

# The Power of Niche Programming: Go Deep!

By Susan Young  
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**There is a cycle of specialization these days that is filtering its way into the college programming arena.** Consider that we have hundreds of television channels and shows at our fingertips and many overlap with similar topics and areas of interest. For example, if you are channel surfing, it's easy to find numerous home and remodeling shows, including dedicated channels and programs like HGTV, *This Old House*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Flip This House*, *Trading Spaces* and Bob Vila. There are other shows specializing in gardens, pools and spas, kitchens and bathrooms.

The college programming market is no different. We have moved away from the days of basic student orientations with dull overviews delivered by stuffy, out-of-touch adults whose remarks and oratory skills are equivalent to a sleeping pill. You may have noticed we have more than the nine channels we had in the early 1970s when I was enjoying TV shows like *Mannix*, *The Waltons* and *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert*.

Students and the public in general demand more depth these days and rightfully so. We live in a fiercely competitive, information-driven world that pulls us in many different directions. Our society requires that we either keep up or go by way of the rotary dial phone and eight track tapes. Students on campuses in Maine, Washington, Missouri, Florida, Texas and everywhere in between are demanding quality niche programming that has proven benefits, pragmatic approaches and interactive dialogues. Thankfully, the day of the sleeping pill and the out-of-touch speaker are fading. Painting the canvas of campus activities with broad strokes is history.

## Enter Niche Programming

The responsibility of students and staff who decide on programs and hire speakers and entertainers can be overwhelming because there is so much to choose from. How do you know which topic, area of interest or trend is best for your campus? How do you meet the needs of diverse student populations?

The best way to bring cutting-edge topics and speakers to your campus is to find what's missing. That may sound obvious or simplistic, but it's often quite difficult. It requires that you go deep. You can do this by thinking and communicating with a funnel-like approach that will force you to narrow down topics and ideas. Keep your focus narrow and deep, not broad and on the surface.

## Ask Quality Questions

Before I became a college speaker and trainer, I worked as a radio news reporter, on-air anchor and news director in the most competitive media market in the country: New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia. I got paid to ask questions and be "Life's Little Observer." Several professions require that you have the ability and talent to ask quality questions; to go deep. Reporters, sales professionals, lawyers, psychiatrists and teachers are obliged to ask quality questions in order to be successful. The ones who ask good questions are the ones who rise to the top of their fields and lead the pack. That's where you want to be.

The way to determine what students need and want during the semester lies in your ability to probe and be inquisitive and to discover what is missing. Evaluations are typical after an event or guest speaker, but you want to take it one step further with specific questions that can help you to provide quality programming every time you put together an event. You need to listen with your ear to the ground for the clues that people will drop from which you can learn. Applause and smiling faces may provide you with what appears to be the instant gratification of success, but in niche programming you will need details. The details lie in the communication.

## Understand that Communication Is Key

The key to our communication is our ability to connect with people. The secret to connecting with people lies in the quality of our questions. The better the question, the better the information that can be gleaned. If you don't get the response you are seeking, chances are your question was not a good one.

Communication is the single most important skill that can directly affect your success. The common trait that all outstanding leaders, students and staff alike share is that they are excellent communicators. It may be time for you to brush up on your communication skills, which in turn can help you to deliver first-rate speakers and entertainers.

One of the major, daily challenges we face is that we are entrenched in multimedia communications, information overload, images and lots of high-tech and low-tech gadgets that are running us in circles 24/7. It's often difficult to pay attention and focus on one thing at a time. You may find that multi-tasking is not all it's cracked up to be. There's simply too much stuff.

While communications tools are quite useful in today's competitive world, it's ironic that our human and interpersonal communication often requires our utmost and undivided attention. In order to learn what people are seeking, what has succeeded and what has flopped, you must have effective and powerful communication skills. You must learn to speak and listen to other people without the outside distractions and conflicting messages that tease for your attention. If you want to ask quality questions and go deep, your laser-like focus and attention are required.

You may be able to ask a question while sending a text message but the quality of it will probably be poor. That's because your mind is not fully on the conversation. The result is a disconnect between listening to the response and your ability to drive the conversation forward with effective follow-up questions and dialogue. Your failure to ask powerful questions, along with poor listening skills and missed opportunities when listening may mean that you missed important details. Often, the person who is looking for information has failed to ask the right questions, may be distracted and leaves the meeting without the residential life training, new music act or event on diversity they might have been trying to obtain.

People who ask quality questions are empowered. People who ask questions are psychologically in control of the conversation. They go deep. Campus activities planners and their teams can do the same.

Once you have asked your quality questions, the key is to completely pay attention to the responses. Many people are familiar with active listening skills, such as don't interrupt others, repeat key details to show you've been listening and understand, maintain eye contact and smile.

In this busy and competitive world, it's time to take our listening skills one step further.

## Enter the Realm of Silent Listening

Silent listening requires us to slow down and virtually stop that noisy unrelenting soundtrack that plays in our heads around the clock. Silent Listening requires our absolute undivided attention, free of distractions, judgments and the planning of our next response. It requires us to be in the moment.

Consider this: How many times have you asked someone a question that you were genuinely interested in and curious about and as soon as they began to respond, your mind was jumping around aimlessly with random thoughts? "I forgot

to send that e-mail to the SAB," "I have to pick up the dry cleaning," or "I forgot to get the posters printed for Saturday's concert." These mental interruptions often occur in less than 1.9 seconds. They pull you away from conversations that result in missing important details. These arbitrary thoughts can negatively impact relationships, as well. Many people can quickly sense when they are in a conversation alone.

