



# Money

SECTION B

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## Cover story

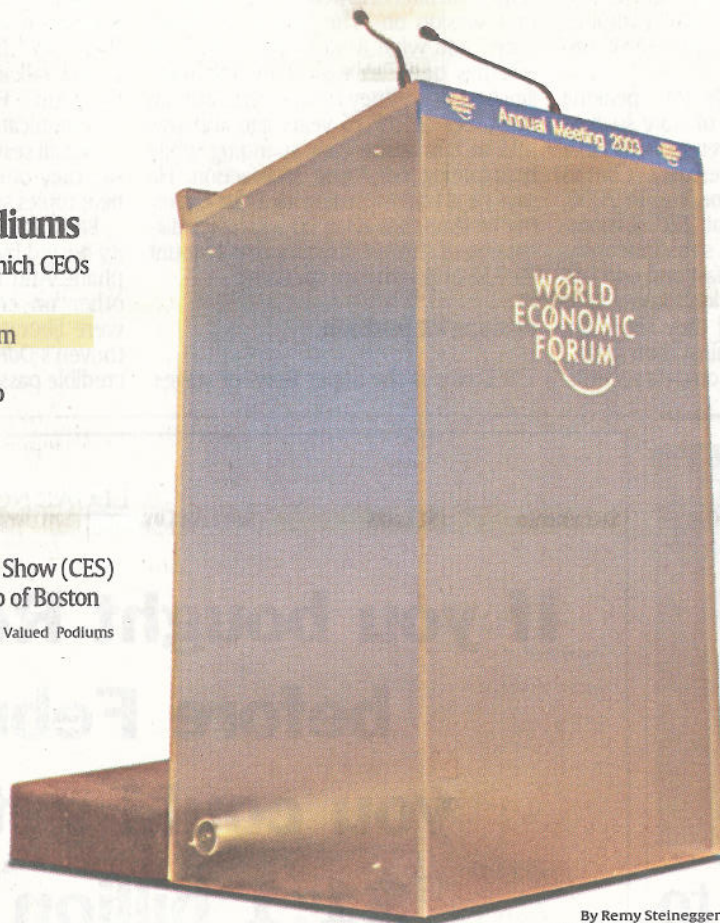
# CEOs around the world want to speak from this podium

### Most-valued podiums

Top 10 conferences at which CEOs most want to speak:

1. World Economic Forum
2. Business Roundtable
3. Detroit Economic Club
4. Fortune
5. BusinessWeek
6. National Press Club
7. CERAWEEK
8. Commonwealth Club
9. Consumer Electronics Show (CES)
10. Chief Executives Club of Boston

Source: Burson-Marsteller's Most Valued Podiums (MVPs) survey for CEOs



By Remy Steinegger, World Economic Forum

By Del Jones  
USA TODAY

Corporate CEOs get 175 requests to speak each year, 3.4 a week. Most are turned down, but just about every CEO longs for a coveted invitation to speak at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

It's the plum of podiums, and so desirable that companies and public relations firms lobby on behalf of CEOs like movie studios out for a best actor nomination.

A-teamers such as Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates have been accused of muscling for more exposure at Davos, a charge Microsoft denies.

"On any CEO's dance card, here's an important ticket you need punched," says Carol Ballock, managing director of Burson-Marsteller's executive positioning specialty practice. "The World Economic Forum is the most important."

As the successful CEO of software company Autodesk, Carol Bartz never wants for speaking invitations. "They find me," she says, but she is proud to be among those selected from the worldwide pool to speak at the five-day World Economic Forum (WEF) that starts Wednesday.

"There really is no more influential podium," she says.

Autodesk grew 30% in 2005 to \$1.3 billion in revenue. Still, Bartz says it's a little intimidating to join the Who's Who of executives this year including Gates, Google's Eric Schmidt, Dell

Please see COVER STORY next page ►

# 'You want to be in the top group at a plum event'

Continued from 1B

Computer's Michael Dell, Coca-Cola's E. Neville Isidell, Nike's Phil Knight, Alcoa's Alain Belda, Virgin's Richard Branson, Lucent's Patricia Russo and Cisco's John Chambers. There will be 1,275 participants from business, almost all CEOs, chairmen or chief operating officers. There also will be 165 presidents, prime

## Cover story

ministers and other top government officials such as Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz and 49 heads of non-governmental (NGO) organizations such as Greenpeace Executive Director Gerd Leipold, plus a sprinkling of celebrities stumping for a cause, notably U2 musician Bono and actress Angelina Jolie.

Why do CEOs duck most invitations, yet clamor for Davos? After all, CEOs are often glorified sales agents, and their time is often best put to use in auditoriums packed with potential customers. That means they would get more bang for the buck speaking at industry-specific events such as this month's North American International Auto Show in Detroit and the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

Pitney Bowes, the maker of mailing equipment, always sends CEO Michael Critelli to speak at the annual meeting of International Post Corporation, an association of 23 national postal operators around the globe. There is no shortage of such events. When 100 large companies told Burson-Marsteller the five top forums they had their CEOs speak at in the last two years and the top five forums they want their CEOs to speak at in the next two years, 600 were named.

Among those mentioned most often were events sponsored by the Business Roundtable, Detroit Economic Club, *Fortune* and *BusinessWeek* magazines. But the runaway leader was the WEF. "No other was close," Ballock said. "Any business leader wants to be influencing the agenda, not reacting to it, and there is no better podium in the world in which to accomplish that than Davos."

## A giant lure

What makes Davos the Super Bowl of stages? For one, it's international and attended by governmental officials who make decisions that affect business worldwide. That makes it appealing to companies such as Alcoa, with projects scattered from Iceland to Jamaica, and to pharmaceutical executives needing to strike up conversations with those in a position to commandeer patents.

