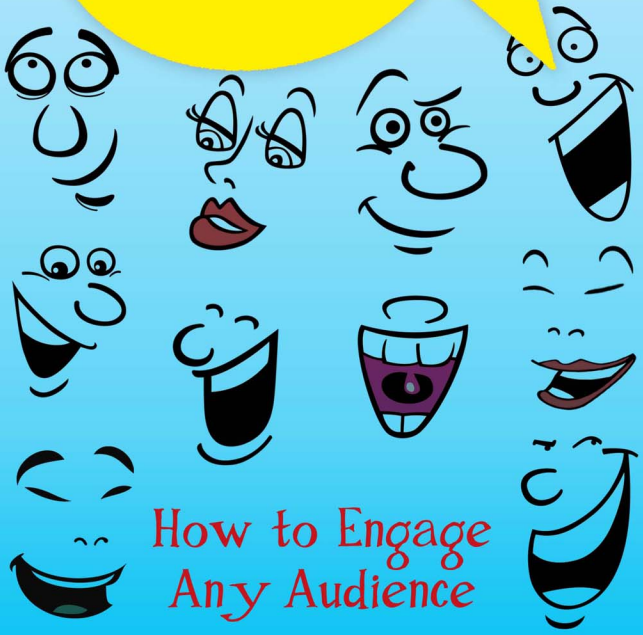
HAPPILY EVER LAUGHTER



How to Engage Any Audience

Scott Friedman, CSP

Happily Ever Laughter
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Chapter One

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to a Speaking Career



Before we begin, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Scott Friedman, your tour guide for this book. Thank you in advance for joining me on our little journey to the funnier side of speaking. Not only will you learn how to use to humor in presentations, you'll also have plenty of healthy laughs along the way.

After all, laughter is good for you! It has no calories, no caffeine, no cholesterol, no MSG, no preservatives, no sodium, and not a sprinkle of sugar for all its sweetness. In fact, research tells us that when we're laughing, dopamine is released, turning on our brain's learning center. And that's why adding humor to your repertoire is more than just fun—it's useful and life-enriching, too!

So hold on tight—better yet, let go—of all inhibitions and

preconceived beliefs on how funny you are (or not), and dare to find your most humble, vulnerable, and authentic self. Starting from that place, you can't help but grow in wonderful ways while enjoying the ride to the funnier side of speaking.

My Own Funny Road

I'm a Motivational Humorist, or so I like to tell myself. In other words, I'm a speaker who motivates by humor, or motivates humorously, or something like that. These days I speak roughly 75 times a year to audiences across the country and abroad. I also enjoy writing and have published several books, articles, and programs, mainly on humor as a positive force in the world of business and beyond.

With each speaking engagement, my aim remains the same: that the audience is always learning and laughing.

I didn't start out as a motivational humorist. In 1985 I was working in a family business, marketing and selling printing in Denver, Colorado. At the time, I was president of Salesmen with a Purpose (SWAP, now Sales Professionals International), a community sales group that met every Tuesday morning at 7:30. I used to start off each meeting with a motivational poem (some weren't half bad, I thought). I'd also end each meeting by summarizing the talk given by that day's speaker with another spontaneously-invented funny verse. Writing for our meetings was always one of my favorite things to do.

One Monday I visited Downtown SWAP, a sister club, for their tenth anniversary. Cavett Robert, founder of the National Speakers Association (NSA), was the speaker that day. I was so taken with his speech, "You Can't Heat an Oven with Snowballs," that I asked him if he'd talk to our sales club before his flight back to Phoenix the next morning. Being the wonderful, generous-spirited man that he is, he gladly accepted. His inspiring presentation made it easy for me to summarize his

words in a funny poem. On the way to the airport, Cavett said he thought I had a unique style and that I would make a great professional speaker.

Me? A professional speaker? Who'd have thunk? Of course, what I didn't know at the time was that he'd said exactly the same thing to lots and lots (and lots) of people. It turns out that Cavett was the NSA's number one recruiter before he passed away in 1997.

"Don't ever worry about getting your piece of the pie. Let's all make the pie bigger," he would say. And so we did—and continue to do. There are many professional speakers (like myself) who are proud to call Cavett their mentor. Of course, if everyone he'd encouraged had gone into professional speaking, we'd all only be speaking to other speakers!

Anyway, in 1985 I decided to quit the family business to become a speaker. Was I crazy? My mom thought so. In fact, she even went so far as to call all my friends, telling them I had lost my mind and asking them if they could help. Naturally, they couldn't. Not that they didn't try … but I had made up my mind; I was going to make my living as a speaker!

I started out my new career by speaking to as many service clubs as I could bribe to hear me (only half kidding). Every Rotary, Kiwanis and Optimist group for miles around was forced to listen to my motivational message, as were Widows in Recovery, Parents Without Partners, Parents with Too Many Partners—you get the idea. My focus was on building experience while reminding audiences that we can turn circumstances into chances. (This was, in fact, my first keynote title.) Where any group with two members and a name would gather, I'd speak.

If I was lucky, my clients would feed me lunch, but it surely wasn't a requirement. If I was really lucky, I'd even get paid a small fee for my speeches.

So what did I learn from these early talks (beyond the fact that there are 368 different ways to prepare chicken)? I learned that if I wanted people to pay attention to my talk, it had to

be funny. Therefore, if I wanted to be asked to speak again, I'd better use humor.

I started to experiment more with humor, and I haven't stopped since. I also discovered that the more the audience members laughed, the more attention they paid; the more attention they paid, the more they learned and laughed; the more they learned and laughed, the more money I earned. In no time at all I was up to $35, $50, and sometimes over $100 per speech. Wow!

From there, I continued spreading my self-proclaimed motivational messages laced with laughter. And 28 years, 50 states, over 25 countries, and close to 2000 speeches later, I've built a solid career as a motivational humorist. It sure beats working for a living.

How This Book Can Change Your Life

Whether you're a seasoned humor professional, a person who simply wants to add humor to your life, or an escapee from The Institution for the Humor Impaired, there's value for you in this book. How much value—as with many things in this life—is up to you. Ultimately, I want you to take away three important lessons from reading this book:

1. *Don't be afraid to take some risks*. I want you to try some new things in your next meeting or presentation. Start experimenting. Sometimes that may even mean you have to fail your way to success. After all, success is just moving from failure to failure with enthusiasm. Eventually, you'll create material worth keeping.

2. *Tap into your unique style*. Humor must be congruent with who you are. As you try on some of these ideas to see if they fit, you'll begin to get a better feeling for what your style is.

3. *Have some fun. Laugh a little!* Let your appreciation for humor, as well as for those who use it, grow.

On that note, welcome again to Happily Ever Laughter! And onward we roll towards engaging any audience …



Chapter Two

The New World of Speaking



No, I'm not going to tell you about speaking opportunities on a newly-discovered planet far across the galaxy. This is about our own world of speaking—one that has changed profoundly in the last 25 years. We've transformed from a fledgling industry into a mature—well, at least some of us—multi-billion dollar industry.

For those of us who have been in the speaking world since those early days, it's been a gut-wrenching change, for reasons I'll get into shortly. And those of us who have been brave (or happily foolish) enough to stick it out have had to grow with the industry. Well, we all know what growing up can entail: a little awkwardness, a few uncomfortable breakouts, strange growing spurts that come with surprises, and plenty of self-reflection. Yet through all the growing pains and gains, one thing has never changed, and that is the laughter.

A Safe Place to Meet

Laughter is a language of shared human emotions. Everyone laughs in the same language. Laughter instantly builds bridges among people of all ages, backgrounds, and cultures. It's our most convenient Rosetta Stone—that instant, universal translator through which anyone in any culture can feel as though they belong.

Humor, the magical tool which brings laughter, is perhaps the greatest resource a speaker has for creating instant connections among people. I've known speakers who steer away from humor in their presentations. Maybe they feel that humor will keep them from being as dramatic, persuasive, or credible as they'd be without it. The irony is that the opposite is true. In fact, humor tends to make a speech *more* dramatic, persuasive, and credible. If you need proof of this, listen to the speeches of great leaders across the globe. You'll find that humor is skillfully woven into many of the most meaningful and poignant discourses ever written.

And why is this? It's because humor—at its most basic level—is about trust. When you laugh with people, you connect at a very personal place. And when you reach that shared space of openness, people become more receptive to expanding or changing their viewpoints. Shared laughter is a meeting point of common experience—essentially, a partnership—and who isn't more likely to open up to a partner than to some random stranger behind a podium?

So now you see the ethereal reason for humor. But there are more practical and professionally relevant reasons for adding humor to your presentations as well.

A Closer Look at Trends Driving the New World of Speaking

I see two major trends in the speaking business today:

1. Immediate Application

2. Entertainment

Let's take a look at each one of these and how they relate to you.

Immediate Application in the Online-Realtime-Infoworld

These days the most precious commodity of all is time. We all have way too much to do, and never enough time. So who has time to waste on education? If we're going to waste time, it may as well be spent playing on Facebook, right?

It wasn't long ago when all you had to do to fill a seminar was announce that you were going to have one. These days, in order to entice a company to send their employees out from the office to attend a seminar or conference, a speaker must offer material that's truly valuable to attendees and their organizations.

Creating Value

So what is "valuable"? In short, value has to include skills, attitudes, and tools which participants can immediately put to use back at work to make themselves more effective. Just as a company might invest in a new technology or cutting-edge gadget, it needs to see your program as a progressive and useful return on its investment.

This may come as a shock to some of you, but in this new world of speaking, having something useful to say is a non-negotiable. Being clever and inspirational can certainly fill the heart, but providing useful personal and business information is much more likely to fill a seminar organizer's needs, which in turn will fill your wallet.

Therefore, that old stand-by, the "canned" speech, is as fossilized as a T-Rex. A speaker's job now depends entirely on adding something substantial to the audience's knowledge and experience. That's where the value lies—and it only manifests when we are able both to understand and to interact with our listeners in meaningful, fundamental ways.

Cracking the Code

Here's another important consideration for the new-world speaker: Each audience, business, and group has its own "secret code." The "code" is the way the group communicates among its own members. As a speaker, it's up to you to crack that code. You'll find that one of the fastest ways to bond with any group is to discover and use that group's unique jargon—the words that reveal inside information. Consider these words the "magic keys" of the shared culture.

Even when you're dealing with universal material, it becomes immediate and timely when presented using words from a group's inside terminology. That's when the audience members look up at you and think, He's talking about us—about *me*!

So forget about the differences. They don't matter. Just ask yourself these questions, and you're on your way: What do I have in common with this group? What do its members have in common with each other? And most importantly, how can I bring it all together?

Go Ahead and Get Fresh!

Being "fresh" is another critical component of immediate application. There's a reason stale bread turns moldy and falls apart. To be truly fresh, your information needs to be original and authentically nourishing. And, like heating the oven to the right temperature for baking that tasty bread, you need to create the right "temperature" to ensure the best possible outcome for your presentation.

Appeal to the audience's emotions, encourage them to want to ask questions, and then tantalize them to want to know more. Keep in mind, too, that the most powerful material will remind the audience of a universal truth they already know—something deeply important to them—and through that connection, immediate application becomes possible.

Back-to-School Time

I realize I've already thrown a lot in your direction. You may wonder how one person can do it all—engage the audience, create excellent material, crack the secret codes, create community in a short time, and still make fresh bread while the oven's hot? I'll tell you how. Do it the same way your parents once told you to get things done: Sit down, shut up (harsh, I realize), and do your homework!

That's right: To succeed in this (and most any) business, you've got to do your homework. Strive to gain a better and broader understanding of modern culture, news, and trends, as these hold the most far-reaching common denominator. You're obligated to keep up with what's happening in today's world—and that means getting beyond your daily headlines. Let timely pursuits become your new best friends. From the local and world news to politics, economics, health care, and the stock market, strive to know at least a little about a lot. Remem-

ber, these things together create the backdrop for all our lives. So to reach people where they truly are in the world, you've got to read, watch, and listen.

