

Speaker Diversity at Industry Conferences

By Norman M. Goldfarb

Industry associations conduct annual meetings for their members. One reason members attend is to hear and meet speakers. A good speaking faculty has three attributes: expertise, presentation quality, and diversity of perspective. The first two attributes can be measured by surveying the audience. Industry associations generally do not publish this data. The third attribute is difficult to measure directly, but can be measured indirectly by analyzing the numbers of speakers and the organizations they represent.

Methods

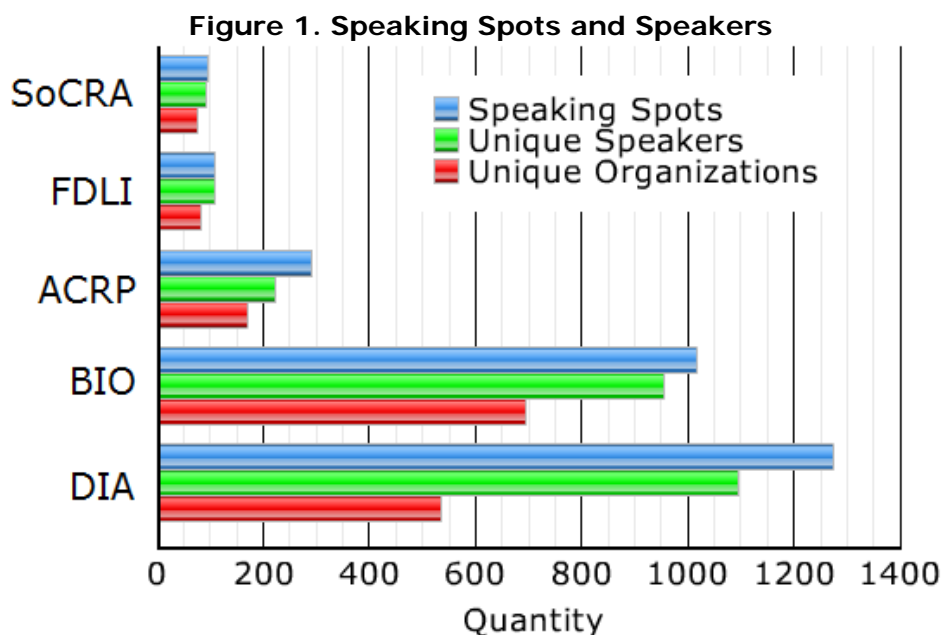
Programs for five industry association annual conferences were collected:

- Association of Clinical Research Professionals (ACRP) 2007
- Biotechnology Industry Association (BIO) 2007
- Drug Information Association (DIA) 2007
- Food and Drug Law Institute (FDLI) 2007
- Society of Clinical Research Associates (SoCRA) 2006

The speaking faculties and their organizations were extracted from the conference programs. Affiliated organizations were combined where known.

Results

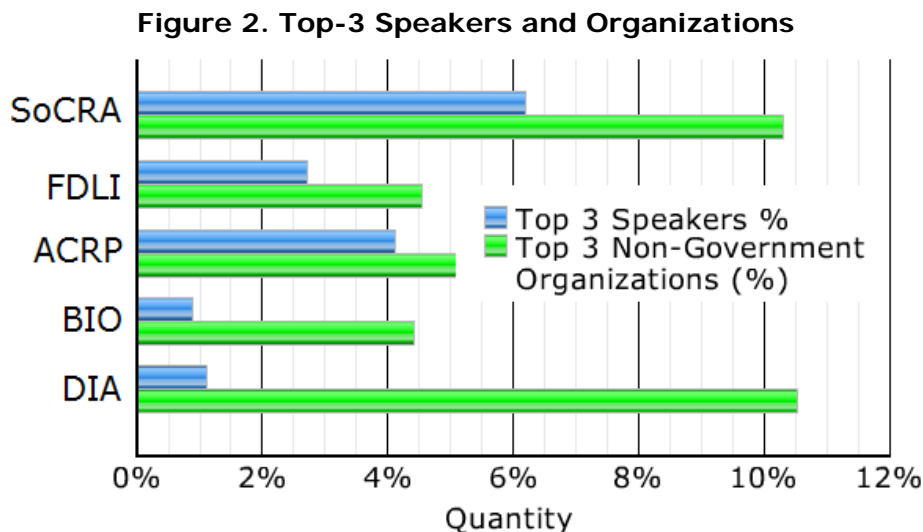
As shown in Figure 1, the five conferences have dramatically different numbers of speakers, probably reflecting the size of the meetings.



There is a strong inverse correlation between the number of speakers and the percentage of unique speakers and organizations. This correlation is expected because as the number of speaking spots increases, it becomes more likely that the association will accept multiple proposals from individual speakers and their organizations. It probably also reflects the composition of the associations, e.g., DIA (relatively large pharmaceutical companies) vs. BIO (relatively small biotechnology companies). It may also reflect relatively stronger efforts by smaller associations to maximize diversity and “share the wealth” of speaking spots among members.

Interestingly, ACRP and DIA both have about 20,000 members, but the DIA meeting attracts about three times the number of attendees as the ACRP meeting. 5.5% of DIA members speak at its meeting, while only 1.2% of ACRP members speak at its meeting (assuming all speakers are members). Nevertheless, the percentage of unique speakers at the DIA meeting (86%) is higher than the percentage at the ACRP meeting (76%).

As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of speaking spots filled by the top three speakers (with the most appearances) correlates reasonably well with the size of the speaking faculty (Figure 1). SoCRA’s relatively high percentage results from the small number of speaking spots and three speakers making two appearances each. ACRP’s relatively high percentage may reflect a relaxed policy, or no policy at all, about limiting appearances by any one speaker.



The percentage of speaking spots filled by the top three non-government organizations does not show a similar correlation. SoCRA’s high percentage may not be statistically significant because the maximum number of appearances by any single organization is only four. DIA’s high percentage probably reflects the composition of its membership: the three top non-governmental organizations are all very large pharmaceutical companies. In contrast, the two organizations with the most appearances at ACRP are relatively small companies affiliated with the current and previous chairpersons of the association’s Board of Trustees. Their high number of appearances may be due to the number or quality of their proposals, or perhaps the prominent role of their executive personnel in the association. If the selection process is blinded, the organizations either submit a very large number of proposals or have some advantage in creating attractive proposals. To increase speaker diversity, ACRP could level the playing field or set an upper limit on appearances.

Conclusion

The diversity of speaking faculties at association meetings varies with the size of the meeting and the characteristics of the members. Meetings with large numbers of speakers obtain diversity through sheer numbers, even though a small number of organizations may contribute a large number of speakers. Meetings with a small number of speakers maximize diversity by limiting multiple appearances by the same speakers. A comparison of the two largest clinical research-focused associations – DIA and ACRP – suggests that speaker diversity is a manageable parameter. It is conceivable that a more diverse speaking faculty may help reduce the discrepancy in attendance between the DIA and ACRP meetings, especially if the speaking faculty is enlisted to help recruit attendees.

Author

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