The WEF is also attended by 300 influential journalists, so if a company has news to break, it's better to do it in Davos than Dallas. Then there is the birds-of-a-feather factor. If heavyweight CEOs like to appear before influential audiences, they really like appearing before other heavyweight CEOs.

But perhaps the top reason CEOs prefer Davos is because it elevates them with a sense of mission. "It's not a place where you self-serve or showcase your company," says Hasbro Chairman Alan Hassenfeld.

For one week a year, CEOs aren't chief sales agents hocking MP3 players. Rather, it's where they take off their suits, put on boots, and weigh in on AlP-sized world issues such as terrorism, pandemics and depleted oil reserves. It's a place where Gates takes on the complexity of poverty in Africa. Davos, simply, lends an air of importance, the kind of rare air CEOs like to breathe.

"We do have egos," laughs Bartz. "This is a plum event, and you want to be in the top group at a plum event."

The WEF has a humanitarian dimension that appeals to CEOs who tire of being fixated on the bottom line, says Aart de Geus, CEO of Synopsis, which sells more than \$1 billion of software each year to the semiconductor, consumer electronics and aerospace industries. He will be attending for the sixth time.

"It's amazing how many companies want to do good, but don't know how to do good," says Stanley Bergman who was invited to speak as CEO of Henry Schein, a publicly traded *Fortune* 500 medical supply distributor to doctors and dentists offices.

The WEF had modest beginnings when German Klaus Schwab, now 66, a former business professor, brought a small group of European executives to the Swiss ski resort in 1971 to learn American management methods. He had no idea it would become what it is today. There continues to be debate about the merits of European vs. U.S. management styles, says Nigel Roberts, who has been to Davos about 10 times as a journalist with CNBC and now with Weber Shandwick Worldwide.

But it has morphed more into a forum that tackles world issues and attracts an international collection of capitalists and activists who are at odds but seem to find in Davos a spirit of idea-sharing and, for one week a year, some middle ground called compassionate capitalism and equitable globalization. James Goodnight, CEO of giant software maker SAS, says each time he goes to Davos, he leaves wondering why the U.S. and Europe continue to subsidize farmers so that Third World farmers can't compete. "People around the world don't understand it," he says.

Despite the scramble for speaking roles, only a few heads of state such as Britain's Tony Blair deliver speeches in a traditional manner. President Clinton spoke on the global economy in 2000. CEOs serve on panels at 220 sessions, many of them going on simultaneously, that begin before breakfast and end late at night. CEO speakers don't know who is in the audience until they show up, something that goes against their grain.

Goodnight will speak on data security

## Some of 2006's speakers



By Michel Euler, AP

Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates.



By Pierre Verdy, AP

From the U.K.: British Prime Minister Tony Blair, left, and U2 singer Bono.



By Michel Euler, AP

By Michel Euler, AP

Dell: Founder of Dell Computer.

Jolie: Actress and activist.

in a session called "Security in an Always-on World." He'll be joined by FBI Director Robert Mueller, Visa International Services CEO Christopher Rodrigues and Symantec CEO John Thompson. Pitney Bowes' Critelli will join Michael Jordan of Electronic Data Systems, Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt and other experts in a session on "The Future of Health Care," and what to do about costs. Critelli has been an expert on the topic since he was Pitney Bowes' chief human resources officer 15 years ago and was told to cut health care spending while maintaining employee satisfaction. He says he is brainstorming ideas for Davos, but he fears that avian flu will hijack discussion of chronic diseases that account for 75% of health care spending.

## Pushing for position

If Davos is the Super Bowl of stages,

one might expect a good amount of lobbying goes into securing an invitation. "You certainly have staffs that are very sensitive to sessions that their bosses might prefer," says Ged Davis, WEF managing director and responsible for matching CEOs to the right sessions. "I'm not going to go into the details of these discussions, but most staffs want to see their senior people placed in a session with a fairly high degree of visibility. People push. That's the nature of life."

No speaker gets paid. Rather, they pay to speak, since most come from the 1,000 large WEF member companies that each pay 30,000 Swiss francs, or about \$23,300, a year to join. And, that only gets their foot in the door. Many pay more to participate in more industry-specific groupings, such as those for oil and pharmaceuticals.

Peter Kerr of the Pitney Bowes public relations team says the company has been "engaged in the process, going back to May," when the company suggested five topics for panels that might include Critelli, including education, transportation, innovation across borders and controlling health care costs.

"It's a process of negotiation. It's understanding the agenda of what's going to work and what isn't," says Roberts, an expert on coaching executives for speeches and media interviews.

Burson-Marsteller's Ballock says securing a CEO speaking role is not the same as studios lobbying to get actors nominated for awards. But she says it would be naive to suggest that there aren't conversations that help a CEO to be considered. "I have had those conversations."

"The key is to have an intuitive sense of what the topics are and how to make a contribution. The essence is knowing what is important and when. Certain themes find resonance at certain moments," says de Geus, who has found himself selected for far-flung panels, one of which included a member of Arabic news network Al-Jazeera.

Some sessions are closed to the media, including one Bergman will speak at on global preparation for a flu pandemic. Being off the record encourages freewheeling discussion, he says.

"The business community wants to respond to a crisis. Government wants business to respond, and with NGOs, it's their job," Bergman says. "Very often, people talk at cross purpose. The World Economic Forum lets these sectors communicate directly."

Not all sessions are so grave, and CEOs say they often get the most out of off-beat topics such as string theory.

Bartz still recalls a session on creativity hosted by political cartoonist Pat Oliphant. And Roberts says he recalls another on creativity where 200 CEOs were liberated enough to bellow Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. "They sang with incredible passion," he says.