Of course, gaining all this knowledge does not surpass the importance of connecting to others at the level of their everyday "normal" lives. Think balance, balance, balance. There's a fine line between being Mr. or Ms. "In-the-Know" and Mr. or Ms. "Know-Too-Much." Take a guy like television comedian Dennis Miller. There's no question he's a brilliant thinker, and I respect his work immensely. At the same time, I'd bet he loses a good portion of his audience because they're not as well read as he. The point is this: Know when *not* to showcase your knowledge just as well as when to highlight it. The right balance will change with each day's new audience and situation.

"Instant" as the New "Normal"

Remember, today's audiences are used to getting everything instantly, from their news to their food to their on-demand movie selections. They'll expect the same—and more—from you. That's why immediate applicability in all things is crucial. Give them what they need right here, right now: fresh, tasty, nutritious … ordered to go, but prepared to last.

In Summary: Five Rules for Immediate Application

Here's a checklist I use when preparing my own material for presentation:

1. Do you know who your audience is?

2. Is your material interesting to your audience?

3. Are you providing information they can use?

4. Is it information that is timely?

5. Do you know what their pain is, and does your talk address that pain in some way? (This is an area that's important when you want to enter another level of depth and connection with a group or listener.)

That's Entertainment!

The other dominant trend in speaking is the necessity to be more entertaining. Okay, so I know what you're thinking. First you've got to be immediately applicable, and now you've got to sing, dance, and juggle flaming sticks, too? Is there no end to this?

Well, flaming sticks aside, there's really not an end in sight. New speakers are emerging from many disciplines, often bringing great entertainment value to the platform. Comedians, musicians, theater performers, and other entertainment professionals have entered the field, raising the entertainment bar for the rest of us.

The Never-Ending Entertainment Session

We have to face the fact that we live in an entertainment-oriented world. MTV, which was initially accused of single-handedly shortening the national attention span, has been around for over 30 years now. The internet, email, cell phones, and social media have added to the ever-decreasing ability for people to focus. Never before has it been easier to tune out. These days, the national attention span is so short, ketchup

commercials now seem like feature films. The net result of this deluge of stimuli is the "Incredibly Shrinking Attention Span."

Think of a baby in a crib, with too many toys hanging overhead. Overwhelmed with options, the baby plays with a toy for, oh, maybe 10 milliseconds before moving on to the next. Are we so different? Not really. Listen to the voice mail—no wait, that's boring… check your e-messages, pay some bills, find some new music, surf the web, go to CNN, hit the flavor-of-the-day web site—and don't forget to update everyone in your social network … and this is all while at work!

So when you walk up to that podium, you'd better be ready to entertain your audience. Either that, or wear sunglasses to cut the glare from the little screens lighting up in every hand. Remember, for your audience, the world is just a smart phone away. Yet there's another important reason to be entertaining. It's because entertainment is like that "spoonful of sugar [that] makes the medicine go down" (remember when Mary Poppins sang this?). A little amusement makes the material go down more easily. It's the appetizer before the dinner. It creates emotions without asking anyone to take a stand.

Learning Through Diversion

An entertainer's job is to create emotions and give pleasure, rather than to necessarily convey a message. You, however, are expected to bring *both* enjoyment *and* solid information to your audience. Sure, it's a narrow path: You have to deliver the content, but you have to do it in a way that entertains. That way the message goes down sweet as sugar.

Consider your favorite teachers back in school. They're probably the ones who taught you the most as well. Have you ever considered what made them so effective? My guess is they were storytellers. They used humor. They made you laugh. And through that laughter, you learned … and remembered.

Summary

The new world of speaking has come a long way from the times when a speaker could command the whole of attention for any group. Back then, a speaker didn't have to compete with the constant stream of information and entertainment that now bombards us daily. In contrast, speakers today must meet the task of creating material that's timely, instantly applicable, AND entertaining. Quite a feat, isn't it?

Yet it can be done, as you'll see in the following pages. Let this book be your practical guide for adding humor to presentations, while having fun along the way.

On your mark, get set … to laugh and learn!



Chapter Three

The First Surefire Tip: You don't have to use humor … unless you want to get paid!



At my very first National Speakers Association meeting, I must have heard "Law One" a dozen times. And what is Law One? You don't have to use humor, unless you want to get paid. The quote was attributed to Cavett Robert, and the message remains clear: If you want to make the most impact when connecting and communicating with people, you *must* use humor. That's right, whether you're a presenter for an hour or a career speaker, the same holds true: No "yucks," no bucks. Not funny, no money.

And the more "yucks," the more bucks.

Humor: The Lightest Tool Kit Around

Using humor when trying to share an idea, teach a lesson, or otherwise appeal to an audience (large or small) gives you a number of built-in advantages. Here are a few of the ways humor can be your best tool kit when speaking:

- *Humor Breaks Preoccupation*. People are constantly distracted. They're checking their phones, chatting with one another, thinking of what to eat for dinner, wondering if the woman in the second row is single. They're somewhere else. A humorous quote, quip, or story captures attention and invites your listeners to participate. It interrupts preoccupations and lets you gain control over your speaking situation. It's a lighthearted way to say, "May I have your attention, please?"

- *Humor Relaxes and Refreshes the Listener*. Like a dip in the pool on a hot afternoon, humor refreshes your listener. And once someone is reinvigorated, he or she becomes more willing to be present and receptive to your message.

- *Humor Helps Us Retain Information Longer*. People forget facts and figures but remember the incidents and feelings that have touched them emotionally. According to R. Sylwester, author of "A Celebration of Neurons: An Educator's Guide to the Human Brain" (1995), "Emotion drives attention, and attention drives learning." Take, for instance, all the good stories your teachers shared with you when you were in school. I'll bet you remember a few of these, even if you forgot where you went for dinner last week. Right? Laughter and humor also appeal to emotion. We remember the message when we recall things that made us laugh. I've had people tell me that, even years after one of my programs, they still remember

a story I told them. And because it made them laugh, they still remember the lesson as well.

- *Humor Appeals to Both Sides of the Brain*. According to Oxford's "Brain: A Journal of Neurology," the processes through which we comprehend, process, and react to humor involve at least six different parts of the human brain (Wild, Rodden, Grodd, and Ruch, 2002). With so many neurons firing at the same time, we can't help but be engaged in the topic at hand. And more engagement now increases the chance for longer-term retention.

- *Humor Builds Instant Rapport*. People like people who make them laugh. If you keep it clean, appropriate, and funny, chances are you'll make a new friend. And once you've created that connection, others will be more receptive to what you have to say.

- *Humor Keeps Things Interesting and Fun*. It's almost impossible to be bored when you're being entertained—unless, of course, it's some pretty bad entertainment. A great way to keep serious material stimulating is to break it up with humor. This way, you keep your listener both amused AND intrigued.

- *Humor Prepares the Mind to Receive*. Before delivering my most serious points, I like to get the audience laughing. After this, their minds are open and ready to receive the message. In fact, they may not even realize the message has landed! As my master-speaking friend Lou Heckler taught, if you can make the audience laugh along the way, they'll forgive you when you go through a longer stretch of mostly serious material. This is true for any audience—be they an audience of one, a small group, or an auditorium full of expectant listeners.

- *Humor Involves Your Audience*. An old Chinese proverb says, "Tell me, and I'll forget; show me, and I may remember … but involve me, and I will understand." Humor involves an audience. It brings them close: They're engaged; they're present. As a result, they're ready to learn.

- *Humor Promotes Creativity*. Joanna Slann says, "Because 'funny' means 'unexpected,' we stretch the listeners' minds." We move from the expected and known to the unknown and unexpected. In the process, our listeners learn new ways to see and process otherwise familiar information.

About Those Creeping Fears …

Yes, many of us do fear using humor, and the hidden monster behind that fear is control. People don't want to lose control of their audience, and there's a fear that humor can start a loss-of-control "ball rolling down the hill" situation.

While it's true that laughter requires a temporary suspension of control, in the end it will create more control for the one making it happen.

How this is possible? Think about it: Laughter is the door to doing and giving more to your audience. It may seem like things are out of control, but with someone laughing in response to your efforts, you've created even more room to maneuver.

Of course, there's also that old demon failure lurking in the wings. Let's be honest; we're all afraid of failing, aren't we? In the world of professional speakers, we worry that if we try to be funny and don't get the laugh, our message may be lost—or worse— our entire credibility might be questioned.

Telling a joke is sort of like taking a pop quiz that's instantly graded. Nobody likes to be graded—unless, of course, we know

we're going to get an "A." Ah, so there's the secret: Once you have proven material, you can relax. After all, you already know the high score you're going to earn!

We all share that insecurity—that fear of looking foolish. We like to be in command, especially when we're aiming to persuade, teach, or otherwise appeal to a group. When you're speaking and you forget part of your funny story, you think you're dead. Believe me, I know. But people have been watching comedians on television for decades, and the truth is, even the best sometimes bomb.

How to Battle the Insecurities … and Win!

Start by weaning yourself away from the fear. Take bigger risks as you go. If you're a frequent or professional speaker, always try new material in the context of your tried-and-true material. Whether you're expanding your "humor repertoire" or venturing into new territory, have fun experimenting as you go. Remember, pushing your limit is the only way to grow!

By taking the following baby steps, you'll soon wean yourself from that growth-inhibiting fear of humor:

1. *Lessen the risk*. If you're going to write original humor, sandwich it within material you already know is strong. That way, if it doesn't fly, it's supported by strong content.

2. *Take the attention of the humor off yourself*. You can redirect the spotlight (and thus the heat) from yourself by using a bumper sticker, prop, story, or joke from a funny source, such as a comedian. This way you don't have to *be* funny; you only have to bring funny material to the table.

3. *Practice, and then practice some more*. Test your humor on those in your comfort zone, such as friends, family, the dog,

and/or the mirror. This way, you can better gauge whether your material will result in laughter, tears, or sudden leaps from high places. Let's hope for the former.

Risk Not, Laugh Not

Let me first share something I've learned from my friend Michael Bane. Over the years, Michael has developed some very strange ideas about what constitutes a fun recreational activity. For instance, he considers climbing immense mountains, scuba diving in caves, and running through Alaska in the middle of winter the epitome of fun. No one would dare to argue that this guy is a true expert on taking risks.

The only way we advance in life is through our risks. And the best way to take a risk is to understand what you're risking. In the case of adding humor to your spoken communications, it's unlikely that you will freeze to death (at least, not literally, though I've seen a few icy stares in my time), drown, or otherwise face dire consequences for a less-than-successful attempt at generating laughter. However, if you succeed, you will have done something good for your audience. Therefore the risk/reward ratio is in your favor, as Michael always points out.

Another consideration he emphasizes is that each of us is constrained by our own paradigm, or rule-set, we believe to enforce our actions. An internal message such as, "I can't use humor because I'm so bad at humor" is an example of a self-defeating paradigm. Only when we become willing to step outside our own negative patterns (or reframe them into positives) can we expect our audiences to do the same.

Humor is Like a River: It Needs a Source

A river starts with a puddle, which leads to a trickle, then a stream, and so forth. The same goes with humor. In order to create great humor, you need to start at the source. And where is this source? It's right there in your mirror! You can't be funny if you're out of touch with your own sense of humor. Here are a few exercises to set you on course towards turning that puddle into rolling streams of laughter.

The Ha-Ha Exercise

What makes *YOU* laugh? How you deal with humor is an aspect of your own personal style, so the humor you use should align with that style. Try this: Jot down ten things that make you laugh. Once you have your list, analyze why you find these things funny.

