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Special Report #3: 12 Tips to Add Humor in Public Speaking

By Judy Gruen

If public speaking has become part of your career, or is a goal, it's a great idea to learn how to infuse your presentations with a little humor. Inducing the laughter of recognition in your audience will make them remember you for all the right reasons!

Here are some tips from the pros on adding humor to public speaking:

1. Use humor right at the beginning

A humorous story or a good joke right at the beginning puts the audience at ease and gets their attention. If your topic is dry or serious -- but not too serious so that humor would be inappropriate -- a dose of humor will be even more appreciated, especially because the audience doesn't expect it.

Here are some ways to get them laughing at the start:

- If someone will be introducing you by reading your bio, add a funny line to it. In my own bio, after the real credentials, I have written, "Judy will promise you anything if you offer her a Belgian chocolate bar," or "In her spare time, Judy petitions the government to create an Institute for the Eradication of Cellulite."
- If you have traveled from another city for the speaking engagement, find something funny to say about your travel experiences, the hotel where you're staying, or something similar that most of the audience might relate to.
- Use a prop. This can work anytime it's appropriate, but is especially welcome in the middle of a talk, when some people begin to lose focus or get sleepy. In one of my talks, I mention the things I keep in my "anti-stress emergency kit," and then immediately whip out items from the kit, including a large foam core board with the Visa and Mastercard images on it, and a foot-long Hershey Bar.
- If you are comfortable ad libbing, look for something striking about the room or the event itself to joke about. There may be too-tall centerpieces on the tables that prevent guests from talking to each other across the table and which you think might come in quite handy at your next family reunion. The thermostat in the room might be set so low that global warming would be a thing of the past. Noticing something funny about the environment that you are sharing with your

audience will help warm up the audience to you -- even if the air conditioning is set to "frigid."

2. Go for humorous anecdotes rather than jokes

"So these two Irishmen come out of a bar. . . Hey, it could happen." (Joke attributed to Walter Matthau.)

You can almost hear Matthau waiting during those critical beats between the set-up line and the punch line, making the joke that much funnier. But jokes demand precision timing and delivery to make them work.

Told ineptly, you can kill a joke fast. Humorous anecdotes are much heartier, and offer more leeway in the telling. This makes them a better bet for the non-professional humorist. You may be a great joke teller, and if so, go right ahead. But try your jokes out on folks beforehand to make sure you won't be the only one laughing when you tell them.

3. Don't try to make jokes about areas outside your expertise

If you are an insurance salesperson speaking to a group of nurses or architects, it can be tricky to try to inject humor about the nursing or architecture fields. Many professional speakers have flopped when they've tried to talk "inside baseball" to professional groups. This can also apply if you are a man speaking to an all-female audience, or vice versa. Tread gingerly on jokes about the opposite sex. They are probably not worth the risk.

Remember, bring the relatable aspects of your world to your audience. Don't try to pretend that you are "one of them."

4. Know your audience

"You've got to know what your audience is interested in. Most of the people I speak to are interested in golf, and in making money." -- Evan Davis, comedian and owner of <http://www.headwriters.com>, a consortium of comedy writers who create material for comics and public speakers.

Before you prepare your speech, talk to the organizer of the event so you understand who you are talking to and what makes them tick -- or what might tick them off. An automotive trade show once hired a woman to do stand-up comedy, but she was so vulgar they yanked her right off the stage. This woman obviously had made no effort to know her audience. She also didn't understand that vulgar doesn't equal funny.

Once, I caught myself just in time before making a joke that would have bombed with that audience. My joke was about my age, yet I was speaking to a group of women who were old enough to be my mothers or grandmothers! Thankfully I sailed past that riff and moved on to my next topic, saving myself a very uncomfortable moment.

If you have any doubts about your material, test it with the event organizer to make sure it will fly with your listeners.

5. Use self-deprecating humor

"I had my fat tested today. It came back positive." (Judy Gruen, from "Till We Eat Again: Confessions of a Diet Dropout.")

Self-deprecating humor is a mainstay of humorists because it makes you relatable to your audience. When you share a funny story about the time you locked your keys in the car twenty minutes before you were expected to meet your wife at a restaurant to celebrate her birthday, you'll have the attention and the empathy of your audience. They'll be only too glad to laugh at the foibles and tribulations that they can easily imagine happening to them.

Make your self-deprecating humor work by doing the following:

- Make sure the story has a universal quality to it. If Donald Trump tried to poke fun at himself in public (there's nice idea!) by confessing that he accidentally dropped his Rolex watch into the toilet, it wouldn't work. The vast majority of people cannot afford a Rolex watch and wouldn't empathize with his problem.
- Remember that self-deprecating humor is not loser humor. Sharing stories about the kind of life frustrations that are common to most people is reassuring. Examples of this are endless, from locking yourself out of the house, finding your car was towed away, fighting with the phone company over a disputed bill, etc. But as you share the stories, keep yourself relatable by showing both your humility and a silver lining of inner strength. If you make yourself come across as a hapless loser, it's a turn-off.

