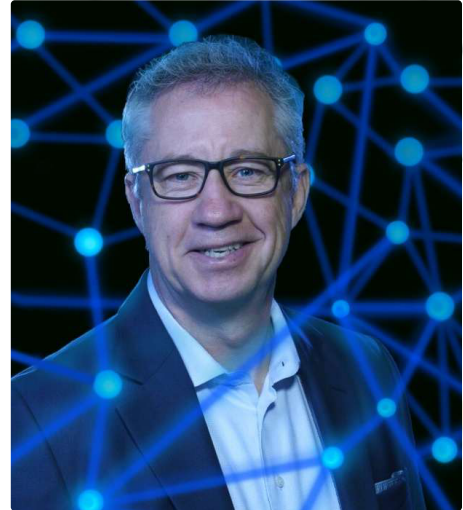


9 Key Points: What to Consider Before Booking an AI Keynote Speaker

Introduction

My name is Jan Ditgen, and as “the AI explainer” I give keynotes on artificial intelligence for companies and organisations of every size. Over the past few years I’ve had the privilege of being part of hundreds of events – from intimate leadership meetings to large conferences with several thousand participants.

Along the way I’ve learned something important: the success of an AI keynote depends heavily on whether the speaker is the right fit for the event and on whether the organiser stages the keynote well. Sometimes I’ve had to drag events over the finish line by the skin of my teeth when they deserved better preparation. Others were superbly planned.



From these experiences – the great ones and the less successful – I’ve distilled what I see as the most important success factors. This checklist will help you get the most out of your event and make sure your investment in an AI speaker has the impact you’re hoping for.

One important note upfront: naturally, I speak from my own perspective and experience. As a journalistic entertainer (more on the different speaker types later), that view is admittedly biased. When I suggest doing things a certain way, it’s because I personally believe it’s best for the audience and the event. That doesn’t mean it can’t be done differently. There are many wonderful colleagues who deliver outstanding keynotes on AI. I’m glad we’re such a great community, and I wish everyone plenty of bookings.

My goal is for the **right speaker** to be on the **right stage**. Because I, too, would rather be where I really fit and can create the greatest possible value. A successful event is a win for everyone involved – for you as the organiser, for the audience, and for us speakers too.

1. Choosing the right speaker: who fits your audience?

The knowledge-level check is crucial

Before you book an AI keynote speaker, you should take an honest inventory of your audience. How much prior knowledge of artificial intelligence is there? In most cases you’ll find the knowledge is mixed. While some participants are already deep in the subject, others may have only touched on it superficially.

The golden rule: bring everyone along

A simple but important rule applies here: aim for the lowest common denominator without boring the experts. A good AI speaker manages to explain complex matters so that beginners can follow along while experienced professionals still gain new perspectives.

Jargon is only for the jargon crowd!

Avoid speakers who are primarily wedded to technical language – unless your audience consists exclusively of AI experts.

Understanding the different types of speaker

Not all AI speakers are alike. When you're assessing a speaker, try to place them in one of these types. Depending on their background, they bring different strengths and weaknesses:

Type 1 – The journalist: Comes from the media world and is used to preparing complex topics for a broad audience. Journalists have often made AI a core topic and continuously research the latest developments.

Advantages:

- Excellent at explaining complex matters clearly
- Used to writing and thinking for laypeople
- Very current topics and well-researched content
- Objective, neutral presentation of different viewpoints

Disadvantages:

- Coming from writing, their thoughts can be too complicated and convoluted for the stage
- Sometimes less deep on very technical details
- Used to longer texts, so they have to adapt to the keynote format
- Very focused on objectivity, sometimes lacking lightness

Type 2 – The computer scientist / researcher: Comes from research or development and has often worked directly on AI systems. Knows the technology “from the inside” and understands the mathematical foundations.

