

The Use of Persuasive Humor in the “Real World”

Humor’s catalytic effects make it a popular tool in countless “real life” situations. I already cited the example of canned laughter in sitcoms. When two audiences have been shown the same show, the only difference being the presence or lack of canned laughter, the one that hears the laughter always laughs longer and more frequently. Why are producers interested in the quality of the laughs they’re evoking? One word: ratings. Humor, in fact, can be powerful in practically any marketing situation. Television commercials and print advertising are often designed to make us laugh. It is likely that if you find a commercial to be really funny, you’ll remember the chuckle it produced when you see the advertised product in the store. If nothing else, the commercial or ad will be memorable, and each time you recall it, it will cultivate and strengthen positive associations with the product being advertised.

All of these efforts are worthwhile to the marketer because s/he knows it is only a matter of time before the cumulative effect of humorous messaging will compel you to buy. How about salespeople? Have you ever had a salesperson who was a real jokester? Often, salespeople use humor to get a prospect to relax, open up and connect. This strategy works, too. If the salesperson gets us laughing along, we like them and we feel like we’re having a good time. We’re glad for a sales representative who appreciates our needs and concerns but who can also take the stress and anxiety out of making an important purchase. These effects, all wrought by the salesperson’s use of humor, bring down our guards and make us more inclined to be influenced. You might think you are funny, but you could be annoying your prospects. We have all met someone who thought he was funny but did not even make us smile. Remember that when you use humor, your prospect will either laugh with you or feel sorry for you. Make sure all your humor is tested and your prospects are in the mood for it.

No matter how much you prepare or practice, sometimes your story or joke will bomb. Even if it has worked in the past, sometimes, depending on the audience and the circumstances, the story or joke just won’t go over well. You have to be able to handle

yourself after the bomb, perhaps using even more humor to make fun of yourself. For example, I have heard the following comebacks:

If silence is golden, that joke must be worth about \$100,000.

That story/joke takes a while to sink in. Around two A.M., that's going to seem so funny that you won't be able to go back to sleep.

Blame someone in the audience or the writers for the failed joke/story.

OK, here is another joke you might not care for.

That was a joke designed to get a silent laugh...and it worked.

Many of you look a little puzzled. You don't know if I was making a serious point or making fun. (pause) You know, to tell the truth, I don't know either.

You may have heard about the slow but sure movement of "humor in hospitals." The trend continues to grow as healthcare professionals become more and more convinced of humor's therapeutic power. Another reason for comedy's popularity is that it buffers the growing sentiment that hospitals are becoming more and more depersonalized in their handling of patient care, focusing instead on more technology and other medical advancements. Advocates swear by humor's tendency to shorten hospital stays and reduce the need for medications.

"Humor in hospitals" takes on many forms, including the very popular volunteer clowns, "humor carts" bearing funny audio and videotapes, cartoons, games and other funny props, and even entire rooms devoted to humor and fun. Remember the movie *Patch Adams*? Hunter "Patch" Adams, the actual pediatric physician on whom the movie was based, made it a common practice to wear his clown suit—red rubber nose and all—as he

made his rounds. Adams, still active in promoting humor in the healing process, says, “Joy is more important than any other drug.”

There are countless other examples of humor’s use in the “real world.” Whether you’re trying to persuade or not, humor generates high spirits and goodwill. Thus, it has an overall powerful, positive impact on an entire organization. In myriad industries, human resources departments use humor to retain employees, to boost morale and to stimulate productivity. Teachers use humor in the classroom to engage students, to increase comprehension, to generate greater participation and to make the learning process more enjoyable. Parents, coaches, religious youth group leaders, bosses, managers and other teachers and leaders all have plenty of use for humor in their interactions with those they have responsibility over.

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