges has been balancing my work and my life," she said. Unlike during her first few years in business, Solomon now leaves the office at 4:30 p.m. every day to study Kung Fu and Tai Chi.

"I give them (martial arts) both a lot of attention. It helps me focus and find a balance," she said. "I'm also a motorcycle enthusiast, and I make time for that, too."