

A man with a shaved head and a goatee is holding a white cutout of his own face. The cutout shows him with a wide-eyed, shocked expression and his tongue sticking out. He is wearing a blue and black striped shirt. The background is black.

Add humor to your presentations with tried-and-true techniques. If the audience is laughing, people are listening.

So You Think You're Funny?

BY STEVIE RAY

When I attended Minnesota State University-Moorhead many years ago, I knew I wanted to study what made people laugh. Since there were no college degrees in humor at the time, I had to create one. With the help of two special advisors, we created a curriculum, petitioned the university board and developed a new course of study: *Theory and Performance of Comedy*. I have been lucky enough to put that degree to use, making my living in front of an audience, both as a speaker and an entertainer. (Surprisingly, my parents didn't boast to neighbors when I graduated from college.)

Comedy is my life, but I disagree with much of the advice given to speakers about adding humor to presentations. Most include lists of funny opening lines, possible come-backs when a joke bombs, closing bits and one-liners. Comedians frown on borrowing material from outside sources because it just doesn't work. One-liners, for example, are the weakest form of humor because they access the lowest levels of thinking. Like puns, which rely only on the sounds of words, one-liners rely on simple semantic trickery.

Great comedy is genuine because it comes from the performer's heart. It engages all levels of thinking by skewering ideas, attitudes and behavior. To achieve high comedy, you must speak to the audience, not throw funny lines at them.

Anatomy of Humor

All things funny follow a simple pattern of *premise*, *set-up* and *punch line*. The premise is the theme of the material. The set-up is all the information the audience needs to know to follow the story. The punch line is the impact line—the funny line.

What are the most common mistakes speakers make when attempting humor?

The audience doesn't care about the premise. This happens when you have a story you like and you're going to make it fit a particular occasion, even though it doesn't really fit.

The set-up is unclear. It is called a "set-up" because you are setting up the audience's train of thought. In order for the punch line to be a surprise, the audience has to be thinking in one direction so you can hit them with a switcheroo at the end. If your set-up wanders, we don't know what direction you're taking us, so there is no clear train of thought.

Remember the last time a guy told you a story and he kept correcting himself as to what day the event happened? "Last Tuesday, Bob and I . . . or was it Wednesday? I think it was Tuesday, but it might have even been Friday." After a minute you were ready to scream, "I don't care what day it was! What happened?" If a detail doesn't have a direct connection to the punch line, leave it out. The longer the set-up, the bigger the punch line must be to justify the listener's investment in your story. So make sure you include all the information needed to follow the story, and *not one word more*.

The punch line is weak. Comedy is exaggeration. We don't want to hear about how you waited two hours for the bus. We want to hear about you waiting 57 hours . . . in the rain. Remember, *comedy is tragedy that happens to someone else*. This means you must stretch the truth. It's for the sake of a laugh, so the audience will not only allow you a bit of leeway with reality, they welcome it the same way we suspend our disbelief at the movies to enjoy watching starships fly through space.

The Laws of Laughter

Sadly, this formula won't create laughter by itself. A person will not laugh unless the following laws are in place.

Laughter of the Unexpected. We've all heard someone tell a joke that we heard before. If there is no surprise, we will not laugh. (That is why a traditional joke rarely gets laughs.) Most people kill Laughter of the Unexpected by putting too much information in the set-up. Too much story detail confuses listeners and risks allowing them to guess the ending.



Laughter of Recognition. Remember the last time you heard someone tell a story and you laughed, "That same thing happened to me!" Being social creatures, we love to bond through common experiences, and laughter reinforces our sameness.

Laughter of Superiority. This law was actually introduced by Plato and Aristotle, who discovered an interesting truth about comedy: You never laugh unless it is at someone. Humor needs a target. This is tricky for speakers because finding an acceptable target among your audience can be risky. You must be careful not to poke fun at the wrong person. Actually, finding a target isn't difficult if you pay attention to the audience. There is always someone who tries to stand out from the crowd and begs to be part of

the show. If there is no one you feel comfortable poking in the ribs, however, turn the joke on yourself (always an acceptable target).

Laughter of Delight. Laughter is a typical response to group energy. In fact, people are 16 times more likely to laugh at something if other people are present than if they are alone.

