

How Speakers Can Use Humor as a "Branding" Technique

by Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

Humor is probably not the primary purpose of your presentation, but it can be a powerful tool for making points and grabbing audience attention. Recently, I chatted with humor expert John Cantu about how to make humor a part of your professional image. "Used wisely," John told me, "humor can build a 'brand image' for you and your topic." Here are five techniques John shared with me that you can use to create you own humor brand.

1. USE A SIGNATURE CATCH-PHRASE - Most people recognize the following phrases or slogans and automatically think of the creators when they hear:

"I don't get no respect."

"The Top Ten List"

"You might be a redneck if . . ."

"Where's the beef?"

These phrases are "owned" by Rodney Dangerfield, David Letterman, and Jeff Foxworthy in that order. Come up with something memorable, and people will remember you every time they hear the words in everyday life.

2. USE A SIGNATURE STORY - A definitive example is Jeanne Robertson's account of her baton-twirling debacle in the Miss America talent competition. No one can think of Jeanne and not remember this hilarious story. (Jeanne is past President of the National Speakers Assn. and a top humorist.)

3. USE A TAG LINE - Frank King's tag line is "Make a living, not a difference." King brags that his material has "no message whatsoever," unlike most humorists who justify their talks with the themes "Humor is the best medicine" or "We should all learn to laugh at ourselves." King says, "You want a message? Check your voice mail." He does standup comedy with not the slightest attempt to give a message.

4. CREATE A CHARACTER - Some speakers create a character outside their real self. Two of the best known humor "character" brands of popular NSA humorists are J. Terryl Bechtol's "Bubba" and George Campbell's "Joe Malarkey."

Bubba is your stock "good ol' boy." Bechtol told me, "People don't realize I have three degrees. When I was doing training workshops based on my education, I was starving. And then I became a goober and got rich."

"Joe Malarkey, the Worst Motivational Speaker in America' is a classic. George Campbell's promo says, "Joe touches on affirmations, goal-setting, subliminal tapes, relationship skills, and dress-for-success techniques." I will go on record that the Joe Malarkey character is simply the most perfect stage persona/presentation ever created. I have seen many top comics live -- Jackie Mason, Jay Leno, Woody Allen (in his standup days), David Brenner, Dana Carvey, Paula Poundstone, Sandra Bernhard, etc. -- and Joe Malarkey is flawless. Campbell's material, stage presence, and delivery are just breathtakingly perfectly blended.

5. ADOPT A UNIQUE FORMAT - For example, past NSA President Mike McKinley, who speaks on business, motivation, and leadership, has a very funny presentation illustrated with photos of real signs. He uses them as a humor device throughout his talk. While others quote funny signs, the idea of using slides of real-world signs to make serious points about marketing now belongs to McKinley. Anyone adopting this framework, even on another topic, will be recognized as an imitator.

Larry Winget owns the brand of `prop' humor. With his outrageous collection of eye wear and a toilet plunger on his cue ball head, he calls himself "The King of Stuff." Winget's website describes his offerings as, "-- a unique blend of humor, motivation, and content, all wrapped around the theme of your meeting! He can also deliver an outstanding seminar providing easy-to-implement ideas on a number of topics." (I tell my comedian pals, "Larry Winget is a businessman's Gallagher.")

So, if you're a speaker, consider these five options for creating your own humor brand.

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John Cantu is San Francisco-based professional humorist, board member of the NSA-NC chapter, and humor consultant. His website, <http://www.humormall.com>, has lots of free articles on how to create and/or deliver humor effectively. Hear him on *The Story Behind Awesome Storytelling* with Patricia Fripp.

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