Okay, okay—I remember the old saying, "In the dissection of a frog, the frog dies; the same thing goes with humor." This time, it doesn't matter. What *does* matter is your effort at discovering your own "humor triggers" by asking yourself, What's funny to me? Why did I laugh at this (or that)? Will my listener(s) think the same things are funny too?

… So What Does Scott Think is Funny?

I was never a big fan of the banana-cream-pie-in-the-face sort of humor, but that doesn't mean it can't be pulled off brilliantly in certain contexts. My humor leans more towards the following:

1. *Incongruity*: The juxtaposition of two things that shouldn't be together, such as an elephant in a swimming pool or a car on the moon, is funny to me. Seth Godin's book, The Purple Cow, provides an excellent example of this technique.

2. *Exaggeration*: This humor rests on exaggerating a universal truth. For instance: "The sun will burn out in 3.5 billion years, which means they'll be finishing the improvements to Interstate 25 in the dark …"

3. *Wordplay*: This includes double meanings of words (such as the butcher who got a little "behind" in his work), as well as poems, songs, and rhymes.

For example, here's a little ditty showcasing some fun with words in song. (Sung to the tune of "Supercalifragilistic"):

> Speaking professionals at times can be precocious,
>
> In this bad economy things can turn ferocious,
>
> If you learn to laugh at it, it won't seem so atrocious,
>
> But if you let them stress you out, I'm sorry, Buenas noches!

4. *Poking Fun at Myself*: It's funny to make light of our own embarrassing moments. And lucky me: I have an entire arsenal of these!

5. *Others' Minor Discomfort*: Watching other people in "pain" when they don't know what to do in an unexpected situation can be very funny. By this I don't mean real pain—just the Candid Camera-type stuff. My favorite episode of that show featured an introducer who entered the spotlight from back stage through a large red curtain. His job was to introduce the entertainment for the night at a well-attended show. During the introduction, the opening of the curtain was sewn shut; thus, after his introduction, the poor guy could not get back off stage. He went to where he thought the opening was, only to find no opening there. He then felt his way along the curtain, desperately searching for the

opening … but to no avail. Finally, he crawled beneath the giant curtain to get out of the spotlight. The crowd roared with laughter, and no real harm was done.

6. *Etc*.: We can't always predict when something will strike a funny chord. That's what makes humor all the more fun. It sneaks up behind us and surprises us with a hearty laugh!

Summary

Adding more humor to your communication toolbox—no matter how large or small your audience—is a powerful and worthwhile pursuit. Humor breaks preoccupation, relaxes and refreshes your listener, aids in retention of information, builds rapport, wards off boredom, adds fun, helps cushion weightier material, involves the audience, and stimulates creativity … and this is only a partial list!

In other words, humor is a multi-tasking store of communication power, doing pretty much everything short of making coffee and folding the laundry. Don't be afraid to explore your own sense of humor, and start from there to build your own style. Try on some stories! Test out some jokes! Start from the source, and let it flow.

Now that you're convinced, read on to learn more about how to build your repertoire and get to the funny, the money, and maybe even the honey, too.



Chapter Four

The Second Surefire Tip: Know thy audience.



The bottom line is this: The more you know about your audience, the more opportunities you will have to play with them.

As attempted Zen Riddles go, this one ought to be written on a marble plaque above the desks of anyone who wants to improve their public speaking skills:

"Ah, Little Grasshopper … to be totally spontaneous, you must be fully prepared. That is the Great Riddle."

When you take the time to get to know your audience, you'll be more relaxed. When you are more relaxed, good things will happen. How nice to be "playing" in the moment without wondering about those strange people out there, all looking at you. With your mind in "play" mode, you can truly be present, and—in speaking as in life—you must be present to win!

Where Do You Stand?

What's your orientation when you speak to others in a public or professional setting? Are you self-centered, content-centered, or audience-centered? Let's look at each position and how it relates to your effectiveness as a communicator.

The Self-Centered Speaker

When you're self-centered, you're there for yourself. You want to be remembered; you want to be liked. Sure, you may care about the audience, and you probably think that everyone on the planet needs to hear your message, but you're still there for you. You look good, you seek the spotlight, and you crave the attention. For many people in leadership or public-speaking roles, it's hard to get past this "all about me" mentality.

Of course, who among us doesn't want to look good? And no one has ever accused leader-types or speaker-types of lacking egos. But if YOU are your primary motivator as you take the stage, watch out—dangerous curves ahead! The reason so many people are afraid of public speaking (or of speaking to groups in general) is because they have the fear of looking bad. Get over it! Quit being so self-centered, and rethink your approach—your audiences will thank you, and your work will immediately take a turn for the better.

The Content-Centered Approach

When you're content-centered, content is king. The focus shifts away from you and onto your material. From this position, your primary aim is to articulate what you know. And I'll bet you know a lot! You have a message that you want heard, and you're out to make sure it is. You may still seek audience ap-

proval, but gaining the approval through your content is most important.

Most people who call themselves "trainers" design their programs to be specifically content-centered. Such programs feature not-so-empty promises or statements on what a trainer expects the audience to walk away with: 10 ways to sell better, 13 secrets to better writing, 34 tips on how to keep your teeth clean.

You know you've been successful when you deliver on everything you've promised. People will tell you how much they learned and/or how much take-home value you've provided.

The Audience-Centered Style

The third approach to engaging a group is audience-centered. It's not about you; nor is it just about your material. Instead, it's about those who are listening. Here, the focus shifts towards bringing your unique message to *this* unique group of people. You feel secure in who you are, you know your content, and you're creating a moment in time wherein a true connection can happen. True bonding takes place from this position, and satisfaction is guaranteed.

The Best of All Worlds: A Balancing Act

Based on these three possible positions, which best suits you as a communicator?

Often, people want to be accepted, so they tend to gravitate towards being self-centered, often without even realizing it. Ironically, when people are self-centered, their chances of being accepted decrease. When we learn to be more audience-centered (or "other-centered"), that acceptance comes much more easily and naturally. We don't have to TRY to gain it;

it's a built-in consequence. We are connecting, rather than isolating—and connection breeds acceptance.

Most professional speakers use a combination of all three positions. After all, a little ego is healthy, especially if it helps us better prepare for a performance. And in our era of information overload, relevant content is more important than ever. But we can't forget that audience—the most vital element in this act of balance.

Ron Arden, coach extraordinaire for many a renowned speaker, says that the greatest speakers in the world have a sense of audience.

Terry Paulson also addresses this idea when he shares this advice: "Stay focused on helping, instead of just persuading. Keep yourself centered on your purpose: 'Help me to serve, not just to shine! Help me empower, not just impress.' "

Getting to Know You

If you're working with a smaller group (say, an office department or a well-acquainted committee), knowing your audience will likely come with the territory. However, if you're speaking to a larger and/or new group, you'll be facing that "great unknown." So how do you learn about an unfamiliar audience? Let me help by offering a few tools I've used as a professional speaker.

The All-Purpose Pre-Program Questionnaire

Try sending out a questionnaire to your audience before the scheduled speech. The purpose of the "PPQ" is to gain information that will help you target your content and humor to a specific group. To help target your content, ask questions about the audience's mission, challenges, breakthroughs, and trends.

Find out if the group is part of a growing or declining industry (if applicable), as well as the age and gender of attendees and their job descriptions. Ask them what changes have taken place in their careers and lives, how technology has changed their business, and anything else that can help gauge their general mood.

To target the humor even further, ask about the local color, an in-house buzz word, a company policy, a popular bar or restaurant, the regional weather, city sports teams, and/or other questions related to local culture. Even a piece of broken equipment or the achievement of a top official or employee can provide great tidbits that fit into standard pre-written setups. Strive to learn as much as you can about your audience members—everything short of their favorite style of underwear. (Unless, of course, you think that boxers vs. briefs may help your speech …)

Finally, don't be afraid to ask about the characters in your group in a PPQ. The term "character" is universally understood and will get immediate input.

Here's an example of my pre-program questionnaire:

Scott's Pre-Program Questionnaire

This questionnaire is our first step in customization for your event. It ensures that your discussion with Scott will be more productive, thus maximizing the impact of Scott's program for your audience. Thank you!

- Please return to us no later than:

Client and Event Contact Information

- Name of Group:

- Date of Presentation:
- Person completing this form:
- Phone:
- Fax #:
- Email:
- Address:
- Website:
- Event Link:
- AV contact person (if you have one):
- Phone:
- Email:

Program & Schedule

- How would you prefer I dress?:
  - Coat & Tie?
  - Business Casual?
  - Casual?
- What is happening immediately before Scott's program? What is happening immediately after Scott's program?
- If this presentation is part of a conference, what is the theme, if any?
- Overall objectives of meeting or conference:

- Specific objectives for Scott's talk:
- Any seeds you would like Scott to Plant:

Audience Demographics

- Approximate Number attending meeting:
  - f(%)
  - m(%)
  - Age range
- General job responsibilities of attendees:
- Top People to recognize in the audience or people to poke "fun" at:
  - Name:
  - Title:
  - Reason:
- Please list the names of two accomplished professionals within the group that Scott could call to get additional perspective.
  - Name:
  - Title:
  - Phone #:
- Any sensitive topics, issues or phrases to avoid?

Organization/Industry

- Mission/philosophy statement for your company/organization:
- How does your organization/industry celebrate (include any recognized holidays, achievement awards, special days, rituals, etc)? Significant accomplishments this group can be proud of?
- What is unique about your group? (ie: seasonal work flow, special clientele, unusual hours, travel, red-tape, communications…)
- Main competitors:
- Problems / breakthroughs / challenges currently experienced by your company/industry:
- Solutions you see to these challenges:
- Changes having taken place in your organization / industry in the last few years:
- Changes you anticipate in your organization / industry in the near future:
- Top challenges faced by those in the audience:
- Special program/project you are currently conducting within your organization or department, please briefly describe its name, nature, and any accompanying slogans:
- Phrases/sayings executives frequently use:
- Please list any in-house marketing specific language, jargon, phrases or words applicable to your group that might be incorporated into this presentation:

Local Culture

- Specifically, what "local color" should I use in my presentation? This could be anything, such as a new company policy, an in-house buzz word, a local drinking place, poor food, a broken piece of equipment, local weather, or achievement of a top official in your organization.

Products

- May Scott offer his books/products for sale prior to and following his program? He will never "hard sell."

Ask about our pre-event product purchase specials! These are great for reinforcing Scott's message and creating your own Celebration culture.

- Would you like to know about pre-event product purchase specials?
- Check the products you are interested in or would like more information about:
  - Punchlines, Pitfalls, and Powerful Programs: Guaranteed Ways of Adding Humor to your Presentations
  - Using Humor For a Change: 101 Clever Ways to Lighten Up the Work Load
  - Celebrate! Lessons Learned from the World's Most Admired Organizations
  - Happily Ever Laughter: How to Engage Any Audience
- Is it possible for one or two guests to sit in on Scott's program?

Please send a copy of program announcements, brochures, and other promotional materials relating to this program so our program will be consistent with your promotion.

We request that you include Scott's website on all materials and hyperlink in web promotions: www.ScottFriedman.net.

In addition, any annual reports, a company newsletter/paper/flyer, or any key product brochures would be appreciated for further customization.

Congratulations, you've reached the end of the Pre-program Questionnaire! Thank you very much for helping Scott to customize his program for your group! Let us know if you have any questions or we can be of assistance in any way.

The Team at Scott Friedman & Associates

Stealth Research

Another way of getting into your audience members' heads is by collecting annual reports, past newsletters, brochures, websites, RSS feeds, Google alerts, promotional materials, and, if you're part of a program, a copy of that as well.

Any of these materials will help you learn what's really going on inside of an organization. Some of the "newsier" items (such as newsletters or brochures) may feature interesting or offbeat activities, trends, or events that might be turned into humor.

