

Techniques for Connecting with Humor

Can you think of a time when you or someone you knew heard a really funny story and then tried to tell it to someone else without evoking a single chuckle? Instead of peals of laughter, you got the old “Guess you had to be there” response. Why is it that the exact same story is hilarious in one instance and bland in another? It all has to do with the delivery. There are many different elements that factor into making humor work. Timing, gestures and facial expressions, vocal tone and inflection, and the setting are examples of just some of the things that should always be considered when delivering a shot of humor. Gestures and facial and vocal expression are things you have direct control over and should be amply practiced. If you are willing to exercise the discipline to rehearse in front of a mirror, or even better, in front of a video camera, you can then step back and observe yourself. In so doing, you will reach a greater degree of mastery.

A critical part of your preparation is to know your audience. Often, understanding the basic attributes that your audience members have in common will give you clues as to what sort of humor might work with them. For example, if you are talking to business people, workplace humor may likely strike a chord. If you are talking to moms, on the other hand, you might center your humor on keeping up with all the demands of home and family. Similarly, coaches and athletes would appreciate sports humor. You need to ask yourself, “What are the commonalities among these individuals that bring them all together to hear the same speech? What would be funny to *this* particular group of people?” The more you know about your audience, the better you’ll be able to connect with them. And the more you can bring yourself onto their turf, the more apt they will be to identify with you and to respond to your message. As the late Victor Borge once said, “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”

Sometimes humor will come to you off-the-cuff. This element of spontaneity can be very effective, but depending on the situation, it must often be planned for and implemented with care. This advice holds especially true when introducing a topic that you hope will really resonate with your audience by the end of your presentation. Spontaneous humor is

an opportunity to gain instant rapport, one that should not be passed up. William Norwood Brigance wrote:

The humorous introduction needs careful handling. Humor is invaluable for establishing friendship with the audience. It also establishes a part of the speaker's prestige, shows whether he is a sympathetic human being, a dull bore or a stuffed shirt. We might say that, as an operating rule, every speech, excepting on solemn or state occasions, needs humor at the start in order to establish rapport between speaker and audience.

You can see that the proper use of humor in your introduction is crucial. Your opener is where you set the stage, create the mood and get your audience ready to laugh. It sets up the rest of your delivery. Once you've successfully launched your presentation, you will want to continue using humor throughout. Sometimes, you will use humor to change your pace and re-center your audience's focus. Other times, you may use it to underscore a key point, to lighten the mood or to simply maintain rapport. Don't despair if everyone does not laugh. In fact, many people won't laugh, but they will still be smiling on the inside. A physical or mental smile also helps during the persuasion process.

When preparing humorous material, it is worthwhile to take a step back and review the structure of a well-told joke or story. There are four basic components to effective humor: the introduction, the groundwork, the build-up and the punch line. Similar to introducing a topic at the beginning of a speech, the introduction to a joke or story grabs the audience's attention and prepares them for what is to follow. You want them to be listening attentively and expectantly before diving into your humorous material. Try to make your introduction succinct.

When you know you've got their attention, transition into laying your humor's groundwork. This involves setting the scene, painting the picture and unrolling the storyline that will ultimately lead up to the punch line. In this phase, try to draw your audience in to the situation as much as possible. Make it as vivid and descriptive as

possible so they can readily place themselves in the scenario you are depicting. Be careful that you don't spend too much time on the groundwork or rush to the next stage. Even if you've told this joke/story a hundred times before, keep in mind that it's the first time this audience is hearing it. Pace yourself so the humor will be effective and produce the desired results.

As the plot progresses and you build up to your story's climax, you transition again. At this point, you want your audience to be intensely interested in what is going to happen. A sense of tension has to exist before the resolution. Utilize the element of drama to evoke as much anticipation as possible. Finally, give your audience the punch line. Most effective punch lines contain some element of surprise. There has to be some kind of twist to your joke's conclusion so you keep your audience guessing. Nothing diffuses the impact of a joke more than if people know all along what the punch line is going to be. Make the punch line short and to the point. Your efforts will fizzle if your audience has to sit there and try to figure it out.

Read the following story and see if you can identify the four different components of an effective joke or story: Communication is critical to any relationship. Even married couples who have been together for years need to communicate their expectations of each other. Communication is a lifelong process. That reminds me of an old friend I used to work with who was the quiet type. He never said much, but he always got the job done. He was a dedicated worker and had been married for over twenty years. When he won the \$20,000,000 lottery, the news traveled around his workplace like wildfire. When he regained his composure, he called his wife, who still didn't know what was going on. The phone rang and rang until at last she finally picked up. He told her that he'd won the \$20,000,000 lottery and would be cleaning out his office and saying good-bye to his coworkers. He instructed her that she should also get her things packed right away. His wife was thrilled over the prospect of celebrating and wondered where he would take her—Alaska? Mexico? She was eager to get packing and asked him where they were going to go. The new millionaire happily remarked, "You can go wherever you want, as long as you're gone when I get home!"

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