

Try these five key components for a successful competition.

Planning a Speech Contest

Practiced and polished, contestants eagerly draw numbers for their position. The speech contest team is at the ready and the audience is abuzz with anticipation. Let the competition begin! But wait ... are *you* a part of the action?

Collectively, Toastmasters clubs worldwide run thousands of speech contests every year. Such events offer great benefits for everyone involved: speakers, audience

apply what I learned to real-life situations, such as setting up events and running meetings.

I used the area contest as a blueprint and dry run for chairing the larger, 29-club division contest, which was my High Performance Leadership project. In the process, I learned several key steps for planning successful speech contests at all levels. Before I reveal my “secrets,” let’s consider why we conduct our

thing a little more electric about doing it in a competition. The stakes are higher and the audience knows it, so they’re particularly interested and engaged.

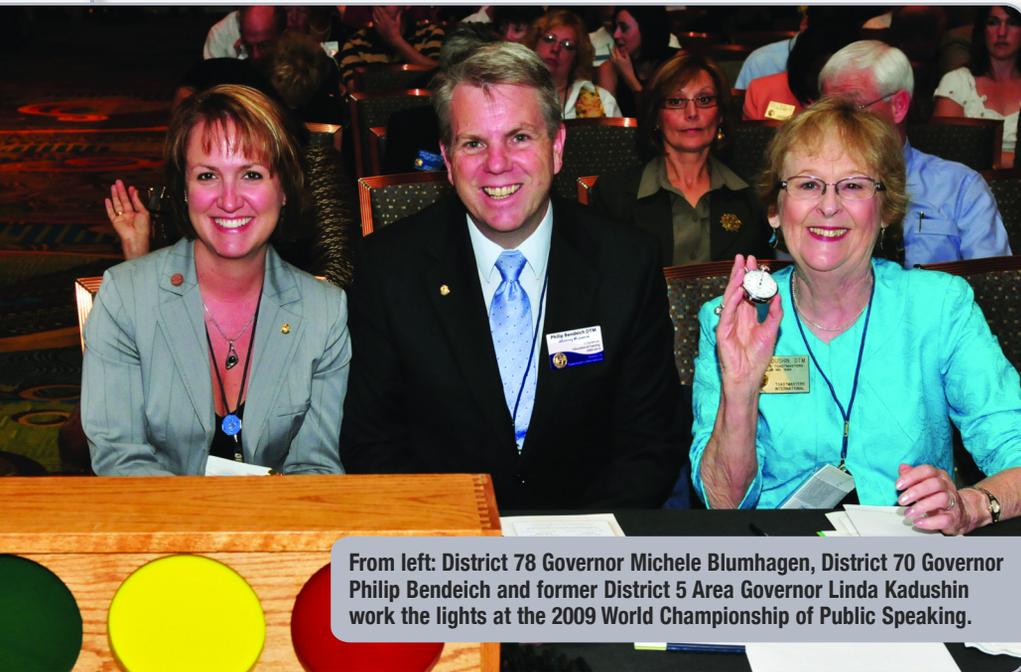
Chairing or competing in a contest is a way for Toastmasters to stretch themselves. They inspire everyone, including the audience, and compel us to be better leaders and speakers.

Planning a successful contest involves five key components:

1 Book a venue. My first task was securing a suitable room. At the time, local library meeting rooms were booked far in advance and recreation centers charged a fee. So I got creative and asked a nearby retirement community if we could use its state-of-the-art meeting room with comfortable audience seating. They eagerly agreed and offered the room free of charge – for two contests!

Event space is a critical element that influences the contest’s outcome, says Rory Vaden, the second-place winner in Toastmasters’ 2007 World Championship of Public Speaking. “Ideal venues allow for the speaker’s best transference of energy from the stage,” he says. “This means low ceilings, clear stage view, close distance between the stage and the first row of chairs, close proximity of chairs, and space that is filled with an audience. A stage – at least 10 feet wide – is needed if there are more than 50 people. Microphones that work clearly and a well-lit stage also are important.”