Here's an example of how well this can work: Before speaking to the Colorado Pest Control Association, I reviewed their brochure. In it I learned that, under ideal conditions, cockroaches can produce a million offspring in one year. From this information, I created the following piece for the opening of my talk:

It's obvious that what we have to do is shut down ideal conditions and put a stop to the manufacturer of cockroach lin-

gerie, stamp out cockroach mood music, and definitely close down those sleazy, disgusting roach motels …

See? From just one line in a brochure, I was able to create some funny, original material. By spending some time and letting your imagination out to play, you can try associating everything you can think of to the topic at hand, and—voila—who knows what you may come up with?

Websites

In today's internet-savvy world, an online search is probably the quickest way to find out what a group or organization values. If it's on their website, it's there for a reason. No telling what goodies you will discover about your target organization. The Home Page is your best starting point, as it will reveal the essentials. So log on and learn.

And while you're there, don't forget the search engines. Recently, I read an article claiming that using Google to "search" potential boyfriends has become an easy way to play detective for women in the Northeast. How else might you instantly discover whether your newest squeeze is wanted in six states and is in hiding from authorities, right there in your living room? And oh, how easy it is to check up on his or her claim of being a famous astronaut, a best-selling author, or the illustrious inventor of the Chia Pet.

The same goes for companies and groups. The more "inside" data you can gather, the better. As soon as you know you're going to be speaking to Company X, you can sign up for their "Google alerts." That way, any time the organization is mentioned in the media or a blog, you'll automatically receive an alert. Just think of it as allowing you to fulfill those childhood spy fantasies in a perfectly legal manner!

If your presentation is advertised, check to see how it's described in marketing materials and programs. You never know

when you may have to write a brand new program at the last second because the "program gods" have made up something you've never seen before. I've experienced times when clients visited my website, copied a blurb that had nothing to do with my intended program for them, and then printed it as the main feature for my upcoming talk. A few clients have even made up topics that they've then advertised as part of my program. Speaker beware!

On a few occasions, I've been billed as a comedian instead of a humorist. As a comedian, they expect you to be funny. They judge you based on laughs alone. As a humorist, you're there to convey a message on the wings of humor. So when I'm billed as a comedian by mistake, I begin by explaining the difference to my audience. After that, I toss aside most of my content and go for the humor. Hey, no matter what I say, they still expect the laughs.

Meet Before You Speak

I never really get a true sense of a group until I've had a chance to spend time mingling with them. It's the single best way to get a sense of what will and won't work. Nothing is worse (okay, plenty of things are worse—and Brussels sprouts come to mind) than walking into a presentation having never talked to anyone there. It's tougher—much tougher—to achieve the same connection. Instead of being in the moment on the platform, you're suddenly up there saying, "Who are these people, and what are they doing in my audience?"

When spending time with a group you're planning to address in a speech, pay close attention to what they're really saying. Notice their words, actions, and overall tone. You'll be dialed into the "pulse" of the group, which will help you feel more comfortable on the platform. I always try to attend a cocktail party or a general session before I speak, just to learn

more.

Here are some of the questions I might ask members of a group during my research, often either as a partygoer or a meeting "spy":

1. What's the funniest thing that has happened lately in this group/organization? (If you're speaking at a conference, you can center this and other questions specifically around the conference thus far.)

2. What is the most memorable thing that's happened?

3. What are people complaining about?

In considering the answers to these questions while writing your material, make certain that over 75% of your projected audience knows about a mentioned incident. Generally, I'll ask the same questions to five people, and if I find some consistency in the answers, I know I'm stepping into some great material to use humorously in my talk.

The Spittoon Theory of Life

At one conference in Colorado, six people shared the same memorable moment that had happened at that morning's general session. A speaker who was illustrating how uncomfortable change can be had requested that each participant spit into a cup and then drink their own spit.

An interesting little exercise, to say the least! What happened to the old "Put your other thumb on top when you clasp your hands" favorite? I shudder to think of what might come next.

So when it came time for me to speak after lunch and during dessert (never my preference for speaking; I like to wait until after the food has been cleared), I started this way: "If you would

now please turn to the person next to you and spit on their dessert …" The audience burst into laughter. I didn't need to say another word.

One of the most effective techniques for the public—or frequent—speaker is to have standard setups into which you can plug memorable moments from a shared recent experience, such as a convention. In my own talk, I often share a bit where I'm leaving a message on my own voicemail, complaining to myself about all the things that are going wrong in my life right now. As I grumble about the challenges this particular audience faces day to day, I toss in a few of those recent memorable moments. A few examples:

> "Hi, Scott? This is Scott, if you're like me, and I know I am, you're having an awful day. The guy next to me spit on my dessert, my apartment complex is grounds for cockroach breeding, and my self-esteem is so low that even my imaginary friends won't play with me…"

Hot Stuff

Another way to learn about your audience is to ask about the group's "hot topics" and commonly-referenced terms. When planning to speak to the Iowa Asphalt Association, I found out beforehand that one of the hot topics among the members was a federal mandate requiring a certain percentage of used tires to be incorporated into the asphalt mix. This mandate drastically changed the way the company was paving the streets. Needless to say, members weren't overjoyed about this, and there were plenty of complaints being aired among them.

I started my breakfast program this way:

> I understand what a pain it must be for you to have to change your asphalt mix with this new federal

> mandate, but, hey, it's not just you. This mandate has affected many industries. You probably don't know this, but the pastry shell this morning was made from 15% old tires (they were a little hard) … and the coffee is 5% ground tread. It brings a whole new meaning to this prayer breakfast. Instead of getting some fire and brimstone, you'll be getting some brim and firestone …

Turning Trends into Friends

Some time ago, United Airlines had been experiencing troubles while the management negotiated contracts with their pilots and mechanics. As we were waiting on the plane for the jet way to taxi up , the flight attendant asked me to look out the window and see if I saw any of the ramp people. I replied, "Just one guy who is holding a sign saying, 'Will move the jet way for more food.' "

She and some of the passengers laughed, which helped ease the tension. This "Will work for __" concept is one of many humorous standbys that can be easily applied to any contract situation, or to any industry undergoing a challenge.

Many organizations and industries are known for their overzealous use of acronyms. This, too, makes for good humor. One line I often use when speaking to a company who reveres the acronym goes something like this:

> "Learning about your industry is like learning a new language. I counted 16,000 acronyms. Wow. All day long I've had this terrible urge to spin or buy a vowel." (This references the game show Wheel of Fortune.)

Another effective way to use acronyms for humor is to change the meanings of the letters to fit what defines the group.

One of my favorite examples of this was back in the 1990's, when I was speaking for the New Mexico Bankers Association. A big scandal involving many congressmen who had overdrawn their bank accounts had been uncovered around this time. So I started out my program accordingly:

> "Isn't it ironic how the men who make the laws that govern the banking industry have overdrawn their house accounts? They must have thought that FDIC stood for 'Free Dough for Insolvent Congressmen'…"

Audiences always appreciate when the story is about them. Here's another example of how this can play out:

> One of the most popular beer ad campaigns to date was Budweiser's "Wassup?" All across America, people were asking each other, "Wassup? Wassup?" That in mind, I spoke to the Wisconsin Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (WASHA) right around the time when this campaign was at its peak popularity. The pronunciation for WASHA is WAH SAH. Starting off my program, I congratulated the association for all the wonderful things they were doing, then remarked that what impressed me the most was their unparalleled public relations efforts. Everyone around the world seemed to know who they were, and I was just amazed. I said, "You may not believe me, but just this morning I was talking to a friend, and he had no idea who I was speaking to today, but still he mentioned you. The first words out of his mouth were, 'WAH SAH…' "

They made the connection, and laughter followed.

Play with the hot topics of the day and the terms of the group, and they'll love you for it!

Familiarity Sometimes Breeds a Little Ribbing

I was speaking to a large company to help kick off their United Way giving campaign. I was to speak once in the morning in downtown Denver, then again that afternoon at their plant in the nearby foothills. The CEO of the corporation opened the meeting by talking about the challenges of the campaign. He shared how the economy of Denver had slowed, how another large company had laid off workers, and how these things would hurt the campaign. It was a real downer. And sadly, he never challenged his audience to step up and make things better. They weren't empowered in the least.

So when I got to the "phone message to myself" part of my talk (as mentioned earlier), I played off of the CEO's earlier speech.

> "Hello, Scott? This is Scott. If you're like me, and I know I am, you're not having a very good day. The economy in Denver is spiraling downward, corporations are in huge trouble, and the world may be coming to an end soon … However, we expect the campaign to have its best year ever. No need to call me back; I'll just see you when you get home. And do me a favor and clean up the place a little, will ya? All right. I love you. Bye."

Yes, it is a little risqué to poke fun at the CEO. So how do you know when it's okay? Again, it goes back to knowing your audience. You first must "read" them and feel confident that you are in a safe place for a bit of ribbing. You then consider

the situation, look at the purpose of the event, and listen very closely to your intuition. Remember, it's best to always ask before you "poke fun" at anyone.

In this case, I sensed the CEO had really wanted to kick off the meeting on a positive note, but it just hadn't happened. I'd also noted a little discomfort in the audience with his comments. The situation was primed for a little ribbing, and my intuition said to go with it. So I approached the CEO and asked him if I could play a little with his remarks of the morning. He didn't mind at all, which cleared the way. The audience just howled (whew!) at my little rendition of the situation, and so did the CEO. He had a good sense of humor and quickly realized how he had sounded in his opening comments.

After the program, I made sure to reconnect with the CEO. I said, "I hope I didn't offend you with my comments," to which he answered, "No, they were very funny, and frankly, I deserved the ribbing." He then followed up with, "But don't think I'm going to give you that same opportunity this afternoon at our other facility!"

Sure enough, things were different when we both had a chance to do it all over again. The CEO started off that meeting by recounting how the first meeting had gone, how he'd painted a bleak picture of the current situation, and how the speaker that followed (yours truly) had jumped all over him.

"He's not going to have the same chance this afternoon," he promised the audience, "because I know that no matter how bad things are, you guys can meet the challenge. You truly care about what this campaign stands for, and you'll reach down deep to make sure this campaign is one of the best ever."

My mild teasing (based on knowing my audience and the recipient of the ribbing) had led the way towards improving both programs in the end! Of course I didn't have quite the material to work with in the afternoon, but I did commend the CEO on improving his approach and thus making the afternoon's campaign a "new and improved" version for everyone,

all things considered.

By calling back memorable moments, not only do you get a laugh, you also build instant rapport. Of course, you do need to be both careful and respectful of others. That's why it's critical that you first check in with anyone you might be planning to tease a little in your speech … a case when "knowing thy audience" becomes even more important.

Summary

Although much of this chapter focuses on the professional speaking realm (which is how I make my living), the "Know Thy Audience" idea is always a good way to build your skills for any speaking application. Decide where you stand in your communication style: Are you self-centered, content-centered, or audience/other-centered? The latter is the most effective way to build connections, but all three can work together when you balance them mindfully.

As for how to get to know your audience, and how to best utilize that knowledge for humor, there are many options. Send out a pre-questionnaire, do some research, and meet as many members of the group as possible beforehand. You can further develop the perfect speech by creating humor around recent memorable events, shared experiences at a meeting or conference, and/or "hot" current topics or terms used and known by your group's members.

Finally, don't be afraid to poke fun in healthy, respectful, and appropriate ways when the opportunity presents itself. This can be useful especially when the "big picture" of a program might benefit from your ribbing efforts. Always know your audience first; also, check with the target of your joking beforehand and treat him or her with the utmost respect—both in your presentation and in your follow-up contact. We will discuss this further in Chapter 11.

Knowing your audience is just another way to mine your surroundings for great material. Practice looking at every situation as a potential source for levity and laughter, and your communications—be they professional speeches or small-group presentations—will be charged with exciting new energy!



Chapter Five

The Third Surefire Tip: The shortest distance between you and your audience is a good laugh.