6. Keep it clean

"I just came back from Hoover Darn."

"Hoover Darn? Don't you mean Hoover Dam?"

"Shhh! You can't say that on radio!"

Our culture has come a long way since that routine was originally performed by Jack Benny and Fred Allen. Today it seems quaint, yet it's still funny. Unfortunately, many of today's comics or would-be comics use raunchy material and foul language as a cheap trick. They may get a laugh, especially from younger audiences, but they won't get a career.

As comedian Evan Davis observes, "If you want a career in TV, you're encouraged to use raunchy stuff. If you want a career that sustains and fulfills you, there is no payoff in the raunch."

In fact, vulgar humor in public speaking, especially to a professional audience, is usually a disaster because it is inappropriate and offensive in those environments. Save the R-rated riffs for open mike night at your local comedy club. Keep a lid on it when speaking

to civic or business groups. Besides, no one will ever complain that a presentation wasn't vulgar enough. But they could well walk away saying that the material was too vulgar.

Work funny and clean for true professional speaking success.

7. Keep it relevant

Don't try to inject humor where it doesn't belong. Obviously, some topics are so serious that attempts at humor would be extremely distasteful. Stay on track and only insert jokes or funny asides if they have a point that is relevant to your topic. Remember that less is more, and a little humor can go a long way in an otherwise serious presentation.

8. If You Use Borrowed Material, Give the Source

You heard a great joke that would work perfectly for your topic. But make sure to give credit for the joke. Not only is it the ethical thing to do, but if you don't give the credit and someone else also heard the material elsewhere, you'll be considered a plagiarist.

If you are looking for funny lines to use, go to <http://brainyquote.com> and type in "Comedian Quotes" at the top. You'll instantly have a list longer than your arm of comedians including everyone from Mae West and Groucho Marx to Lily Tomlin and Jerry Seinfeld.

9. Practice, Practice, Practice

Read your remarks aloud several times before giving your presentation. There's little that will bore an audience faster than a speaker who is reading from notes and failing to make eye contact. The better you know your material, the less you'll be looking down at the podium and the better you'll connect with your audience by looking at them and moving a little during your talk.

10. Keep Emergency Back-Up Material Handy

If your presentation relies heavily on humor, be prepared to switch gears if your jokes and stories aren't working. Sometimes, the presentation that worked beautifully for one group won't work as well with another group. Have some alternate material ready if you see you are losing your audience.

11. Engage Your Audience

Unless you are a naturally riveting speaker, keeping an audience engaged can be tough. Here are a few ideas that will make it easier to keep your listeners actively involved in your presentation:

- Ask them questions and use their answers as part of your talk
- Ask questions just to get a show of hands
- Get out from behind the podium and move around as you speak
- Invite someone from the audience up to the stage for either a demonstration or a Q&A

12. Keep Your Presentation a Work in Progress

Funny situations are always happening all around you, so keep your eyes and ears open when you hear of them and see if you can work in any aspect of it into your presentation. Updating your presentation, even in small ways, will give you renewed energy each time you speak to the public.

Your audience may also provide funny material for you. Allen Klein (a.k.a. Mr. Jollyologist) is a popular speaker, author and the president of the Association for Applied & Therapeutic Humor. For many years, he has asked his audience "How do you spell relief?"

"My answer is 'L-A-U-G-H,'" Klein said. "Then one day a woman in the back row called out, 'D-I-V-O-R-C-E.' It got a huge laugh for her that day and continues to get a laugh for me when I retell it."

Before You Take Your Final Bow . . .

Remember that audiences want to like you, so even if your delivery isn't ready for Comedy Central, telling humorous anecdotes will make your audience laugh and appreciate you. After speaking only a few times, you'll also learn what works well and what needs tailoring in your presentation. I've been surprised at some things that got a big laugh when I was expecting only a modest one, and I've learned to be ready to substitute some material for an audience that isn't responding the way I had hoped.

If you want to develop a career in public speaking, join your local Toastmasters group for excellent practice opportunities in small, encouraging groups. From there, you can work your way up to larger speakers' organizations and potentially command impressive speaking fees.

But even if a speaking career isn't in your plans and you only need to address business groups now and then, adding humor to your presentation will help you enjoy yourself more in front of a microphone, and your audience will love you for adding entertainment to their education.

Judy Gruen is the author of three award-winning humor books, including *The Women's Daily Irony Supplement*, named ForeWord Magazine's Book of the Year (humor) in 2008. Her humor has appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Woman's Day*, *Family Circle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Jewish Journal*, and many other media outlets. She is a regular humor columnist for www.aish.com, www.mommasaid.net, www.diet.com, and *Jewish Life* magazine. Her humor talks to various groups have also delighted her audiences. Some have even purchased her books afterward. Judy may be reached at 310-486-4573 or judy@judygruen.com.