2 Handpick a team. You’ve heard the expression, “It takes a village



From left: District 78 Governor Michele Blumhagen, District 70 Governor Philip Bendeich and former District 5 Area Governor Linda Kadushin work the lights at the 2009 World Championship of Public Speaking.

members *and* those who plan such programs. As an area governor last year, I put myself on the planning side, when I chaired two fall contests in Denver, Colorado. The experience was invaluable to me; it taught me how to orchestrate a high-level contest and lead a team in executing a big event. Now I can

Toastmasters contests (International Speech, Table Topics, Tall Tales, Humorous and Evaluation).

Compete ... and Grow

Participating in contests is an exciting way to challenge yourself. While it’s always great to deliver a speech in front of your club, there’s some-

to ...” Well, it does take a village of Toastmasters to run a contest. That means delegating roles and recruiting volunteers. Select people who are dependable and experienced to fill key positions such as chief judge, sergeant at arms and timer. I was the Toastmaster for my division contest and asked each area governor to be a judge or to select one for balanced representation, which worked well.

Area Governor Carolina Moore from District 33 in Las Vegas, Nevada, advises, “Remember that your area is more than just *you*. It’s a group of clubs, each with members and leadership that you can – and should – draw from. Set your expectations up front, by e-mail or phone, and during your area governor club visits.

“Tell your clubs that you need their help to ensure that ‘*our* area has the *best* contest.’ Ask, ‘Who wants to be Toastmaster? Sergeant at arms?’ New members can staff the registration table; this is a great opportunity for them to meet lots of people.”

3 Create an agenda. Early on, design a contest agenda template and add the details as they become available: contestants (remember that their eligibility has to be confirmed), contest team, visiting officers, the program and timeline, sponsor and volunteer credits, and upcoming events. A timeline keeps your program on track from start to finish. I used my agenda as a script, much like I use an agenda at club meetings.

For interest, include inspiring or humorous quotes in your agenda, as well as graphics, sponsor logos and easy-to-read typefaces. Print plenty of copies and make sure everyone has one at the start. Use the agenda template for future contests.

4 Communicate clearly and often. A contest chair can never over-communicate with the contest team and contestants. Connecting with

members in your home club is easy. But communicating with multiple clubs for higher-level contests can be a bit more challenging. I chose club presidents and area governors as my liaisons for the information and contacts I needed.

Secure contacts’ e-mail addresses and group them for frequent and clear instructions about contest location, time, speech titles and team roles. Following the contest, send e-mails to the contest chair at the next level of the competition, with the winners’ complete contact information.

5 Generate publicity. It’s vital to let other clubs as well as the community at large know about an upcoming contest. For non-members, attending a contest can pique

their interest in Toastmasters, which can lead them to join the organization and reap the benefits. For members, participating in a contest is wonderful – but so is being in the audience. It’s a great way to learn techniques to improve your own speaking. And by seeing speeches that are more polished than the typical club speech, audience members gain a better idea of the skills they can aspire to.

Publicizing a contest is also important for the competitors themselves. “The speakers want to have an audience there,” notes Colin William, a finalist in the 2008 World Championship of Public Speaking from West Lafayette, Indiana, who once participated in a contest where he delivered his speech to fewer than 10 people. “It’s tough to give your best speech

when you have a small audience.”

To get the word out, take advantage of free social networking tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube. Generating publicity for contests has never been easier. Ban Seng Chew, DTM, a member of YMCA Toastmasters club in Singapore, says the Internet is best for generating free publicity. “Printed mass media are expensive and not easily accessible,” he says. “We use social networking, including the club, division and district Web sites, like <http://district80.org>.”

Remember to publicize the contest winners. I did this using a citizen journalism tool that my local newspaper, the *Denver Post*, features online. I submitted a photo of the contest winners with a detailed caption crediting the clubs involved.

“Contests inspire everyone, including the audience, and compel us to be better leaders and speakers.”

I listed our District 26 Web site for follow-up information. Voila! The picture appeared in the print version of **YourHub.com**, a community site for sharing news and photos.

Consider being a part of the exciting contest action during the next round of your club, area, division and district contests. When chairing a contest, remember these key components: book a venue, handpick a team, create an agenda, communicate clearly and often, and generate publicity. Your contest is sure to be a smashing success. **T**

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