

If You Want More Humor in Your Presentation(s)

by John Cantu ©1998, 1999

This article gives you some concrete suggestions on how you can evaluate your current presentation and discover how effective your presentation's current humor really is.

I am a professional humor coach and this article is based on the result of years of working with clients such as: Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE and former National Speakers' Association president, Malcolm Kushner (Humor consultant & author "The Light Touch"; & "Successful Presentation Skills for Dummies"), Stu Silverstein MD (Humorist speaker on medical topics), Mark S A Smith (Co-Author "Guerrilla Trade Show Selling," & "Guerrilla Teleselling"), Larry Wilde (Motivational humorist & author of 56 humor books with more than 10 million in print), Orvel Ray Wilson (Coauthor "Guerrilla Selling"). This is a small sampling of my humor credits. You can review a more comprehensive overview by sending an email requesting "Cantu Full Bio."

I've often used a taxi-driver analogy to describe the underlying principle with regard to my approach to giving humor advice and offering coaching. If I were a cab driver in the San Francisco Financial District and you jumped in my cab and said, "Take me to the Airport," I would do so without hesitation since the airport is at least 25 minutes away and a cab (or a shuttle) is about the best and quickest way to get there.

But you might jump in my cab and say, "Take me to 450 California Street.", and I might say, "Well, I could take you to 450 California Street and I would be happy to charge you to do so, but are you aware that if you simply walk to the end of this block and turn right, it will be just three doors down? It's about a four minute walk. Now, do you still want me to take you there, or do think you can get there on your own?" In other words, I am not looking for every client who thinks he/she needs help. I only want to work with you, if you are absolutely convinced that I am the best vehicle to get you to where you want to go. If this make sense to you, then and only then, should you request a fee schedule. The following ideas are some suggestions about what you should do before contacting me (or another humor coach) and discovering if you even really need coaching assistance.

If you are not totally satisfied with effectiveness of humor in your presentations right now, chances are that your material can be slotted into one of the following three situations:

1. You have a fully developed presentation that you give on regular basis which does not change much from engagement except for minor customizing and you want to increase either the quality or quantity or perhaps both of the already existing humor.

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2. You have one or more vignettes/stories that you believe could be improved by the addition of some humor.

3. You have one or more undeveloped ideas, topics, or concepts that you would like fleshed out into a more presentable and humorous form.

In order to improve your humor quotient you have to be clear on what you want. I have often heard speakers describe their presentations as "my talk has 10% humor and 90% non-humorous content" or "30% humor and 70% serious material" or "50% humor and 50% solid content" or pick your own ratio.

For me, these descriptions are too vague to be of real use in knowing how much humor you already have in your talk or how much humor you could add or should add to your presentation. What criteria can you use to define 10% or 30% or any percent of your speech as humorous? There is only one criterion for defining the humor in your talk. It is each line that generates a laugh. Every time people laugh - you've just delivered an effective humorous line, idea, or concept.

Therefore, I suggest you borrow a technique used by professional comedians to evaluate their own act for funniness - the concept of LPM: (Laughs per minute). A stream-of-consciousness comic like Robin Williams may generate nine or ten LPM. Bob Hope and Phyllis Diller clock in at about seven LPM. Most comics will run about five LPM (Before I started working with professional speakers I used to coach new comedians. I usually would work with them trying for a ratio of five LPM). Bill Cosby, the story teller, rates about four LPM and Lily Tomlin with her philosophical observations runs about one LPM.

There is no right or wrong ratio. It is a matter of personal style. But I feel it is more helpful to decide "I'm giving a 30 minute presentation and I would be satisfied with three good laughs" (LPM ratio: one laugh every 10 minutes) or "I want it to be a bit more light-hearted, I'd like at least 10 solid laughs" (LPM ratio: one laugh every three minutes) than using the vague percentage technique. This principle can be applied to any length presentation - number of minutes divided by number of laughs desired in an entire time frame.