In 2007, I decided not to make a New Year's Resolution. Instead, I made a promise and vow to myself that I have kept to this day. It is to "Be in the Moment." That means that wherever my feet are, my head is. In other words, silent listening. In the year-and-a-half since I made this promise, I have often had to literally pull myself back into the moment when those random thoughts starting bouncing around my brain. When I am in a conversation with someone, I have to be completely engaged and attentive to what they are saying and how they are moving and behaving. There are no distractions, there is no pull. Where my feet are, my head is.

## Silent Listening: One-Two-Three

Here are three tips to successful silent listening:

- 1 Resist the temptation to interject comments or ask more questions. Let the person who is speaking completely finish their thought. We're adults. There should only be one voice at a time.
- 2 Count to five slowly before you respond. People tend to be uncomfortable with silence but this practice will help to slow you down and will ensure that the speaker is finished.
- 3 Catch yourself if you begin to drift. When you become aware of your mind darting around or are planning your next response while someone else is still speaking, pull yourself back mentally and reconnect with the conversation.



## Show that You Are Fully Engaged

Silent Listening is an essential communication and success skill. It shows people that you are fully engaged and care about what is being said and who is delivering the message. You'll find that you remember people's names, details of what they are talking about and that you show compassion and congeniality. It helps to build strong relationships. This is all linked to emotional intelligence. It's about self-awareness, thoughtfulness and empathy. These are the success tools of the decade and beyond.

## Four Tips for Good Questions

Here are four tips to asking good questions:

- 1 Ask open-ended questions. These start with words such as who, what, where, when, why and how. They require the person responding to open up and share information and details. If you ask close-ended questions that simply require a yes or no response, the conversation will likely come to a "close" or dead-end.
- 2 Focus on specifics. By being inquisitive and requesting clarification in conversations, you will develop a more thorough understanding of the issue at hand. In addition, you will also be showing the person with whom you are speaking that you are truly paying attention and are interested. Some examples include, "How will you know the event has been a success?" or "Can you give me three specific topics or issues that you want addressed during the program?"
- 3 Pay attention to the competition. Don't be afraid to ask your counterparts at other schools near and far away what types of programming they are considering.

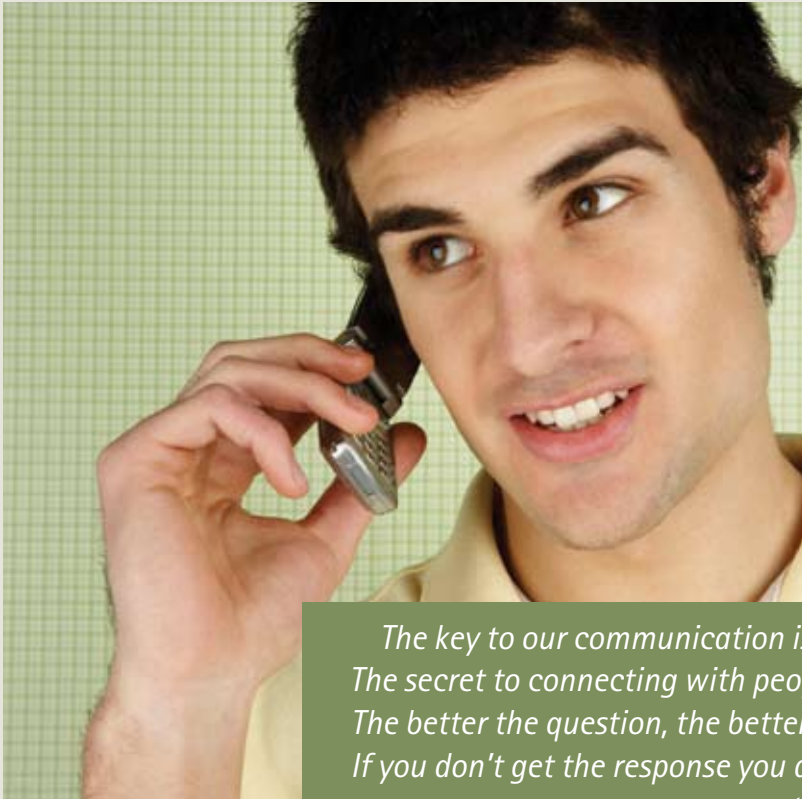
Sharing information with "non-competing schools" and eavesdropping on your neighbor schools may help to spark some creativity. You may wind up combining a few elements from different schools and developing your own topic or unique program. It's important to be creative and open to change. As a college speaker at campuses across the country, I talk to many activities coordinators and know what they are looking for and what the trends are. Pick my brain and together we can develop

something fresh and creative. After all, I work directly with your counterparts and competition!

- 4 Dive in. Questions provide us with valuable information. If your activities director is critical of how you handled last semester's leadership conference, avoid asking yourself that dreaded and pitiful "why me?" question. Instead, pose the following questions:

- a. "What specifically would you recommend that I do differently in the future?"
- b. "What three specific areas were up to your satisfaction and where could I have made improvements?"

Put a positive and specific spin on your questions and you'll quickly get to the core of the situation.



## About the Author

Susan Young, a college speaker, author and award-winning communications expert, is president of **Get In Front Communications** and **Susan Young Media Relations, Inc.** Her new book, *Communicating with Confidence* is available at [www.getinfrontcommunications.com](http://www.getinfrontcommunications.com). Young has been in the communications and news industry for 25 years. She is an award-winning radio news broadcaster and a member of NACA and the National Speakers Association. Her companies are based in San Antonio, TX and East Brunswick, NJ.



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**MICHAEL KENT**  
COMIC, MAGICIAN, SMART@\$\$!

Michael Kent's magic & comedy show was awesome! It drew one of the largest crowds we have ever had for an event! Everybody loved it and was talking about it for weeks!

- Jennifer H., Kentucky Wesleyan University

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