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AS SEEN ON TV

Darren Kavinsky tells how he made the jump from the podium to the TV screen

THINK LIKE
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Darren Kavinsky, attorney,
keynote speaker and
TV personality



Darren Kavinsky is a keynote speaker, attorney and interventionist. He is the creator and host of *Deadly Sins* on Investigation Discovery. Kavinsky has appeared as a legal analyst and misbehavior expert for CNN, the *Today* show, *Entertainment Tonight*, *HLN*, *Dr. Phil*, *Dr. Drew* and dozens of other shows. Here, he shares his experiences and advice on making the leap from the podium to the TV screen.

As Seen

Kavinoky with CNN
host Brooke Baldwin

BY DARREN KAVINOKY

Is there a more valuable medium than television for building for the subject matter expert? Is there anything else that delivers the reach of millions of eyeballs, plus credibility-boosting superpower, better than television? Notwithstanding certain exceptions, like being the subject of paternity testing on *Maury*, don't people still believe that you know what you're talking about if you appear on the magic box in their living room?

Appearing on TV has a cascade of benefits for the speaker. "As Seen on TV" is a boon to event planners, because celebrity and quasi-celebrity can help put butts in seats.

Those who appear regularly on TV are somewhat rare (not quite like seeing Bigfoot and returning to talk about it, but rare). TV appearances carry the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." If you've been allowed on air, and especially if you're invited back, you are less risky to a meeting planner and face less initial skepticism from audiences, since you've been vetted by the Court of Public Opinion. And, as a bonus, TV means lots of Twitter followers to help build your platform.

I've been around NSA long enough to see how it usually goes. Speak first, then cement your expertise by writing a

book, then leverage that credibility by getting on TV. The conventional wisdom is that TV won't care about you, or let you grace the airwaves, until you have the bona fides that come with authorship. I didn't know any better, so I went straight to the magic box. And you can, too.

Get your "at bats." Malcolm Gladwell talks about the 10,000 hours required for mastery. Get your reps in! Radio, Internet radio, podcasts, blogs, vlogs—and even your kid's school newspaper—are all excellent ways to get used to being interviewed. Speaking in sound bites is a skill that can be developed—and nothing will help you develop it like getting your 10,000 hours in—but it's not always easy.

Early in my career, when *Court TV* was doing a particularly interesting trial from San Diego, I used to drive down from Los Angeles, pay for my own hotel room, set my alarm for 3 a.m. to do *Court TV* radio for East Coast drive-time, and then go over to the courthouse for a five-minute appearance. Years later, because I got my reps in, I get to be the answer to a Trivial Pursuit question: "Who was the last person to host what used to be called *Court TV*?" Answer: Me! That was only the result of getting my reps in. The lesson is simple, especially at first: Be willing to go to any length to get that gig. This is all in the name of building your reel.



Barbara Walters
and Kavinoky

em on TV

Building your reel. Would meeting or event planners risk their professional reputation by recommending an unknown to deliver the opening keynote for their most important client? That's exactly how TV producers think about booking guests. They are concerned about looking good, and nothing reduces risk for them like seeing your reel. It doesn't matter whether it's local news or CNN! There are many people who are charismatic in their personal life who wilt on camera. Booking producers need to see how you look on camera. They don't want to risk their reputation on you not delivering the goods.

“The person who was offering you coffee at one network might be booking guests next week at another network!”

Authenticity trumps polish. For my first *Today* show appearance, producers sent me the five questions Ann Curry was going to ask me. I was up all night crafting, tinkering and rehearsing. Then, under the hot lights of live TV, she asked me totally different questions. It was only when watching it later that I had the slightest idea what I had said. I just remember babbling and sweating. Through the years, I progressed from scripting out each answer, to bullet points, to extemporaneous answers to the questions they would send me in advance.

But the real “A-ha!” moment came later, when producers asked me, during a commercial break, if I could talk about a breaking news story that we hadn't prepared for at all. I realized in that moment, when flying without a net, that what made me effective on TV was *not* what I had to say; it was who I was being. It was my unique point of view. It was me just being me. It was that I was willing to look bad, to tell one on myself, all in the name of being me. That was years ago, and now, while I like to know the topic we are going to discuss, it's not required. I certainly don't care about the questions. And there are other reasons you should never care about the questions.

Questions are simply an opportunity for the host to talk before you talk again.

Don't worry about answering the questions that they ask! Reframe, recast, and say what you want. As someone who has hosted live interviews on TV, I only care that something interesting is being said. In TV, there's no attorney that will stand up and yell “Objection! Non-responsive!” if I use a question merely as a vehicle to say what I was interested in saying. It's all right to respond to a question by answering, “That's a great question, but what's really fascinating is XYZ.” I promise you, if XYZ makes for good TV, that's all anyone will care about!