The more you create connections with your target audience, the greater your chances of success. And creating connections can only happen when barriers are removed. So how do you facilitate the ideal situation for a connected encounter with others? Begin with these relatively simple barrier-removers. Note that many are introduced for use with a large group; however, you can modify according to both the size of your audience and your intended setting.

Make Room for Success

If you have the luxury of planning for your communiqué, take the time to carefully review the setup of the designated room, as well as all the elements that will be working together to ensure your program's success.

Sounds Good to Me

Your voice is the carrier of your message. That's why it needs the same attention—or more—that you might give to choosing the right attire. Whether you plan to talk solo or to use a sound system, note the acoustics of your room and plan accordingly. As for that sound system, make sure it works. A bad one can wreak havoc on your timing and rhythm, and your audience may be tuning out rather than in. On the other hand, if your voice sounds (pleasantly) loud and clear—whether amplified or not—you'll come across as confident and lively. The better you sound, the better you'll feel.

Shedding Light on the Subject

If you want to shine in front of that key listener, give careful consideration to the lighter side of things. After all, the phrase "Let there be light!" got a whole lot of things started, didn't it?

Anyone who wants to be heard should also be well-lit. How long can anyone listen to a talking shadow? So if you can, check out your meeting room early just in case you need to quickly install a spotlight—or a flashlight. If you'll be standing on a platform, make sure there aren't any dark spots lurking nearby. If you're half in the light and half in the dark, your audience may mistake you for the Phantom of the Opera and run for the exit. Or worse, they'll tire of trying to focus on a half-shadow and will turn to checking the sports scores or taking a nap.

Remember, facial expressions often communicate as much (or more) than words. If you're sharing something positive but are frowning at the same time, which will be the louder message? The more you have working for you, the better the reception from your audience will be.

Musical Chairs

Laughter is maximized when you've seated your audience in the optimal arrangement. If you have more chairs than people, remove chairs or rope off the back rows until you fill the front sections. Keep attendees close to one another, yet as comfortable as possible.

Ideally, the room should be set up so that people can see one another. Picture a chevron or a "V", wherein the rows are set up on an angle. Laughter is often a domino effect: One person chuckling leads to two, then four, etc. That's why a room set up with long, narrow rows is less effective humor-wise. If you're speaking to a smaller group, arrange your listeners around a table or in a similar "V"-shaped arrangement. The more connected they feel to one another and to you, the better.

Last week, I was speaking at the Los Angeles Convention Center to a group of around 400 people. The room was set up for over 1000. I asked the staff to move the air walls and close off half the room, joking to the man who had hired me, "Now if they hate me, it's nobody's fault but my own. I have no one else to blame it on."

Get a Little Closer, Please

The closer you can be to your audience (short of sitting on their laps, which may come across as slightly offensive), the better the potential for laughs. And if you will be speaking to a larger group, consider losing the podium. A podium creates an instant

wall between you and your audience. You don't want that, since humor works best in a barrier-free environment.

A Few More Considerations on the Speaking Environment

Inside or Out?

I'm often asked to speak outside, and each time I do my best to move the meeting inside. Why? Because it's much harder to control the elements when you're outside. Not only do you have to contend with the weather; you also have to compete against all sorts of (sometimes surprising) outside stimuli.

I was speaking outdoors in San Diego a few years back. The audience and I were situated next to a pool with views of the harbor and boats sailing in the background. Sounds beautiful, doesn't it? It was—but that was the problem! What would you rather look at—a beautiful harbor, or me? Okay, don't answer (thankfully, I'm not sensitive). Let's just say it was more than a little challenging to keep the attention of my audience.

Not All Venues are Created Equal

Sometimes you have to overcome obstacles that you just can't get around. Still, you can always do your best to improve the situation. For example, I have found high school audiences to have some of the toughest elements in the business. When you're standing in front of 1,000 or so rambunctious teenagers in a gymnasium with a bad sound system, you know you're in trouble (put it this way: pep rally time!). Therefore, when I speak in a school, I always ask if we can arrange to use the auditorium or another indoor space with a more subdued environment. Even if I have to speak to two sets of kids at two separate

times, it's well worth the trade-off to avoid wayward pom-pom waves or spontaneous fight songs.

Ultimately, the goal is a transparent delivery—a delivery focused solely on the message, rather than on the sounds, the lights, or the wayward busboy dropping a tray of glasses. When you have no distractions, no barrier exists between the arrow of message and its intended target … and we all know what that can lead to: Bulls-eye!

Beware of Potential Disasters

Most disasters are avoidable, as long as you do your homework. Make sure you size up your audience as well as you can. Check to make sure you have everything you need, especially if you're speaking on a stage or to a large group.

Speaking at Union Station in Dallas, I was supposed to go on after a lengthy break following dinner. The crowd of around 500 was restless, already up and talking. I could tell they'd be difficult to settle down in the pre-designated open area, especially given the fact that they seemed to be up to walking and talking off their big meal. So I suggested to the meeting planner that we change the venue to a different space. The change made all the difference, creating a new mood in a new room and encouraging the audience to enter "in fun."

Don't be afraid to ask for something if you know it will improve the situation. I pride myself on being easy to work with, but when I spot potential danger, I'll run through a bull pen (or a version of one) to make a change. Remember: You often know what will or won't work better than those well-intentioned meeting planners. They will appreciate suggestions—especially since your input will likely result in a better experience for everyone.

Send in the Fun!

In controlling the elements, add a pinch of play to the environment to put your audience "in fun." "In fun" means "ready to play." When I set the tone for others to play, chances are they may even laugh at my humor. What a relief!

An Invitation to Play

Never assume others are going to walk in ready to be "in fun." Most people going about their daily lives are thinking more about their problems than they are about play. So go ahead and prod them a little. Give them permission to have some fun while you're speaking.

Approach your listeners as though they've come to have a good time. You're not trying to control them; rather, you're inviting them to share some common ground. When humor works, it works by creating a bond—a connection in time and space among those who share it. By being open, loving, and relaxed, you give your audience permission to be the same.

Prepping for an Experience "In Fun"

Take charge of the fun factor before your program starts. Even if you're speaking to a smaller group, you may be able to incorporate a splashy addition or two to spice up your meeting. Here are a few ideas:

A Melodious Entrance

By playing upbeat music as your group arrives, you're letting them know that this is going to be better than a good day at the dentist. Gloria Estefan's "I Have a New Attitude," the Black

Eyed Peas' "I've Got a Feeling," or any other feel-good song with a beat works well.

Some of my favorite songs come from my good friend Jana Stanfield. Her uplifting voice, coupled with upbeat tempos and encouraging lyrics, always touch heart and soul. You can find her music at www.JanaStanfield.com. Best of all, if you buy a song, you're automatically licensed to use it for professional purposes, such as to accompany a speaking program.

Don't Stop 'til you Prop

If you're a hired speaker, consider adding playful props, plants, or colorful elements to your stage before you go on. Lighten up your environment. Allen Klein, speaker, author, and "Jollytologist," puts his audience "in fun" by greeting them with a humorous projected image as they enter the room. He also plays a recording of people laughing here and there during his program. Remember, laughter is contagious, so take steps to ensure its spread!

The Best Introduction is a Funny Introduction

Use humor in the first part of your talk, and you'll arouse curiosity and interest. If you're a speaker, the amount of humor you use in your introduction should be equal to the amount you use in your program. If you're a humorist, you can use much more humor in your introduction. If you're not, then a dash will suffice. Remember the rule: The lighter the talk, the lighter the introduction.

Jim Pelley, my friend and fellow motivational humorist, writes "Think Funny" on his podium before he speaks. This serves as his personal reminder to stay in the moment and let his natural spontaneity come out. Try it.

Big Brother and Sister are Watching

As soon as you walk in the room, you're on stage. And the minute you're on stage (even if that "stage" is just a prime seat at the meeting table or a mingle through the crowd), your audience is sizing you up. Everyone is subconsciously deciding whether or not they are going to like you. Therefore, any little idiosyncrasy you have will be magnified … so you'd best save your nose-picking for a more private time.

Yes, it's a hot seat of sorts. But hey, if you couldn't stand a little heat, you wouldn't be reading this book! The point is, try not to give your audience too many reasons not to like you. Knowing that you're always "on stage," do your best to be appropriate and to mind your manners. And, just in case, carry a tissue at all times.

If You're Happy and You Know It, Let it Show!

Smile early and often. Your listeners are your mirror. If you're having a great time at your own party, so will they. Terry Paulson, past president of NSA, laughs at his own material all the way through his programs. He says that by enjoying his own program, he gives the audience permission to enjoy it, too. His laughter guides the audience to know when to laugh, just in case they can't figure it out on their own.

Big Humor, Not-So-Big Ego

If you can build credibility while being humorous and humble, that's even better. Ralph Hood, a speaker from Alabama, does this well. In Ralph's introduction, he says, "Ralph has a weekly newspaper column, which is widely read … by his

mother." Ralph builds credibility by showing that he writes a weekly newspaper column; at the same time, he conveys a sense of humility by poking fun at himself.

I've used the same technique in my own introduction, to this effect:

> "Scott has been compared to Steve Martin. Compared to Steve Martin, Scott just isn't that funny, but he was voted one of the top ten humorists in his immediate family of nine."

Hopefully, my audience members are thinking, "I bet this guy is going to be funny … nice that he's not so full of himself." Is that what you were thinking, or did you know better?

When In-Fun Becomes Un-Fun

We'd all like to believe that once we're having a good time, things will go on that way forever. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Let's take a look at a few of the pitfalls that have been known to trip up even the best. Avoid them if you can, and focus on letting "the good times roll" (as Mick Jagger put it) for the entirety of your presentation, interview, or talk:

1. *The speaker is arrogant*. Audiences like people who are self-confident, yet humble. There's a fine line between self-confidence and arrogance. When you speak down to your listeners, rather than with them, you cross that line. Also, if you're the hero of your own stories too often—too much me, me, me, me—and you don't share your foibles, others will soon become disgusted with you and go seek their fun elsewhere.

2. *The content is too serious, or too much*. If you've gone on too long about a heavy topic with no humor or break, you're

likely to face an audience out of fun. "Humor breaks" are a great way to keep everyone happy and in fun, with no getting up or shuffling needed!

3. *The work environment is too close for comfort*. If you can keep your talk away from the shop, your audience will be more open to the "in fun" mentality. The old saying, "Out of sight, out of mind," definitely holds true when it comes to the workplace. So if you can hold your meeting in a coffee shop or other relaxing space, you'll have a starting advantage. For speeches or conferences, resort areas are ideal, as they're built for relaxing!

4. *The time of day is off*. If you meet too early, it may take a while for everyone to warm up. Most audiences generally start waking up at around 9 a.m. Conversely, if you're meeting late into the evening and your listeners have to drive home, beware. They may be counting sheep before you reach your grand finale.

5. *You lose your temper or put down one of your attendees*. Never lose your temper, no matter how poorly behaved your attendees (or the audio/visual equipment) may be. And no matter how off-target or off-color some else's remark may be, show grace and composure at all times. Should a listener witness a less-than-favorable side of you, you will have compromised that person's respect. And who wants to laugh with someone they don't respect? No one.

6. *Your "humor" is inappropriate or offensive*. Contrary to what some risqué comedians are modeling for the masses, you really can make people laugh while staying appropriate and classy. No need to take risks on questionable material when there's so much good humor out there to be created and shared!

The Discovery Channel School of Life

You know when you're watching one of those all-animal, all-the-time cable channels, and there's a special on elephants or lions or rattlesnakes? Many times, the experts will show or tell us how animals can sense nuances in the psyche, including disease, fear, and intimidation.

Well, guess what? We humans have the same powers of perception. And that's why—even when we're intimidated by a person or group—we must create the perception that we are in control. If an audience senses your nervousness or fear, they will in turn lose that feeling of being "in fun."