Advantages:

- Enormous expertise and technical depth
- Authentic hands-on experience with AI development
- Can answer even the most complex questions
- High credibility with a technical audience

Disadvantages:

- Often struggles to translate into everyday language
- Tends towards technical details that overwhelm the audience
- Sometimes too theoretical, with little business relevance
- Teaching skills are not automatically part of the package

Type 3 – The management consultant: Comes from strategy consulting or specialises in AI implementation. Focuses on business applications and rollout within organisations.

Advantages:

- Clear focus on practical application and business impact
- Structured presentation style
- Experience with change management and implementation
- Can present ROI and cost-effectiveness well

Disadvantages:

- Sometimes too fixated on “consulting speak”
- Can seem theoretical without hands-on development experience
- Knows only part of the AI universe
- Promotes their own consulting firm

Type 4 – The entertainer: Often comes from other fields and specialises in entertaining knowledge transfer. Knows how to present even dry topics excitingly.

Advantages:

- Rousing and entertaining, creates enthusiasm
- Takes away the fear of the complex AI topic
- Brings lightness to hard-to-digest content
- High attention and memorability
- Motivates people to engage further with the topic

Disadvantages:

- The importance of the topic can fade into the background
- Sometimes too little technical depth
- Can't answer in-depth technical questions

Type 5 – The practitioner / entrepreneur: Has founded AI-focused companies or led AI projects. Speaks from personal experience of practical implementation.

Advantages:

- Authentic hands-on experience and concrete use cases
- Can report first-hand on pitfalls and success factors
- High credibility through their own implementation
- Concrete recommendations for action instead of theory

Disadvantages:

- Sometimes too narrowly focused on their own industry
- May push their own solutions too strongly
- Less of a broad overview across different AI fields
- Possibly less objective because of their own business interests

Type 6 – The futurist / visionary: Deals with long-term technology trends and the societal impact of AI. Often from futures research or technology philosophy.

Advantages:

- Inspiring and forward-looking, paints the big picture
- Helps with strategic thinking about AI's impact
- Motivates long-term planning
- Brings in ethical and societal aspects

Disadvantages:

- Risk of too much speculation without a concrete basis
- Few tangible, immediately actionable recommendations
- Can be too abstract for practically minded audiences
- Sometimes too little connection to currently available technologies

Which type fits your goal?

- Awareness and understanding → journalist, entertainer
- Technical depth → computer scientist (with good teaching skills!)
- Implementation and ROI → consultant / practitioner
- Motivation and vision → entertainer / futurist
- A balanced mix → an experienced “explainer” with a mixed background

Check in advance: Can the speaker explain complex AI concepts in everyday language? Do they use analogies and examples from your audience's world? A test: ask them for a five-minute example of how they would explain “machine learning” to someone who has never heard of it.

2. The ideal talk length: is brevity the soul of wit?

When planning an AI keynote you face a classic dilemma: on the one hand, “brevity is the soul of wit” – especially in our fast-paced times, people have ever less patience for long talks. On the other hand, AI is a complex topic, and “good things take time” if they're to be truly understood.

Attention span vs. depth of information

The reality is that the average attention span keeps shrinking. Studies show that concentration noticeably drops off after 20 minutes. That clearly argues for shorter formats. At the same time, artificial intelligence isn't a topic you can deal with in ten minutes – the implications are too multi-layered, and there are too many misunderstandings to clear up.

The sweet spot: 45–90 minutes

Experience has shown that a window of 45 to 90 minutes works best. This range allows you to:

- **45–60 minutes:** Perfect for focused impulse keynotes that shed light on a specific AI topic and deliver immediately actionable insights

- **60–90 minutes:** Ideal for more comprehensive presentations that leave room for interaction, Q&A and deeper discussion

Important: The ideal length depends heavily on the speaker's style. An interactive speaker with lots of practical examples can make 90 minutes gripping, whereas a purely theoretical talk can feel tiring after just 30 minutes.

Our tip: Discuss with the speaker in advance which length suits their style and your goals – and always build in a buffer for spontaneous discussion.

