



Professional speakers sell advice and inspiration for a living

By William Conroy, Business Writer

Alexander J. Berardi never planned on earning his living as a professional speaker. Never even could have imagined it.

"I'm an introvert," the 46-year-old Wall resident insists.

The persistence of a friend got Berardi started. Berardi ran a New York-based medical research firm with about 1,000 employees that had virtually no turnover of workers. The friend wanted him to speak to a group of hospital administrators about how he managed to motivate employees and retain them. He kept after him for two years until Berardi finally agreed.

"It all started from there," Berardi said. "I found I absolutely loved it."

Twelve years ago he started speaking and consulting regularly, and three years later he sold the medical research firm and became a full-time speaker and, as his business card puts it, "leadership strategist."

Last year, "author" was added to the card when he published his first book, "Never Offer Your Comb To A Bald Man," which has been translated into seven languages. Now Berardi earns a seven figure annual income by speaking and consulting.

People all over the country have begun to make comfortable livings as professional speakers. Many of them...like Berardi, see the job as a way not only to advise others how

to run their lives, corporations or small businesses, but as a mission.

"If you're passionate, you'll find cash in it," said professional speaker David Glickman.

Glickman was one of the dozens of presenters at a recent convention in Florida of the National Speakers Association, which attracted more than 1,700 people who wanted to learn how to become better professional speakers and advance their careers.

The total number of professional speakers in the United States is unknown, said Marsha Mardock, director of marketing for the 29-year-old speakers' association, which has nearly 4,000 members of the organization.

Berardi's book is subtitled, "How to Get What You Want by Giving Others What They Need," and his specialty is a concept called "servant leadership."

"It's serving the needs of those you lead instead of directing those you lead," he said.

How does that work in practice?

Berardi cited the example of a home-health care agency that was having trouble, like many health organizations, hiring and keeping enough qualified nurses. He also uses this example in his book. The agency could not afford to pay higher salaries; many of its clients paid services out of their own pockets, so there was a limit to what the agency can charge.

The managers at the agency looked closely at their pool of nurses and discovered that they were losing many of them to motherhood. They were quitting to raise children. Many were single mothers.

The solution was to help their nurse employees find day-care centers for their children and help them pay for them, Berardi said.

"They developed a whole new attitude toward their employees and started serving their needs," Berardi said.

After making around 100 to 150 speaking engagements last year as he worked to promote his book, Berardi has cut back some this year.

"I got a hankering for sleeping in my own bed," he said.

He returned home last week after a 10-day swing in Tampa, Orlando and a few other stops in Florida.

He charges \$21,000 plus expenses for appearances in North America, and \$28,000 plus expenses outside the continent. Expenses include travel and lodging, but Berardi pays for his own meals.

Florida Today contributed to this story.

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