So get out there and make direct eye contact, smile, and carry yourself professionally and authentically—even if you're shaking inside. Hopefully, after a few laughs, you'll settle down and join your audience in having some fun!

Opening Acts: Starting out With a Laugh

The opening of your speech may well be the most important part of the program. Let's take a look at what will make your opening sparkle with humor, setting you on course for a successful program.

Three Minutes to Make It or Break It

In the first three minutes, your listeners will decide whether to stay with you and fully listen, or to leave or change their channels. If you start off humorously, they'll stick with you later on. Once you have your target audience "in fun," you're likely to keep them there. But for how long?

Scott's Guide to Grand Openings

I know, I know—sometimes that first step is the hardest … so allow me to give you a hand. Here are four great ways to start your talk:

Grand Opening #1: Self-Effacing Humor

The highest form of humor is the ability to laugh at oneself. In Malcolm Kushner's book, "The Light Touch," the author reminds us that self-effacing humor is a leadership trait. It reflects strength and confidence. It shows that you're secure enough to laugh at yourself. It creates immediate rapport and increases your likelihood of being liked.

Often, while speaking to other professional speakers or trainers, I will start this way:

> "This morning I told my mother that today I'd be speaking to the National Speakers Association. She said, 'Don't you get nervous when you speak for other professional speakers?'
>
> 'More so than with most groups,' I replied.
>
> 'Well, don't try to be clever, charming, or profound. Just be yourself.'
>
> Thanks for the advice, Mom."

From the beginning, I let the audience know that I don't take myself too seriously and that I'm here to play. Knowing this about me gives the group permission to do the same. It's a quick way to build instant rapport.

Here's one you can use when coming back to an audience for the second time:

> Last time I was here, I went up to Bob Brown after my program was over and said, "Bob, how was my talk?"
>
> He replied, "Scott, do you want me to be honest?"
>
> I said, "Of course."
>
> He cleared his throat. "Scott, your speech was boring, it had no humor, and it had no substance."
>
> I thought I'd better get a second opinion, so I went up to Carrie and said, "Bob just told me my speech was boring, it had no humor, and it had no substance."
>
> Carrie answered, "Scott, don't pay attention to what Bob says. He just repeats what everyone else says around here."

Don't Keep 'em Guessing … About Certain Things If your audience has questions about you when you start your program, they will be paying more attention to these questions than to what you are saying. That's why it's necessary to answer any questions your audience may have right from the start.

If you have an obviously distinctive feature—you speak with a heavy accent, you're quite overweight, you have a standout physical trait, you're wearing a cast or unusual clothing, etc.—the "feature" may steal the show and leave your message on the sidelines. It's best to address it right away so the group can start paying attention to all those good things you're sharing.

For instance, let's say you're overweight to the point where your audience is thinking, "My, my, what have we here?" Of course you first must be comfortable with your weight before

mentioning it; if you're not, your audience will pick up the discomfort. Here are a few clever openings I've heard over the years around this issue:

> "What are you looking at? Okay, so I've let myself go … since Christmas … 1985."
>
> "I'm a light eater; I start eating the moment it gets light …"
>
> "I know what you're thinking: I'm out of shape. Hey, round is a shape!"
>
> "I had an hourglass figure, but then my hips accumulated time-and-a-half."

If you have an accent, your listener may be trying to place its origin rather than listening to your ideas. A comment to remove the mystery around the accent will clear up the issue and put attention back on the message. Remember, if you can laugh at yourself, the audience can no longer laugh at you—they have to laugh with you.

Grand Opening #2: "Inside" Humor

Inside humor is a secret code that only the people in a particular group would know. It's a way of saying, "Hey, I'm one of you! I'm a member of the club, and I know the secret handshake." So how do you become an "insider"?

It All Begins With a Question This is where those pre-program questions come in handy. (See my pre-program questionnaire in Chapter 4). If you're able to distribute a questionnaire beforehand, consider this your starting point. Pay close attention to the answers, and after reviewing them, write more

questions that will take you closer to the "inside." From there, ask questions that will play right into your material.

For instance, back when the movie Titanic was a big box office hit, I'd ask the following question before my engagement: What is something in your organization that takes too long, causing people to complain? (This could be anything from money collections to slow computers to another organization's response time.)

Once I got a good answer, my line while speaking would go like this:

> "Remember when, in the film Titanic, the crew figured out the ship was going to sink? They sent out a message of distress, but nobody got the message for a long time. Well, it turns out they sent the message through Lotus Notes (or Medicare reimbursement, or the company mail room … or whatever process is really slow)."

Double check beforehand, though, to ensure that the target of your humor is not too sensitive an issue. As I've shared in various parts of this book, securing permission ahead of time is always good practice.

Get Personal If you have the luxury of an in-person contact opportunity before talking to a group, take advantage of that as well. Try to meet folks in different departments and levels to get the best sense of things. Jim Tunney, past president of NSA and former referee for the National Football League, suggests chatting with the level of worker farthest from the top. This is the best way to get an honest view of what really happens day to day.

The key to writing effective "inside" humor is that at least 75% the audience should know about the target incident. If 75% of your listeners do not know the incident, but you still

feel compelled to use it, make sure you offer some context so that everyone can be a part of the laughter. In other words, avoid alienating anyone; humor, like fine wine, is always best when it's shared.

The Grease Monkey Case I was speaking at the national oil change franchise Grease Monkey's convention a few years back. At the time, one of their major issues was what to do about "Ladies' Day." Ladies' Day allowed any woman bringing her car into Grease Monkey on a Wednesday to receive a $2 discount on an oil change. The discussion centered around whether or not the company should get rid of the day altogether, or institute a Men's Day as well. With this being the hot topic, and with my role as a customer in mind as well, I came up with the following:

> "I'm not going to speak to you as a professional speaker today, but as a customer… Because every 90 days, on the Wednesday after I get my oil-change reminder notice in the mail, I hop in the shower, shave my legs, put on my wig and my favorite skirt, and head down to Grease Monkey for Ladies' Day."

In this particular case, I had to take a longer-than-usual pause and raise an eyebrow to let the group know that I was indeed being tongue-in-cheek. This gave the audience permission to laugh, and from the first words, they knew that this experience would be a little more unusual than most.

My favorite way to take advantage of "inside" humor is to write song parodies highlighting the memorable events from a meeting. This not only exercises a creative talent of mine; it also allows me to immediately bond with a group, because it's all about them (audience-centered) rather than me (self-centered).

Cruising for Fun When speaking on a cruise ship, I like to poke fun at the amount of food people consume. On a Royal Caribbean cruise in December, I wrote this jingle (sung to the tune of "Jingle Bells"):

Dashing through the sea
On a Royal Caribbean Cruise
Stuffing my face with food
And maybe a little booze

A feast when I wake up
An hour later something sweet
Lunch just after one
At three o'clock my ice cream treat

Ohhhhhhhh, life's a breeze
More lobster please
A second helping I won't regret
Just pure luck, roasted duck
With a side of beef bro-ch-ette

Heart be still, sautéed veal
Dessert chocolate soufflé
I've never felt worse
I'm gonna burst
But not before the midnight bu-bu-bu-buffet!

Lost in Opryland If you've ever been to the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, you know its size can be overwhelming. I've never met anyone who hasn't gotten lost at least once while staying there. The immensity of the place is a frequent topic of conversation. Here's how I started off a program at that hotel (sung to the tune of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town"):

Oh, you better watch out
It's like a bad dream
Last night I was found by the search and rescue team
Need a trail map, a lunch sack, a stranger, ranger guy

I was lost for an hour
I was losing my mind
How to get out, she said, just dial "9."
Need a trail map, a lunch sack, a stranger, ranger guy.

More fountains than in Paris
The size it is renowned
More jungles than in Africa
More challenging than Outward Bound ...

Oh you better watch out
It's like a bad dream
Last night I was found by the search and rescue team
Need a trail map, a lunch sack, a stranger, ranger guy.

On Par With Humor Golf tournaments make it easy to take advantage of inside humor with a standard set-up. I always ask for a well-known character who thinks he or she is a good golfer but who isn't. Then I choose another golfer who has had something eventful happen during that tournament. (Maybe he or she hit a house or broke a window or had a terrible round.) Here's the set up:

"Dick (the bad golfer who thinks he's a good golfer) had a good round; he shot a 74 … Camaro. There's some good news and some bad news about Dick's golf game. The good news is he's taking lessons. The bad news is he's taking them from _____ (the one with the eventful round)."

Make Getting Permission Your Mission Whenever using inside humor or poking fun at an audience member, make sure you first run it by both the "marked" audience member and the meeting professional who hired you. If not, it's very easy to step into a hornet's nest you never knew existed. Since it's impossible to know everything that's going on with your audience, treading on sensitive territory is easier than you think. So always ask … no exceptions.

Grand Opening #3: Don't Just Mind Your Surroundings; Mine Them!

Pay close attention to your surroundings, and mine them for their absurdity. Room set-up and any unusual fixtures are easy targets for good humor. If it's a large room or a small room, if it's too hot, too cold, or too noisy, you've got the makings for good humor. If the room is too hot, you might start off with, "I'll keep my remarks brief; we've had enough hot air," or, "So, this is what the hotel meant when they said they were going to give us a warm reception."

If the room is too cold, your audience members may be thinking, I'm not going be able to make it through 45 minutes freezing to death. That's why mentioning the issue is a good idea. Try something like, "I tried to get someone to turn on the heat, but they had to go feed the polar bears. The room will be warming up soon. I promise."

In a situation where you're in a really large room with only a few people to occupy the mostly-empty chairs, you could say, "I see that many of you have brought chairs with you tonight."

Food can be a touchy subject. Be careful about poking fun at the food, since you never want to put down those who made it. If someone else makes fun of it first, and/or if you've been granted permission to do so, you might be able to share a laugh or two, but keep it tasteful (pun intended).

Play With the Elements at Hand I was speaking to a group at Lost Valley Ranch, a retreat center in Colorado. The meeting room had plenty of snacks for the two days, along with many bottles of alcohol stored right behind where I spoke. When I got to the part of my workshop where I give rewards to involved participants, I just grabbed those bottles and passed them out like candy.

Let's just say I've never had such an involved audience. The point is, take a quick scan of your surroundings and ask yourself how you might use what's around to better your presentation.

Many times I'll bring along the little bottles of shampoo or sewing kits from the hotel to use as "prizes" for those who participate in my programs. When I speak during a trade show, I'll pick up flashlights, candy, and brochures to give away. People love these sorts of things: they love prizes, and the ridiculousness of these "lavish gifts" makes them laugh.

Grand Opening #4: Fun With Current Events

Establish an immediate connection by talking about what's going on locally or nationally.

When Denver International Airport was experiencing trouble with their new baggage system, I started my talk with, "When I checked my bags in at DIA last week, the guy tore off the stubs and said, 'Here are your lottery tickets!' "

Or, "I went up to the counter and said, 'It's October. So why do you have mistletoe hanging over the place where you check your bags?' The attendant said, 'This is so you can kiss your bags good-bye.' "

Another note on being careful and considerate: Some issues are more sensitive than others. If you're speaking in a city that's not your own, you may not realize an issue falls into the offensive category. It's safest to reserve your local needlings for your own city.

Be a Good Sport Feel free to poke fun at your own sports team in your own city. For instance, as a Denver resident, I can say something like this:

> "The Broncos played the Green Bay Packers last week, and I was reading the paper to find out why Denver had lost. They claimed there had been a drug problem, can you believe it? That's right, a drug problem! Our guys were drug up and down the field."

Gambling on a Good Laugh Any time you have a gambling spot close by a speaking destination, you've got some great built-in humor opportunities:

> "I saw Bob at the change machine last night changing dollar after dollar. I said, 'Don't you think you have enough?' And he said, 'What? Quit while I'm winning?' "

> "You know the secret to leaving a casino with a small fortune? Go in with a big one."