3. Teaching skills: more than just subject expertise

The expert's curse

Many AI speakers come from computer science or academia – they understand their field perfectly, having researched and developed for years. But this is often where the problem lies: **expertise doesn't automatically mean the ability to convey it.** What works in academic circles or among colleagues can fail completely in front of a mixed audience.

Science vs. clarity

Computer scientists and researchers are trained to be precise and detailed. They love going deep, explaining complex algorithms and illuminating every technical aspect. In their professional environment that's right and important. For a keynote in front of executives, marketers or staff without a technical background, however, this approach can be a disaster.

Recognising warning signs:

- The speaker starts straight away with technical details
- They can't "shift down" into simple language
- Their explanations are full of jargon they don't translate
- They show impatience with "simple" questions

Good signs:

- Use of everyday comparisons and metaphors
- A structured build-up from the general to the specific
- Actively checking whether everything has been understood
- The ability to adjust the level of complexity on the fly

4. Tailor-made or off the shelf?

The problem with the standard keynote

Many speakers have one or two standard presentations that they roll out at every opportunity – whether they're speaking to doctors, bankers or engineers. That may be efficient, but it's rarely

effective. An AI keynote about automation developed for an industrial trade fair will land completely differently at a conference for creative agencies.

The relevance trap

Your audience notices immediately when a talk wasn't made for them. Examples from the wrong industry, irrelevant use cases or generic phrases with no bearing on their own reality lead to bored faces and the feeling of having wasted their time.

Check adaptability

Ask specifically:

- "How do you prepare for our particular audience?"
- "Can you integrate examples from our industry / field?"
- "What information about our company / our participants do you need?"
- "Have you spoken to similar audiences before?"

Warning signs of a standard talk:

- The speaker doesn't ask for details about your audience
- They can't name industry-specific examples
- Their references show only one kind of event
- They speak only in general terms about "AI in business"

Signs of a tailor-made talk:

- Detailed preliminary conversations about your goals
- Specific questions about industry, audience and expectations
- A willingness to go deeper on certain aspects or leave others out
- Examples are adapted to your context

Beware of empty promises

Of course every speaker claims to tailor their talks individually – that's part of the standard sales pitch. But how can you check whether it's more than just a promise?

The video check as a test of truth: Ask to see a video of a past talk and analyse it critically:

- Does the speaker address that specific audience concretely?
- Do they use industry-specific terms and examples?
- Do they refer to the challenges of those particular participants?
- Or does it all sound very general and interchangeable?

A speaker talking to car manufacturers about "AI in production" should choose different examples and emphases than in front of financial-services providers on "AI in banking". If the talks sound almost identical, you have your answer.

The effort pays off

A tailor-made talk costs the speaker more time in preparation – and they should communicate that openly. But that's the only way to create keynotes that really stick and add genuine value.

5. The fee: what does quality cost?

Understanding the price range

With AI keynote speakers you'll find an enormous range – from free to five-figure sums. These differences aren't random and say a lot about a speaker's motivation and quality.

Be wary of free speakers

Speakers who appear for free usually have other goals:

- The stage becomes a sales show for their own consulting services
- Selling expensive AI courses or certifications
- Lead generation for their own company
- Building their personal brand at the expense of your event

This doesn't automatically mean poor quality, but you should be aware: the "free" talk is rarely truly free – you just don't pay directly.

The celebrity premium

At the other end of the scale are well-known names from TV, politics or business. Here you often pay a substantial celebrity premium without proportionally more insight. A former politician who is suddenly an AI expert, or a TV presenter talking about digitalisation, may be a crowd-pleaser – but do they also offer real expertise and practical value?

The professional mid-range: \$4,400–\$11,000

Serious, professional AI speakers typically sit in the range of \$4,400 to \$11,000. In this segment you'll find:

- Genuine expertise paired with stage experience
- Tailor-made content without hidden sales agendas
- Professional preparation and follow-up
- A focus on your event, not on their own business goals

The market regulates quality

Experience shows that fee and quality usually correlate strongly. Why? Good speakers can afford to be selective. They don't have to accept every booking and can invest time in quality and preparation rather than making up for it with sheer volume.

