

Jokes deserve same thought as what goes into a speech

As someone who makes his living in front of an audience, I'm often asked for tips on how to be funny in corporate presentations.

The way I see it, the answer is a whole lot like Steve Martin's advice on becoming a millionaire: "First, you get a million dollars."

But even the world's greatest sense of humor won't guarantee that what works informally among friends and colleagues is going to be effective in the next presentation at the office.

What needs to be determined first is if a given presentation is an appropriate forum. If the answer is no, then for heaven's sake - and the sake of the audience - stay away from it.

All of us have squirmed in our seats while watching a presentation, and perhaps a career, go down the drain due to clumsy, inappropriate attempts at humor.

The trouble often begins when a speaker starts thinking that what he or she has to say just isn't compelling or entertaining enough on its own. "Gee, if only I could bring some humor into it."

Rest assured that when you've been asked to speak in a professional setting it's because you have knowledge, information or experience that is relevant to the audience. Enthusiasm for the topic alone can go a long way. What's more, audiences generally find value in what you have to say when it is a genuine representation of who you are.

Granted, though, there are times when humor, used skillfully, can liven up a presentation. Just keep in mind that humor is seasoning. As a main course, it doesn't stick.

(How often have you laughed yourself silly at a comedy club, only to come up blank the next morning when trying to tell someone what the comedian said?)

Research, research, research

In preparing the presentation, consider these questions:

- What is the purpose of the gathering?
- What does everyone in the audience have in common?
- What/who are the sensitive issues/personalities?
- What time of day is the presentation?

When in doubt, don't

In choosing material, follow your instincts. If you're second-guessing a particular line, story or comment, don't use it! Typically, the best humor in a professional setting is:

- Respectful - of your audience's intelligence, interests and positions. Not to mention, time. (Everybody's busy.)
- Universal. (Does the whole company deal with the same computer quirks?)
- Clean. Remember, we're talking about what's appropriate in a professional setting. Sometimes you can take the same corporate audience, dress them in jeans, scatter them in a comedy club and watch a good number of them laugh at crude material. But not in a business meeting.

Even those who are entertained by the bluest material at the water cooler are going to be turned off and embarrassed by dirty jokes in the context of an official office function.

- Non-political and non-personal. There are exceptions, of course - like speaking to a political party. Or doing a roast. But roasts may be dangerous to begin with because they can easily degenerate into free-for-alls where well-intentioned amateurs bore the audience, humiliate the honoree and embarrass themselves.



EVENT
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To avoid such disasters, consider keeping the proceeding short, hiring a professional (at least as an emcee) and approaching the event as a tribute rather than a roast. This will help dignify the evening and reduce the pressure of the presenters to be funny. A tribute is also more likely to send off the honoree

feeling that he or she is sincerely appreciated by the organization.

So where do I get material?

Here are some places to look:

- Personal experience. We know that truth can be funnier than fiction - and that the things that happen to us can be humorous to others, providing, of course, the audience can relate to the experience. In talking about oneself, self-deprecation is often considered the safest route to take, although even that must be used sparingly and with great discretion.

Audiences, particularly at awards events, resent it when presenters focus too much on themselves, and it's possible that too much self-deprecation can lead unwittingly to the perception that you're insecure and soliciting reassurance.

- Stories and jokes you read and hear. In such a case, always give credit to the original source. This is for two reasons: It helps you keep your friends (how do you like to be plagiarized?), and it preserves your credibility. If an audience has heard your line somewhere else - on HBO, for instance - and you pass it off as your own, they're likely to question the veracity of everything else that you say. Giving proper credit can be as simple as saying, "As George Carlin puts it ..."

- The audience. When possible, meet with a few audience members in the days beforehand. It helps to get a feel for the group and for what they might find funny. If they give you some potential gems, run them by others at different levels in the organization.

Remember, just because a joke or observation is coming from the person at the top, doesn't guarantee that it's appropriate, universal, funny or won't hurt someone. And if the joke doesn't fly, guess who's going down with it?

Mom was right about everything

Ultimately, the best approach to take in front of an audience is to follow the advice your mother might have given you before your first date: Just be yourself. Chances are, the audience isn't going to fall head-over-heals for you, but at least they'll respect you for being confident in your subject and comfortable with yourself.

In a business setting, that can leave a million-dollar impression.

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