Be nice to the production assistants ... they'll be booking you next week.

TV is not usually a career for those who value job security. Shows get green-lit, shows get cancelled, and the production teams scatter like seeds in the wind. The person who was offering you coffee at one network might be booking guests next week for another network! You know how you can tell a lot about a person by how well they treat the waiters and busboys? The same applies here. Even when you have your

own show, you should leave the diva behavior to others. (That's why I changed my personal policy—I now allow production assistants to make eye contact with me, and I will accept all colors of M&M's in the greenroom!)

Stay top of mind. I was in the bullpen at *Entertainment Tonight* when the frenzy happened. Michael Jackson had just died, and there was an image that had just been released of the King of Pop being wheeled into an ambulance, with all kinds of medical equipment attached to him. The senior producer wanted a subject matter expert to come on air and explain what all of that stuff was, and what it meant about his condition in that moment. The buzz of activity that followed was amazing, perhaps a dozen people all working their contacts to find a medical professional who looked good on camera, was willing to go on camera, and who could be on camera before the deadline passed.

Lesson: When the need hits, you want producers to think of you first. Whether you do this by way of gifts and cards, wining and dining, or a simple email with your unique take on an interesting story, is a matter of personal preference, and to some extent, availability and budget. But how important is it for you to get on camera? How much value might it have over the entire arc of your speaking career that you're the “go-to person” on a certain issue? How valuable is it to put the logo of a nationally known TV show on your website or speaker's reel? Isn't it worth staying top of mind?

Who is your audience? If my speaking topic is so broad that I believe I'm applicable to everyone, I'm likely so vague that I'm applicable to no one. Again, the same applies here. For me, I started doing strictly legal analyst work, but with my experience around addiction and becoming an interventionist,

Kavinoky waits behind the scenes of CNN wearing the sartorial equivalent of a mullet: All business up top; all party down below!





and after creating and hosting *Deadly Sins*, I became “the misbehavior guy.” (Thankfully, between Lindsay Lohan and Justin Bieber, I’m virtually guaranteed camera time for the next few decades!) If you’re reading this magazine, I suspect you already are qualified to speak on a list of topics. Who are the media outlets that discuss these topics? There are many resource guides to reach the producers and editors. Start by reaching out and doing something that may be counter-intuitive . . .

Give away your best stuff. Time to send producers your unique point of view on whatever today’s hot story is, keeping in mind their deadlines. So, if I wake up and see that a celebrity has been arrested or is on their way to rehab, I send a little note to my producer friends with ideas about how to take on that story with a fresh angle that is contingent on my point of view. If you have a blog, and you’ve created a post on a topical story, include them on a tweet promoting your unique take. And let them know you’re available to go on camera ahead of their deadline! It probably goes without saying, but make sure the subject line of your email is attention-getting, and keep your email short and to the point. I see the volume of emails most producers slog through each day, and it is enormous. Make yours stand out by being

really clear about the only thing they care about, namely, what’s in it for them—which better have something to do with a great segment, great show or great ratings.

What about a publicist? If you’re willing to invest in yourself by engaging a publicist to help do the heavy lifting and give your TV career some momentum, then by all means do so. I’ve used several at various stages of my career, and they can be a valuable asset . . . or an enormous waste of money and time. Like so many places in life, choosing a partner carefully can save you much heartache later. (If you want to connect with me privately, I’m happy to make recommendations.)

Publicists will usually charge in one of two ways: either a monthly fixed fee engagement, or “pay per play” engagement, where they only get paid if they get you gigs. Without offending any publicists who may be reading this, in my experience I only need the publicist to make a new introduction for me. Once I’ve been on their air, I will be invited back, and I don’t need the publicist for that outlet any more. Therefore, consider short-term relationships. The free stuff everyone knows about is HARO (an acronym for Help A Reporter Out, found at HelpAReporter.com). Make sure any potential publicist knows that

you will not accept their assistant merely repurposing HARO’s free daily email blasts as work on your behalf. I also like having an accountability structure in place, like a weekly report of all pitching activity, especially if you choose a monthly engagement.

If you don’t live in New York or L.A., can you still get on TV? Absolutely! Everything I’ve been sharing works just as well with local media as it does for the national big boys. If a national program is interested, and logistics are difficult, there is always Skype (though the delays and inevitable glitches make this a true last resort), or using a local studio. (There are many independent studios that can uplink to the national network shows). If you’re good, you’ll work.

Building your speaking business is all about leveraging your resources, and one of the resources at your disposal, no matter where you are, is television. Don’t wait for the stars to align to begin. Remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, where he says “We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. We cannot afford the luxury of cooling off, or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time.” If you want to see your face on that magic box, now is indeed the time.

Visit www.DarrenKavinoky.com.