> "I was standing next to Bob, and he pointed to the numbers and yelled, 'Looky there, all the Keno numbers are coming up in order!' 'Uh, Bob,' I said, 'that's because we're in an elevator.' "

More Customized Humor

Here are a few more examples of "customized" humor. The key here is to know your audience and write your humor accordingly. The following groups or situations lend themselves well to some good lines:

A contracting group or any group where they are involved with a bid process:

> "So you're wondering how it came to be that I'm your keynote speaker this morning. Is it my because of my content, warm sense of humor, or quick wit? Nope—it turns out, I was just the lowest bidder."

> "People think it's easy to widen a highway … like you order a highway and a guy in a paper hat says to you, 'For an extra dollar, we can supersize it!' "

A delayed flight:

> "A journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single delay of two hours before takeoff."

The high price of gas:

> "Before you know it, buying gas will be like going to an expensive restaurant and ordering lobster. How much is gas today? It says on the marquis, 'Market Price.' How much is market price? If you have to ask, you can't afford it."

Remember, the purpose of the opening is to loosen up the audience and help them feel comfortable with you as a speaker. Be responsive, try different things, get out there and be with them. Put them in an exercise. Smile and let them know you're having a good time, and that it's okay to laugh. Once the audience is relaxed, they'll think almost anything is funny and will laugh freely and joyfully—and that's what living Happily Ever Laughter is all about.

What? Funnier Than Moi?

What do you do when your presentation or talk follows someone who is really funny—maybe even funnier than you (as if this is even possible …)? Well, should it happen, don't try and compete immediately. Your listeners aren't likely to take to you so quickly when their allegiance remains with that funny guy or girl who just left. They'll have to readjust to new possibilities before giving the new kid in the spotlight a chance.

Following a particularly entertaining and hilarious comedian in Dallas, I assumed the fetal position and hid backstage for the rest of the evening. Okay, not really. I took my spotlight, heartily complemented the speaker before me, and then moved straight into some of my more content-oriented material first. This provided a breather for the audience. It gave them a chance to refocus, gain a little knowledge, and reframe their mindset in preparation for a new brand of humor. After a few minutes, I slowly bridged back into my own variety of humor, which they then were eager to embrace. I was glad that my former speaker had warmed up the audience, setting a successful and energetic program in motion.

Emotional Rescue: When Humor Takes a Back Seat

Earlier I suggested that humor is a great way to open your talk. Yet—like most things— this is not always the case. The only way to know for sure is to check in with the emotions of those around you. Aim to bridge the emotional gap between your audience's initial state and the one you'd like them to inhabit.

Spontaneous Mindfulness

A few years back, I gave a speech in Missouri. Just before I went on, another speaker paid tribute to a teacher who had saved a child's life. The teacher received a "Heroes" award to the tune of a room full of tears and strong reactions. After so much emotional sharing, I would have come off as misguided and disrespectful if I had launched right into humor. I needed to bridge the gap.

So, after commenting in sincerity on how touching the Heroes presentation was, I said, "In light of what's going on right now, how about we all link hands and sing Kumbaya?" That one line was enough to bridge the transition from my audience's current emotional state to the state I was aiming for in my speech.

From Tragedy to Triumph

I was hired to speak to the Jefferson County School administrators not long after the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado. It was the first time many of them had ventured out of their building during school hours since the tragedy two weeks before. Everyone in the district and throughout the community was feeling pain at a very deep level. In truth, their entire sense of security had been stolen away with the senseless deaths of so many innocent young victims.

Originally, I'd been hired to end the school year in celebration—to give a humorous, motivational talk both congratulating administrators on a great year and sending them off for the summer in high spirits. After the tragedy, I called the executive director to see if they still wanted me to speak, and if so, what new direction they may want me to take. She told me the new purpose of my talk would be to give administrators permission to live and laugh again. A tall order.

Immediately before I spoke, awards were given to seven administrators for their heroic efforts in handling the tragedy. Many tears were shed as the heroes spoke about their experiences. Afterwards, I was introduced: "Next up, we have a speaker, Scott Friedman." The announcer spoke a little about me, and then came the proverbial moment of truth: "Let's welcome Scott."

Never had my opening words felt more important. I wanted to say something to help ease the pain and give them permission to start living again. Most importantly, I had to respect the seriousness of the moment and the feelings of the participants. What would your first words have been?

Mine were these:

> I know I can't possibly feel what you feel. But anyone who has suffered a loss, as I have when my brother died, can feel at least a little of what you must feel. After he died I remember thinking that there has to be some meaning, a lesson in all of this … but for quite a while, I didn't know what it was. I wasn't sure how to move on. In time, the learning came.
>
> The healing will be a day-by-day process … maybe even minute-by-minute. Unquestionably, those who have passed on would want us to let their youth, their vigor, and their zest be held up as examples for our own lives. By living well and living with purpose, we can in turn pay tribute to them in a way that no constructed memorial—however lovely—can match.
>
> Our job is not to stop mourning; our job is to stop *only* mourning and get back to living our lives and feeling joy again.

> Today was supposed to be a celebration for a good, productive year. It was meant to congratulate you on your accomplishments—on the positive steps you have taken in shaping the next generation. And none of that changes. Instead, maybe it's a rebirth, a new beginning. A step into the future.
>
> We need to give ourselves permission to live and laugh again, to celebrate all that is good.

My opening comments showed that I understood and cared; thus, I could gradually move into lighter material as they grew ready. After the talk was over, a few principals asked if I would come speak to their teachers to kick off the school next year. I was honored. More than anything, I'd wanted to do something to help the situation, and this talk provided the opportunity.

Summary

Think of it this way: The more you can control the elements within your physical space, the better your odds will be of controlling the other more important aspects of your presentation. Even if you're in a small space speaking to a few of your colleagues, you'll give yourself a great advantage if you've got the physical elements on your side. Consider this as you embark on your next speaking adventure, be it to an audience of four or 400. From lighting to sound to room set-up and ambience, the more you can plan ahead, the better.

Remember, the aim of your communications is to get your listeners to the "in fun" state of mind. Once they realize that this is going to be a joyful and relaxed experience, they'll stay on board for the duration and will better absorb the essence of your message. Experiment with the surroundings, and don't

be afraid to point out (and thus rid the air of) distractions. Remember, too, that the first three minutes of your talk will gauge the interest of your audience. Make them count!

Finally, know when humor is best left in the back seat. In times of struggle or tragedy, handle yourself with the appropriate solemnity. You may find that eventually, you can safely return to humor in the very same talk—but this is something you'll have to determine for yourself.

In the end, the alchemy happens through a matching of the audience's mood and situation to your own. The more you create synchronicity, the more you'll engage your listener. You and your audience are simply mirrors of one another. And we all know that a mirror's truest purpose is simply to shine!



Chapter Six

The Fourth Surefire Tip: You are only as successful as you are original.



Why do you need to stay fresh and original? Let me put it bluntly: The harder you are to duplicate, the more you'll be in demand. And the more you're in demand, the more you will get paid.

In the infancy of the professional speaking industry, even top professionals commonly shared the same material—much of which might have come directly from Reader's Digest magazine or television shows. Apparently, back then stale material had a fresh aftertaste.

Those days are long gone. Anyone who wants to stand out as a leader, a thinker, or a professional speaker today needs to project a certain edge—one that comes only with fresh insights and original humor.

The Funny Side of Life

Each day is brimming with material ripe for use in any speaking situation. Don't believe me? Take a moment right now, and consider your last 72 hours. What have you done? Where have you been? And whom have you met? Jot down a few details and see if you can create connections between your experiences and the universal truths we all know. This is exactly where you'll find your very best material.

In her book, "The Artists' Way," Julia Cameron describes how writing "Morning Pages" can help stir creativity. It's a simple concept: You take a few minutes each morning to write about what's going on in your life and how you feel about it all. This helps you get into the habit of reflecting on your experience, which in turn helps you generate the original material you need. And if you're a blogger, it makes for great material!

Why Stories Often Outshine Jokes

Personal stories are excellent (and entertaining) catalysts both for communicating big ideas and for presenting your most original humor. Better yet, stories let you provide more substance in less time.

Jokes, on the other hand, have less reach substance-wise. Why? Because a joke is meant to entertain. A story, on the other hand, has inherent meaning. Stories allow the audience to get to know you, your imperfections, your flaws and your foolishness. You can be vulnerable right there with the audience watching. You can entertain, enlighten, and teach all in the same effort.

The Quest for Meaning

Hall of Fame speaker Grady Jim Robinson says, "Personal disclosure is a relatively new addition to the speaker's potential

arsenal and is partly due to the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, who—at fifty or 60-something—are looking inward for meaning and are less success-crazed, less goal-oriented, less competitive, and therefore more inclined to make relating to other human beings a higher priority than a Rolex, Gucci, or BMW."

Taking off the Mask

So how much can you share when you're telling stories? This is up to you and your comfort level. Keep in mind that showing vulnerability can actually strengthen your presence and your connection to the audience. After all, no one is perfect!

Therefore, don't be afraid to let others know that you've met with challenges and that you don't have all the answers. Be vulnerable; share a funny moment when you've played the fool. Self-effacing humor shows, too, that you have a sense of humility … and this immediately renders you more approachable and thus more likable!

Be careful, though: Never share a story around a raw or unresolved situation in your own life. If you're not healed yet, don't play that drama out in front of others. (You wouldn't want to come off as a ranting, raving, angry lunatic when you start throwing chairs to punctuate your point about that ex, now, would you?) Instead, save those "issues in progress" for a time when you're past them and can share the lessons constructively.

… But Shouldn't I be Joking?

Sure, humor builds immediate rapport. And yes, laughter helps relax you and others. But sometimes it's tempting to hide behind the humor and stay a mystery while everyone else is having a good time. Don't sell out and go for laughs alone. Instead, work on adding humor and meaning to your personal stories.

Then, when the opportunity arises to share a good joke as well, you'll use it wisely to add spice to an already strong presentation.

The Right Joke: Fresh-Picked and Ripe For Humor

If you are going to tell a joke, make sure it's unique and that it carries a strong message. Make sure you know it well, too. Never tell a joke unless you know the specifics—especially the punch line! You don't want to be one of those "funny guys" (we've all heard them) who drag you into a lengthy joke only to finally exclaim, "Oh wait—what was that punch line? Sorry, I forgot …" And there go five minutes of your life that you can never get back. Instead, make every moment you spend with someone a moment worth spending—for them, for you, and for the sake of our collective Happily Ever Laughter.

Oldies are Not Always Goodies

If your audience has heard your joke before, they may laugh with you tonight, but will they respect you in the morning? Maybe not. Worse, someone in the audience just may beat you to the punch … line.

The thing is, when you share a joke with someone and they've heard it before, you compromise your chances of being seen as a fresh and unique voice. What meeting planners, company executives, and speaker bureaus are seeking most is that hard-to-find quality of true originality. They want your unique way of looking at the world.

So if you do decide to tell a "recycled" joke, tell it better than it's ever been told. Add a funny twist, rewrite it with all-new details, and/or include one of your listeners or audience

members in the new version. Personalize, customize, and hope that no one heard the same joke just this morning.