I think this approach is better for one simple reason - if you use the 10% or 20% or whatever % concept, how can you tell if you're succeeding? With the LPM method, you can listen to an audio tape or review a video tape and you will know if you got the amount of laughs you were trying for, or if you got more, or if you got less. And realize the LPM technique does not turn you into a comedian. It is only a tool to help you evaluate YOUR success in adding the PRECISE AMOUNT of EFFECTIVE humor YOU desire.

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Now, I do help speakers add humor to their talks. But if you have a full-blown presentation, before you contact me, you might want to do an analysis of what LPM ratio you would be comfortable with. Do you want five, ten, fifteen, twenty, or more laughs in the time frame of your talk?

Well, first review three tapes of past performances. Audio or video, it doesn't matter, since all you're going to do is listen for and count the number of laughs. Count every laugh. Count a laugh, even if it wasn't from something you had planned as funny. Count a laugh even if you don't understand why the audience laughed at that particular moment. The audience doesn't divide its laughs into "a real laugh because the presenter planned it" and "not a real laugh because it was unplanned" - they laugh at whatever makes them laugh - and they give you credit for it. This is true even if they're laughing at something another audience member said or did. So count every laugh you hear regardless of its cause.

Do a laughs total for each individual session and then divide the amount into the total number of minutes you spoke giving that talk to find the LPM ratio for that particular presentation. (Use the exact number of minutes you spoke. You may claim you have a 50 minute speech, but you consistently go over that time by 10 minutes. Then you should divide 60 minutes by the number of laughs you received. Your literature may state you have a 45 minute talk but you consistently finish in 40 minutes. Deal with the real length of your talk and not the length your literature claims.) Three different totals should give you a fair idea of the range of your current LPM ratio.

Keep in mind that some audiences will not laugh at everything you think is funny and other audiences will laugh at things you didn't think were funny. Day in and day out if you are hitting 90% to 110% (plus or minus 10%) of your targeted LPM you should consider yourself to be successful with the amount of humor you want to present.

You might just surprise yourself. For the first time, you might just discover you are funnier than you ever imagined. Your laugh ratio might demonstrate that you already have as many laughs as you desire. Maybe even more!

Great. Go forth, speak, and worry no more about the humor in your speeches. You don't need a humor coach - - - unless you have new untried vignettes or ideas or concepts that need to be fleshed out and/or punched up. Or unless you find you don't have the number of laughs you would like (you have a lower LPM ratio than you would prefer). Or unless you have an entirely different humor/comedy issue you would like some help with. In that case, let's talk.

I have a fee schedule that I can send you. When you receive it, you will see that I charge a small flat fee if you want laughs added to an existing talk (30 to 90

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minutes) that you give regularly. That's because, based on past experience, I am fairly confident that most of the laughs you want are already in your talk. Oh, you probably haven't seen them simply because you are too close to your material, but believe me the laughs are usually in there.

Speakers too often make the mistake of judging their humor content by looking solely for obviously humorous-type lines in their talks. But audiences laugh at much more than just obviously funny lines - They can laugh at undisguised passion, recognition of concepts that are a part of their own experiences, the juxtaposition of two sentences that together convey some synergistic humorous thought, and many other non-joke elements. One of my skills is the ability to recognize and point out these elements out to you.

Often, a laugh can be brought forth simply by pausing and giving the audience time to recognize the humor. In other cases, it is simply a matter of some minor restructuring, rewriting, or repositioning a line differently for maximum effectiveness. This, by and large, is a fairly straightforward matter and for the most part doesn't take hours and hours and hours of time. Nor does it usually involve any radical restructuring of your talk or adding a bunch of 'jokes'.

However, working with a stand alone vignettes(s) and/or an untried concept(s), it's harder to predict the time-line needed to get to reach an acceptable level of funniness. I just can't predict how much time it will take when working with you on untried material or material in the rough. Therefore, in those cases you'll see that I charge by the hour.

For most projects we should be able to do the actual work via phone, fax, and email. I do some face-to-face consulting but at a higher hourly rate. I do not as yet have a regular office so you would have to provide the meeting place for face to face work. Need help with some other comedy/humor issue? Tell me your problem.

Let me know if you want to have a fee schedule emailed to you. No need for my services but know someone who does? I give a 10% finder fee for any referral - 10% of all fees generated by referral.

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