Three Conditions of Humor

By themselves, the laws aren't funny. Surprise doesn't always result in laughter—often, it induces shock or fear. To create a laugh response, the speaker must ensure that the following conditions are in place:

Light-hearted atmosphere. Laughter rarely pops up in a somber room unless it is nervous laughter—and we don't want that kind. If the atmosphere isn't light hearted, a good speaker will first determine why and then decide if and when laughter is warranted. For example, if a serious announcement has just been made, many speakers would shut down any attempts at humor. The audience, however, might be aching for you to relieve the tension. Slowly bringing levity into the atmosphere puts the audience in the palm of your hand, and grateful for the release.

Detachment. In order for people to laugh, they can't care too much about the subject of the laughter or the laugh provider. Laughter needs a target, but it can't be a defenseless one (e.g., a physically or mentally challenged person). We also must feel detached from the joke teller so we won't worry that he might bomb. Comedy requires the speaker to walk a fine line. You must select a premise that the audience cares about—but not too much—to maintain the necessary distance to laugh about it.

Permission to laugh. Psychologists classify laughter as a cued response, meaning we often have to be told when it is time to laugh. Watch joke tellers relating a funny story and you'll see that they often

start laughing as they approach the ending, letting the listener know that it is not only okay to laugh, but it is expected. A good speaker will not simply *hope* for a laugh at the end of a routine, but cue the laughter with an expectant attitude.

You can kill any of these conditions by making one fatal mistake: *displaying nervousness*. By showing even the slightest hint that you are afraid you might not get a laugh, you remove the light-hearted atmosphere, you lose detachment, and you remove permission to laugh. The only way to create comedy is with absolute confidence.

Most comedians do not actually sit down and write comedy material—they *discover* it. As they perform, they spontaneously create new ideas and routines. Because a good deal of comedy comes as a surprise, diligent comedians will record their act so they can retrieve new material. Instead of writing comedy, they recall it. The trick is delivering the material to a new audience as if it is the first time, even though it might be the hundredth.

If you want to add more humor to your presentations, follow the example of professional comedians. Record your presentation and review it for new gems.

Practice using the new material in future presentations. If you try a bit and it does not get the laughs you expected, look at the formula, the laws and the conditions of comedy. You'll be able to retool your material and knock 'em dead. **S**

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Comedy WORKOUT

Exercise ONE

The next time you make a group of friends laugh, take notes. What did you say? What was the context of the conversation? What were the story details? Write down everything you can remember so you can move to the next step: recreating the laugh. Tell

the same story to a different group of friends, then again to another group. Comedy is not about simply being funny; it is about being able to recreate a moment. A comedian can't be funny only when he or she feels like it. You have to be funny in front of a group of well-dressed executives at a Friday evening fundraiser, and then again at a VFW pancake breakfast on Sunday morning. You have to be funny when the M.C. says, "You're on!"

Don't tell people that you are practicing this exercise. And don't ask a friend, "Do you think this is funny?" Instead, find ways to insert the story into everyday conversation (just as you must smoothly insert humor into a speech). If you are diligent at this exercise, you will quickly build a bank of trusted material from which you can pull during any presentation. You also will develop true comedic instincts, rather than rely on a joke book.

Exercise TWO

Perform at a comedy club. Put together three minutes of funny stuff and sign up at a comedy club amateur night, most often referred to as an "Open Stage" or "Open Mic" (short for microphone). Don't assume you can just take the stage and wing it—

prepare three minutes of material. And don't just try it once. Even seasoned veterans like Jerry Seinfeld continually work out new material at open mic night.

I've heard dozens of speakers say, "I'm a speaker and a comedian." The strict definition of a comedian is anyone who makes an audience laugh, but there is a big difference between getting laughs during a speech and making a comedy club audience give it up. I've delivered training sessions to Honeywell executives one week and performed stand-up at a saloon in a small town in South Dakota the next. (Guess which audience was easier to manage.)

The difference between professional speaking and professional comedy is audience expectation. An audience at a corporate presentation isn't expecting Rodney Dangerfield, so even a mild attempt at humor is a welcome surprise. And if your humor is not 100 percent, listeners will still respond politely. Comedy club audiences expect lots of laughs. If you are off your mark, they don't sit politely and applaud at the end; they let you know you failed right then and there.

Make open stages part of your weekly humor exercise. If you are on the road, see if a local club has an open mic night for a fun change of pace that will change you as a speaker in ways no other training can. Perform at a comedy club, and then tell me you're a speaker and a comedian.