
Speaker Emergencies: When the Show Can't Go On

by Thomas MacEntee

As a genealogy and family history speaker, imagine yourself experiencing one or more of these scenarios:

- A genealogical society has signed a contract with you to deliver a Saturday workshop of four lectures in a city over 1,000 miles from your home. You arrive on a Friday afternoon as scheduled, but overnight you become sick—too sick to even deliver those lectures.
- The day before a local lecture, you have had a death in your family and you need to cancel your appearance.
- A few days before you are scheduled to deliver a talk to a group, you have broken your leg and cannot travel.

It is likely that over the course of your genealogy-speaking career, at least once you will have to cancel an appearance at the last minute. While there are some emergencies in life that are unavoidable, there are various ways you can turn a “no show” situation into a “win-win” situation for everyone involved.

My Recent Cancellation Situation

In early April, I traveled four hours by train to a speaking engagement for a local genealogy society. They were holding their annual spring seminar and I was their only speaker. I had agreed to present five lectures with the first one on a Friday evening at the local library, and the other four at a newly renovated theater in the city's downtown area.

While the Friday evening lecture went well with an engaged audience looking forward to more presentations the following day, I had a medical emergency in my hotel room at 5:30 a.m. on Saturday. An ambulance arrived and I was in the local hospital emergency room until 10:00 a.m. . . .

with my first talk scheduled for 9:00 a.m. I did not deliver those four lectures, but the event sponsor was able to “go on with the show.”

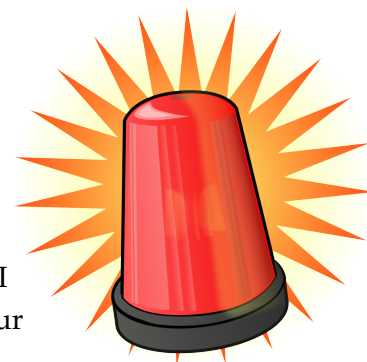
The event planner knew that there would be several key attendees at the event from different genealogical and historical societies, most of whom were capable of making a presentation. She pulled together a team of four speakers who covered different topics of interest to the audience. Most, if not all, of the speakers had their materials located in a cloud program such as Dropbox or had their laptops with them. It was a matter of downloading the lecture files and making copies of handouts for the audience.

By the end of the day, I was on my way to getting better, the sponsor pulled off a great event, and the attendees were happy. A win-win-win situation.

Cancellation Provisions

Make sure that you have discussed cancellation provisions with the event sponsor, either via e-mail or, better yet, by implementing a Cancellation Clause in your speaking agreement. Although these agreements have become more commonplace in the genealogy speaking industry over the past few years, when a society balks at using one, I always tell them this: “This agreement protects you and your group as much as it does me. It outlines what to do in case the event is cancelled . . .”

A good cancellation clause should outline various situations that could occur such as the event space being damaged due to fire or flood, the society cancelling the event due to lack of attendance, the speaker cancelling due to a death in the family, etc.



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Speaker Emergencies

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In the clause, discuss repayment of fees, how to handle deposits and refunds, and how to secure a replacement speaker. Here is an example:

Cancellation Clause. This Speaking Agreement may be canceled only if:

- a) a natural or public disaster should render the Event Site inaccessible so as to force cancellation of the Event;
- b) Society deems there will be insufficient attendance at least thirty (30) business days prior to Event Dates;
- c) serious illness should incapacitate Speaker or a death in Speaker's family should occur.

Should Society elect to cancel the event or wish to void this Speaking Agreement for any reason (other than natural or public disaster) fewer than thirty (30) business days prior to Event Dates, the Society will:

- a) reimburse the Speaker fifty percent (50%) of Speaking Fee as stated in this agreement as consideration for blocking event dates on Speaker's calendar; and
- b) Society will reimburse Speaker any advance sums Speaker may have expended for non-refundable transportation costs.

In the event that Speaker should be unable to fulfill the obligations set forth in this agreement:

- a) Speaker will return to Society the payment of any Speaking Fees made to Speaker by Society prior to the Event Dates;
- b) Speaker will assist Society in finding a comparable replacement speaker; and
- c) Speaker will not expect reimbursement from Society for any advance sums Speaker may have expended.

Medical and Emergency Information

When my recent medical emergency happened, I was prepared. While I was ill, I was still able to

communicate to emergency personnel my basic information, provide identification, locate my health insurance cards, and even unlock my cell phone in case they needed to contact family.

In some cases, you may not be able to communicate this information. Consider creating a small card with basic ICE (In Case of Emergency) information and make sure your event sponsor has the information as well. While a speaker never wants to tell a society, "In case I get sick . . ." it is better to be prepared than to have society board members scramble to contact your family and still get their event back on track.

Communicate – Early and Often

There are times when, as a speaker, we have advance notice of a possible cancellation. A family member could be ill or in hospice care. You could have a medical condition requiring surgery. Most speakers do not want to "spook" their event sponsor by even mentioning the possibility of a last minute cancellation. However, most event planners would rather know than not know and have a contingency plan in place.

Most sponsors will appreciate your honesty and openness, especially if you can help secure a "stand by" speaker for the event.

Colleagues, Board Members, and Webinars to the Rescue

If you do have to cancel a speaking engagement at the last minute, there are various ways you and the society can "save the day":

- For large conferences, it is likely a colleague will be in attendance who can either cover your scheduled topic OR, by working with the conference program staff, substitute their own lecture. Plan ahead, have a "speaking buddy"

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Speaker Emergencies

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lined up, and do not forget to also offer your own services in reciprocation.

- For smaller events, such as one-day seminars and workshops, work with the society to see if there are local speakers who can cover your talks or substitute their own.
- With some advance notice, and if the situation permits, consider delivering your lecture content virtually via webinar. This would be ideal if you had an injury such as a broken leg that prevented you from traveling.
- Reschedule if possible. For larger events, this does not always work, but for monthly genealogy society meetings, ask if you can present your lecture at a later date.

So what did I learn with my recent medical emergency while out of town and preparing to speak at an all-day seminar?

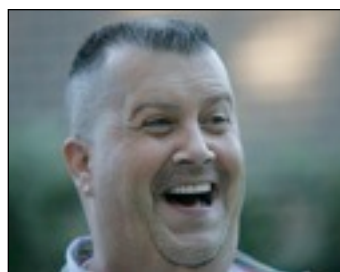
- The value of early communication. Although it was 6:00 a.m., I called my contact at the society so they had time to either cancel the event or secure last minute speakers for a different program.
- The value of having emergency information at hand. For future speaking engagements, I will provide basic emergency contact info to the event sponsor in case something happens.
- The value of a network of colleagues. While the location was a bit remote, I know that I could

have found several speakers within a 50-mile radius by using social media. Most of them would have substituted at the last minute, knowing I would do the same for them.

- The value of going the extra-mile to “make things right.” This was the first cancellation I have had in over five years of delivering more than 400 lectures. I not only refunded the deposit on my speaking fee, I also covered the expense of the hotel accommodations and the travel for that weekend.

One goal as a professional speaker is to keep your speaking commitments, while still realizing that emergencies of various types can and will occur. With some advance preparation and resourcefulness, you can assist the society or event sponsor in providing solid educational content at the last minute and create a worthwhile experience for the attendees.

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Thomas MacEntee is a genealogy professional specializing in the use of technology and social media to improve genealogical research and as a means of interacting with others in the family history

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