

Present with Humour

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Are you mustering the power of humour in your presentations? When used appropriately, it helps you to build tremendous rapport with your audience, gets your point across with impact and develops your reputation as an entertaining and engaging speaker.

Why use humour?

Humour is not comedy. Humour has a point other than pure entertainment. Professional speakers use humour to attract and retain audience interest so they can put their point across. It's been said that laughter is the best medicine. It provides relief from pain and act as a temporary escape or release from suffering and reality. Hence people naturally welcome the right dosage of humour in the right setting. Speakers use it to diffuse tension. Humour can help you make a point and even gracefully redirect attention away from a potentially embarrassing question.

When to use humour?

Humour can be used at the beginning of a presentation to build rapport, to energise your audience and as segue to the main body of your presentation. It can be weaved into your main speech body to illustrate key points, reinforce messages and interact with the audience. It can be used at the end of a presentation to make your message memorable.

I am not funny, can I use humour?

When people think of humour, they normally think of jokes. Many people think they are not funny enough to tell jokes and hence do not use humour. This is a common misconception. Humour can exist in different forms. Showing a cartoon is a form of humour. Showing a funny video clip from YouTube is a form of humour. The most traditional way people associate humour with is jokes. So let's examine jokes.

Anatomy of a joke

A joke has three key parts: Set up, Pause and Punch line. The set up is the background information that leads the listeners to an unexpected pathway. The pause is an important delivery technique just before the punch line. The pause is important as it signals to the audience you have something important to say. It builds up tension through anticipation. The punch line is the word, phrase or sentence that creates the humour. It is the payoff to the story which releases the tension. To be funny, it needs to be unexpected. You can imagine a line going from left to right and then suddenly turning off sharply at an angle. The sharper the angle, the greater the derailment, the funnier the joke will be.

Styles of jokes

I broadly classify jokes into two styles: formula and story

Formula style:

There are various types: one-liners, word play (contradictions, dual meanings, puns), definitions, irreverence, switching, fool's query and twisted proverbs, just to name a few. Let's take a look at two examples.

One-liners

“It’s been said that before marriage, a man is incomplete. But after marriage, he’s finished.”

One-liners are easy to use and incorporate into your presentation. You do not even need to be original. The key is to make it specific and relevant to your topic and audience, as with all humour.

Word play-contradictions

“When I do right, no one remembers. When I do wrong, no one forgets”

Here the word play is on opposites and playing off contrasting states and emotions. Think of a Miss Universe pageant to appreciate the meaning of contradiction. The contestant who smiles is the one who lost (you got to look graceful even though you are just the first runner-up), while the contestant who cries is the winner (shedding tears of joy).

Word play-dual meanings

Think of the subprime borrower who was so grateful to his banker for granting him a loan which he would not otherwise have gotten, by saying this with tears rolling down his cheeks: “Thank you so much for your generosity. I don’t know how I am ever going to repay you.” The second sentence is a common expression of gratitude, which in this case turned out to be actually true. His non-payment had lent to the roots of the subprime crisis as we know it.

Formula style humour is easy to use, as you can follow the formula and use its structure like a template. Just fill in your own contents to customise it for your target audience.

Story style:

This is a longer form of jokes. It takes a more elaborate set up with richer details, the pause and final punch line. For example: “Famous playwright George Bernard Shaw once met a beautiful lady at a party. After a few drinks too many, the lady who was not exactly very high on the IQ department, went up to him and proposed marriage. She said to him how wonderful it would be when they have children, as they would have her looks, and his brains. George Bernard Shaw, the more sober of the two, declined. He said, “No, no. Can you imagine what would happen if our children have my looks and your brains instead?”

Notice the long elaborate set up before the punch line, which classifies it as a story. To pull this off well, you need to have better delivery skills as compared to the formula style, which is easily told with a straight face.

Delivery

For the story style, delivery is important. There is more important emphasis on the areas of facial expressions, gestures and body language. Greater exaggeration of body language and variations in tonality are pre-requisites for a good, funny story as you need to maintain the audience attention as you unfold the story.

Do’s of humour

Do make it relevant to your topic. There must be a purpose in telling your joke. Better still, use it to illustrate or explain a point to make it memorable.

Self-deprecating humour (making fun of yourself) is useful if you are already an acknowledged expert or highly successful. It shows the human side of you. For example, at the Stanford University’s commencement speech, Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple, started off by saying that he did not graduate from college, and that his presence that day “was the closest he ever came to graduation.” However, if you are just starting to establish yourself as an authority, you may want to skip this. There are many ways to skin a cat and this is just one of them.

Don'ts of humour—Three rules

Rule 1: Do not tell people you are going to tell them a joke. Jokes work on the element of derailment and surprise. You will kill the joke if you pre-empt the audience. The safest way: tell them you are going to tell them a story, if you must. Not a joke. Of course, the better way is to just launch straight into your story.

Rule 2: Don't tell jokes on sex, politics and religion to a business audience. Keep them for the night out with the guys at the pub. Some jokes have class, others are crass. Use your common sense. If in doubt, leave it out. Be safe, not sorry.

Rule 3: Don't make the audience the target of your jokes. If you want to joke about how bad woman drivers can be to a mainly female audience, be really careful, unless of course you are one of them. Don't talk about how your elderly audience belongs to the "Infirmation" Age in this Information Age, unless you are one of them, which qualifies as self-deprecating humour.

Sources of humour

People often asked where I got my inspiration from. The internet, of course, is a vast resource for jokes, cartoons and funny videos. Better still, your life and the world around you are full of examples for humour. They are the best form of humour as you can personalise your story since you have experienced it yourself, which makes it easy to tell. I once went to a convention centre and saw a "Baby Changing Station" signboard with the photograph of a baby on a door. Something triggered my mind and I turn to my wife and said, "How nice it would be if they also have a "Wife Changing Station." It was truly hilarious for me at the moment, but you can probably tell my wife did not take too kindly to that. Remember Rule 3.

What if my joke bombed?

Don't Panic. As long as your story (tell a story, not a joke, remember?) is relevant to your point, it is fine. A joke is simply a funny story. If the audience did not laugh, they must have considered it a serious story. So just continue with your presentation, seriously. Telling jokes with a straight face is good insurance. It may take practice though to not laugh at your own jokes.

Don't Repeat. Don't retell the joke so that the audience gets it. Just move on. Nobody looks forward to having reheated dinners the day after the party.

Don't Explain. A dissected frog is no fun to look at, and so is a dissected joke not funny to listen to. Don't bother with either.

Conclusion

As with all skills, the more you practise *correctly*, the better you become. The jokes may be free, but to tell them well is a priceless skill worthy of your time to master.

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