Rule of thumb: If the fee is well below or well above the market average, ask yourself critically why. Both extremes can be legitimate – but they warrant a closer look at your expectations.

6. Technical equipment: standard or special?

The basic setup is usually enough

Good news: for most AI keynotes you don't need any unusual technology. The standard conference setup is normally entirely sufficient:

- Projector / LED wall with Full-HD resolution (1920×1080)
- Wireless presenter or clicker for the speaker
- Wireless microphone (headset or handheld, depending on speaking style)
- Standard lighting for the venue
- Laptop connection (HDMI, USB-C) or the speaker's own notebook

What you should still pay attention to

Screen size and visibility: AI presentations often contain screenshots, diagrams or live demos. Make sure participants in the back rows can see everything clearly, too. For larger halls (over 200 people) you should consider additional side screens or larger displays.

Internet connection: Many AI speakers like to show live demos of ChatGPT, other AI tools or the latest developments. A stable, fast internet connection is therefore more important than for other talk topics. Plan for a backup hotspot – nothing is more embarrassing than a speaker waiting for ChatGPT to load.

Audio quality: Especially for interactive formats or Q&A sessions, pay attention to good acoustics. AI topics invite questions – make sure comments from the audience can be heard clearly too.

Special equipment only when needed

When you might need more:

- **Live-coding sessions:** often require larger screens or duplicate displays
- **Interactive workshops:** tablets or laptops for participant groups
- **VR / AR demos:** special hardware, which the speaker usually brings

The hotel-technology dilemma

Never rely blindly on the hotel's own technology! Even if the hotel proudly speaks of “state-of-the-art conference technology” or has just invested – the reality on site is often sobering.

The typical problems:

- **Competence gap:** The actual technician is on holiday, off sick or otherwise engaged. Instead, the caretaker explains how the system “supposedly” works, based on a one-off briefing months ago.
- **Creeping wear:** Projectors are often in operation for years. A heavily contrasting image is “just about legible”, but for a professional AI presentation with fine details, screenshots and diagrams it’s completely unsuitable.
- **Outdated connections:** The “modern” system still has VGA ports, while your speaker works with USB-C or modern standards.
- **Unpredictable failures:** Just before the start, the microphone suddenly stops working, the projector shows colour casts, or the remote has vanished.

The professional alternative

Invest in additionally rented equipment with an accompanying technician. The extra cost of a few hundred dollars is minimal compared with the damage a technical glitch can do to your event.

Advantages of professional equipment:

- Modern, regularly serviced devices
- An experienced technician on site throughout the event
- Immediate problem-solving when something fails
- Backup systems for critical components
- A stress-free experience for you and your speaker

The cost comparison speaks for itself: The cost of professional technology only looks high at first glance. Compared with a speaker fee of \$4,400–\$11,000, the additional technology cost of \$550–\$1,650 is practically minimal. What’s more, better technology benefits the whole event – not just the keynote speaker. Every presentation, video and discussion gains from the higher quality.

Rule of thumb: The more important the event, the less you should leave to chance. Nobody forgets a failed AI keynote caused by technical problems in a hurry.

7. Timing is everything: when to place the AI keynote?

The three golden time slots

At the start of the event – the curiosity-sparker: An AI keynote as an opener is ideal for sparking curiosity and setting the tone for the whole day. The audience is still fresh, attentive and ready for new impulses. AI as an opening topic creates a forward-looking mood for everything that follows.

After the lunch break – the energiser: Every organiser knows the classic afternoon slump. A lively AI keynote can work as the perfect energiser here. Interactive speakers in particular, or

those with impressive live demos, manage to reactivate tired participants and win back their attention.

At the end – the grand summary: As a closing keynote, AI can bring all the day's topics together into one big picture of the future. "How does AI influence everything we've talked about today?" – this approach creates a rounded conclusion and sends participants off with concrete thoughts for the future.

Who follows the pro?

