



But I'm Not A Comedian!

Adding Humor Without Parodies, Pauses or P-sounds

by Todd Hunt

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Don't write clever jokes? Wear funny costumes? Chat with your audience? Good news -- you don't need an arsenal of one-liners to add humor to your keynote speech, seminar or other program! Here are seven tested techniques to punch up your programs without punch lines (or even alliteration).

1. Exaggeration

Look at your speech and identify places where you can stretch the truth. Example: I talk about the frustrations of voice mail. People who try to be creative in their greetings.

“Yep, we hate talking into these things too, but that's the only way we'll get your message, so leave yours after the beep.” I don't exaggerate the message (that's verbatim), but I exaggerate the voice.

I once heard a greeting with background music. So I exaggerated the concept:

“Then we have the ‘production numbers.’ Hollywood epics with 87-piece symphony orchestra. [HUM ‘OVER THE RAINBOW’] Hello -- it's Dorothy. I'm somewhere ‘Over the Rainbow’ now, so leave your name and number after the beep, and I'll call you back just as soon as I return from Oz.”

These are not typical jokes; that is, setup and punchline. Comedians know how to do jokes, but you may not be comfortable with that. So try exaggeration instead.

2. Self-deprecation

Poking fun at ourselves always works, because we offend nobody. And you show the audience you're comfortable in your own skin, which gives them permission to be comfortable in *their* own skin.

Maybe you're technologically challenged:

"I don't know a microchip from a potato chip. But I *do* have a computer. With a built-in cupholder. Press the button, that little tray slides out, you set your coffee mug on it. See -- you've got one; you know what it's for!"

Maybe you're obsessive-compulsive:

"I organize the money in my wallet by denomination and bill condition. And serial number sequence." (That last one's an exaggeration -- the first two are not.)

3. Report funny things you see

The easiest way to add humor -- just observe the wackiness around you! I do a segment on stupid signs, which ties into one of my books, "Pardon Me, But That's a Really Stupid Sign!"

Like the one in the window of my neighborhood dry cleaner:
38 YEARS ON THE SAME SPOT
(Maybe they should have tried baking soda.)

In a Connecticut restaurant:
OPEN SEVEN DAYS A WEEK *AND* WEEKENDS

Store window:
TATTOOS IN REAR
(That's gotta hurt!)

Collect some funny things like these signs, then connect them to your theme. Mine is how we all mess up communicating...and one way is "forgetting to think -- you see this everywhere, especially on signs." Then I launch into my funny sign sightings.

4. Tags

I said we wouldn't talk about jokes, but here's a lesson from the comedy world -- add a joke (or tag) after the first joke.

"I'm in a Red Lobster Restaurant, reading the menu. Server walks over and says, 'Do you have any questions?' 'Yes -- what's the capital of Ecuador?' 'No -- about the *menu!*' 'Oh, the menu. Yes -- what kind of paper is this? Where'd you get it typeset? Who did the laminating?'"

"I'm ordering at KFC -- 'Number 3, please.' 'Original or crispy?' 'Original.' 'Seventeen-minute wait for original.' 'Okay, crispy. 'Day-and-a-half wait for crispy.' 'How about Tender Roast?' 'February 30th.' 'I'll just go next door and order a pizza.'"

5. Bits

Add funny comments or asides to your material. I ask my audiences if they've ever worked for a boss who truly inspired them. When the hands go up, I say, "Me too. Mine was Harry. And short. (OK, Harry was his name.)"

It catches people off guard. They laugh. Sometimes they groan. Doesn't matter -- I go on with the story.

I do another piece about how law school teaches you to prepare the other side's case first. Because once you know where they're coming from, you can better build your own argument. I start out with, "Anybody go to law school?" Usually no response. Then I say, "Anybody get in trouble with the law *at* school?" Chuckles. Not fall-on-the-floor funny, but it keeps them alert.

6. Misdirection

Say something that has a logical ending, but change the ending.

“We start communicating the day we’re born, and don’t stop until the day we get married.” (You thought I was going to say until the day we die.)

“The word ‘sell’ originates from the Scandinavian root ‘Zelzig,’ which literally means [beat] ‘Lover of mountain goats.’ Okay, it really means ‘to serve.’”

Even if you’re not a comedian try some of these techniques to add fun to your next presentation!

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Todd Hunt is a Recovering Anal Retentive Professional (RARP), who finally learned to lighten up. Now he speaks for groups that want to add fun to their meetings and send members back to work smiling -- with tips to improve communication and success. His world’s shortest e-mail newsletter (30 seconds, twice a month) is available free at www.ToddHuntSpeaker.com.

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