A word of caution when planning the programme: after a really good, professional AI keynote speaker, internal speakers or less experienced presenters can quickly look pale. The difference in quality becomes painfully clear to the audience – both in content and in delivery.

The break strategy: Deliberately schedule a longer break (at least 30 minutes) after the keynote. That gives participants time to reflect on what they've heard, network and mentally switch to the next format. This softens the contrast and gives every following speaker a fair chance.

Alternative: Let the keynote deliberately stand on its own – as the single major item in a time block. That way you avoid direct comparisons and give the keynote the space it deserves.

8. The video check: a video says more than a thousand words

Videos reveal the truth

Instead of endless phone calls or pages of emails, simply watch videos of past appearances. A 10-minute video clip tells you more about a speaker than an hour-long sales conversation.

What you can spot in a video

Presentation style and stage presence:

- Does the speaker come across as natural and authentic, or stiff and read out?
- How do they move on stage? Static at the lectern or dynamic?
- Can they hold your attention for 10 minutes even without your personal interest?

Clarity in practice:

- Can you, as a layperson, follow the explanations?
- How do they explain complex AI concepts? With analogies or with jargon?
- Do they pause to "bring the audience along"?

Experiencing audience adaptation live:

- Do they address that particular audience concretely?
- Do they use industry-specific examples or stay general?
- Do their examples feel authentic or contrived?

Assessing the technical execution:

- How are their slides designed? Overloaded or clearly structured?
- Do they show live demos or work with screenshots?
- Is the image quality good enough to make out details?

The reality check without sugar-coating

On video, speakers can't gloss over anything or explain it away afterwards. You see the unfiltered reality: how do they come across to a real audience? Do things drag? Where does the audience react positively, and where more hesitantly?

Pro tip: Watch the audience's reactions in the video. Are people attentive and interested, or are many looking at their phones? That reveals more about the quality than any self-presentation by the speaker.

9. Seating: proximity creates connection**The motto: the closer, the better**

Now you might be wondering whether the keynote speaker really needs to have a say in your seating plan, too. Yes – because the seating largely determines the success of a keynote. The closer the audience is to the speaker, the stronger the connection and the greater the effect. Imagine telling a joke from 10 metres away – the punchline fizzles out, the facial expression is lost, the intimacy is missing. It's exactly the same with AI keynotes.

The different seating arrangements compared

Theatre seating – the supreme discipline: All participants sit in rows without tables, facing the same direction. Everyone is close to the speaker. This is optimal for keynotes. Attention is fully focused, no one is distracted, and the energy can transfer directly from the speaker to the whole audience.

Advantages: maximum proximity, optimal view, undivided attention

Parliamentary seating – also works: The rows are arranged a little more loosely, usually with tables for notes. Still well suited, since the basic orientation towards the speaker is right and the distances stay manageable.

Advantages: room for notes, a slightly more relaxed atmosphere

U-shape – difficult for keynotes: This is where it gets tricky: the average distance to the speaker is greatest. Participants in the back corners are very far away, the speaker has to keep looking back and forth, and the energy disperses.

Disadvantages: large distances, divided attention, hard to reach everyone; participants look at the person opposite rather than the speaker

Gala seating – very poor for daytime events: Round tables of 8–10 people, some facing sideways or with their backs to the speaker. This may work for evening events with dinner, but

it's counterproductive for a daytime event.

Problems: half the group sits with their backs to the speaker, distraction from table neighbours, large distances, divided attention

Putting it into practice

Rule of thumb: Plan the seating so that the furthest participant is at most 15–20 metres from the speaker. Better to choose a slightly smaller room and seat people closer together than to half-fill an oversized hall.

When choosing the room, remember: a full small room creates more energy than a half-empty large hall – even if, in theory, all the seats were available.

In closing

So those were my tips for you. Naturally, I'd be delighted if you sent me a direct enquiry, so we can find out together whether I'm a match. If you have a specific event in mind, we should talk about it. Should I not be the right speaker, I'll gladly recommend a colleague from my network who will support your event competently and appropriately.

Thank you.

Yours,

Jan Ditgen

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