If You'll Allow Me to Hog the Stage for a Moment…

One of my favorite older jokes—one that I still use on occasion in a customer service program—is the old pig story. I add some levity to it by personalizing it:

> A lot of you may not know this, but before he got into the (real estate) business, (an audience member who is well-liked) had a vision of having the largest pig farm in the entire Midwest. So what did he do? He went out and bought truckloads of pigs, close to a hundred of them. He brought them back to his farm and found out that every single pig was female.
>
> Obviously, you can't breed sows with sows. So he called up (another name from the audience—we'll call him Bob), who happens to own a farm just down the road. "Hey Bob," he said, "I've got close to 100 sows. Do you mind if I bring them over and breed them with your boars?"
>
> Bob was more than happy to help. "Sure! How about you bring them down today?"
>
> "Sure."
>
> So he loaded the pigs back into the pick-up truck and headed back to Bob's place, let the sows breed with the boars, loaded them back on the truck, and drove home. The next morning our excited farmer

> ran to the window at 6 a.m. peered out hopefully, but not one sow was wallowing in the mud. This went on for five days.
>
> On the morning of the sixth day, the farmer couldn't bear to get out of bed. So he said to his wife, "Honey, can you go to the window and see what the sows are doing?"
>
> So his wife (insert her name if you have it) went to the window and said, "Not one pig is rolling in the mud, honey."
>
> "What are they doing?"
>
> "Every pig but one is in the truck ready to go … And that one is honking the horn."

This one's an old story, but it still works—and even better when you plug in the names of your fun-loving listeners. So far, you've got your audience laughing. But the best part is the way you take it further to create meaning for your listeners. Let me illustrate with my own customer service slant:

> … We can learn something from these pigs, so stick with me for a minute. See the sows are up at six every morning, excited to go the same place they were the day before and the day before that and the day before that. And why? I'll tell you why. For three important reasons. Number one: Great service. Number two: Their expectations are being met. And number three: They're having a lot of fun. An engaging customer experience indeed!
>
> Now, can you say the same for your customers? Are you providing great service? Are you meeting

> and exceeding expectations? Are you creating an experience? Remember, the best business strategy is a satisfied customer.

Now we have both a cute joke and one that makes a great point about customer experience.

In my humor workshops, I can use the same story to make a slightly different point:

> … Wouldn't it be nice if we, like the pigs in the story, could get up every morning at six, always excited to head to the same place as the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that? You see, we don't have to roll around in the mud every day to be happy. By reframing the way we think about the people and situations in our lives, we can find joy and laughter in most every moment. In essence, adjust your attitude, and you might be surprised to find yourself waking up day after day, happy as a pig in the mud.

Now it's your turn to try it: Think of at least two ways you might use this story to illustrate a point of your own.

Attention K-Mart Joke Tellers!

The single largest mistake in joke-telling is to announce that you are going to tell a joke. Never say, "Now I am going to tell you a joke." Doing so increases the audience's resistance. They challenge you internally: If it's a joke, it had better be funny … or… So you think you're funny, huh? Well, then, make me laugh, wise guy.

Instead, just dive in. If it's funny, they'll come to know it's a joke, won't they? And please don't say, "That reminds me of a time when …" Again, the antennae will go up, and so will the

resistance. Just deliver the humor, and let the laughs happen spontaneously.

Mislead Me Not

Be careful of that fine line between reality and humor. Let's say you start telling a story and claim that it happened to you or your family. The story sounds authentic to the audience, even though you know it's really a joke. Here's where you run the risk of losing your credibility. Once they realize what's going on, your listeners may think, If he lied to me about this, why should I believe anything else in his presentation? At the same time, if the joke is so extremely outlandish that your audience is certain that you're just kidding, it can actually add to the humor value.

It's Show(case) Time!

If you ever have the opportunity to participate in a Speakers' Showcase, a venue wherein potential clients preview you for possible hiring, remember that originality becomes paramount. Chances are high that the attendees have heard many speakers in the past. Therefore, the fastest way for you to be excluded is to use material they've already heard. Strive instead to showcase your most unique and edgy material—and let this book help you to both find it and shine it!

Summary

In short, start writing! Original material is your new best friend. Tap your own experience for the strongest (and most personally relevant) material. Remember, the best stories are entertaining,

humorous, and meaningful. Don't be afraid to show some vulnerability when writing and sharing your stories, either … as long as you avoid the "dirty laundry" sort of thing.

Jokes have a place, too, but use them with care. Often the best ones have enough flexibility to handle a few creative additions. Sometimes you can make a good one shine by sprinkling it with details such as places or names familiar to your audience.

Whether you're sharing a story, a joke, or a combination of the two, keep your humor authentic. Building trust with your listener is always a top priority—for without it your message will be lost.

Ultimately, your success as a communicator will be in direct proportion to the originality of your material. Strive to be one-of-a-kind, and you'll end up taking that hallmark all the way to the bank and beyond.



Chapter Seven

The Fifth Surefire Tip: If you can't find funny material, change your glasses.



After listening to a great comedian, you may think, "Boy, if only I had a funny life like Adam Sandler or Billy Crystal, I'd be a great humorist, too. Why doesn't anything funny ever happen to me?"

The thing is, comedians' lives aren't much different from anyone else's, at least not in the essential ways. It's just that they've cultivated a habit of looking at things differently. As Jerry Clower puts it, "I don't tell funny stories, I tell stories funny." Each of us is born with the ability to see funny. The difference lies in the way we look at things.

So where does one find humor?

Life: The Great Observatory

Life is filled with funny anecdotes when you learn to see it through the eyes of humor. You see, humor isn't necessarily in the experiences; it's in the interpretation of the experiences. As Steve Allen reminds us, nothing is funnier than the unintended humor of reality.

One of my biggest thrills about being a professional speaker is that it gives me license to do things I wouldn't normally do. I simply say to myself, "Go ahead and do it, Scott; this is going to make a great story!" All sorts of customer service situations and funny anecdotes are out there waiting to be witnessed or experienced at hotels, airports, restaurants, and beyond—especially if you're willing to initiate a little conversation.

As the ever-so-wise (wink) philosopher Scott Friedman once said, "Life is one long anecdote just waiting to be told—taking risks and facing fears, all in the name of a good story." Give yourself permission to let loose and create a new story or two. Let the following ideas help get you started.

Keep a Humor Diary

A diary is a great tool for discovering where the humor in your life might be hiding. Every day before you go to bed, write about the day's activities. Often, we don't realize all the funny things that happen to us until we write them down. Later, when we go back and read about our experiences, we say, "Now, that's funny! I can use that."

One definition of humor is "pain, embarrassment, or stress distanced by time." When you're experiencing any of these, you may not feel like laughing … but step away for a short while, and—voila!—you just might find a treasure trove of potential laughs. To capture the funny thoughts that pop into your mind, carry a small notepad or a smart phone to record possible ma-

terial. Then categorize by topic, and you've started a wonderful file of humor. When you look for, read, and collect humor, funny thoughts and witty comments will begin to pop into your mind at the most unusual times. This is how an emerging sense of humor grows.

Browse For Laughter

Start reading about humor. Go to the library or bookstore, or explore the blogs of your favorite comedians. Pay attention to how a story is developed; notice what makes you laugh. Listen to video bits on humor as well—you'll find them in digital and other formats.

Most newspapers, magazines, and online periodicals contain jokes, cartoons, clips, political columns, editorials, and anecdotes that are full of humor. Reader's Digest is just one example of a periodical with plenty of humor sprinkled among its other material. It features four regular humor features a week.

So learn to read, listen, and study. Soon enough, you'll be ready to experiment with writing your own humor, and that's when the magic unfolds.

Catch a Comedy Act or a Funny Speaker

Visit comedy clubs and/or hear professional speakers as part of your "research." Look for common elements of style; notice stage presence, timing, and delivery. Listen for what you find funny. Never steal material, but study what the "greats" do, and then start writing.

Watch Funny Shows

Late-night talk show hosts are always good for inspiring fresh material. Check out the stand-up acts at the beginning, and note the topics, approach, and timing. Sitcoms have some of the best writing in the world of television—especially when it comes to humor. Other options for comedy include shows like Saturday Night Live, Punk'd, and parody news shows. And you'll always find something both amusing and educational (from a humor-sleuthing standpoint) on the Comedy Channel. So tune in without guilt: It's all for the sake of research!

Find Funny Friends

Being around people who make you laugh will exercise your funny bone. You can't help but grow your sense of humor when those around you are feeding it.

And for the professional (or aspiring professional) speaker…

- Go "humor-surfing." Do an online search for "humor," and four billion choices later, you will have found some good, useable humor.
- Subscribe to speakers' services. You can find a list of these under www.ScottFriedman.net. Just follow the links to all the latest humor resources.
- Consider hiring a humor writer. Whenever you hear a clean comedian who appeals to your style, inquire if he or she might be interested in writing for you. David Glickman, one of my own favorite comedic writers, will take your favorite tape and give you many good

lines for a reasonable price. You can contact him at David@DavidGlickman.com.

Other great writers include Ron Culberson at Ron@Funsulting.com, and Tim Gard at Tim@TimGard.com. You can expect to pay $75 to $150 a line or $50 to $200 an hour. It's a small price to pay considering you will own this line forever. Funnieru.com is a service that helps you learn to become funnier every day for a very reasonable price.

If you expect to find humor every day, you will find it. Mike McKinley, a past president of NSA and funny man, says, "There is no such thing as humorless speakers, only speakers who do not feel comfortable incorporating humor with their heavy content. If a speaker believes in humor and relaxes, the humor will intertwine with the presentation."

Easy-to-Use Humor

If you're a little skittish about using humor in front of a group, have I got a deal for you! Here are some non-threatening ways you can ease into it, keeping the focus on the material, rather than on you. That way, if they don't laugh, it's nothing personal; they just don't think the material is funny. This method keeps you off the hot seat while still showing your funny side. Read on!

Project Some Laughs

Use a Smart Board, laptop projector, or good old-fashioned transparency projector to showcase something funny. When projecting an image, read any printed words aloud so that your listeners will finish at the same time. When people laugh at

a shared visual, the laughter validates that the group is on the same page. Look for clever visuals (such as cute cartoons) on the internet and/or in print. Remember to contact the artist or author to get permission before sharing with a large group.

Show AND Tell With Video

We live in a moving-picture-oriented culture. People love reality shows, internet movies, and films of all kinds. Let this lively medium work for you as well. Show a funny clip to reinforce a point or to move things along. You can obtain great movie clips legally (always important!) at a number of websites. Here are a few of my favorites:

- www.videometry.com
- www.artbeats.com
- www.footage.net
- www.revostock.com
- www.t3licensing.com/video/home.do
- www.buyoutfootage.com
- www.istockphoto.com/video
- footage.shutterstock.com

Read Something Funny

One of my favorites, taken from Dave Barry's Claw Your Way to the Top, can be adapted to suit many different situations:

Dear (Your Name):

Thank you so very, very much for sending us your resume. What a nice surprise it was! "Look at this," the mail person cried as we all gathered around. "(Your Name) has been so kind as to send us a resume!" What excitement we felt here in Personnel! We danced far into the night!

Sadly, however, we do not expect to have any positions available until approximately the end of time. We will, however, keep the remains of your resume on file, in a tasteful urn, and you may rest assured that nobody will disturb it outside of routine dusting.

Sincerely,

The Personnel Department

And I Quote…

The key to using quotes lies in choosing the appropriate line to match the situation. Let the "borrowed" humor work for you; if used out of context, it will only sidetrack your message and leave your listeners more confused than amused. Of course, always give credit to the original author.

Here are a few more of my favorite quotes from other funny folks:

> The day after tomorrow is the third day of the rest of your life.
>
> —George Carlin

> I just broke up with someone, and the last thing she said to me was, "You'll never find anyone like me again!" I'm thinking, "I should hope not! If

I don't want you, why would I want someone like you?"

—Larry Miller

You can say any foolish thing to a dog, and the dog will give you this look that says, "My God, you're right! I never would've thought of that!"

—Dave Barry

According to a new survey, women say they feel more comfortable undressing in front of men than they do undressing in front of other women. They say that women are too judgmental, whereas, of course, men are just grateful.

—Jay Leno

Always be nice to your children, because they are the ones who will choose your rest home.

—Phyllis Diller

AT&T is now offering a new service that allows you to pay your bills through your TV screen by using your remote control. So instead of saying, "The check's in the mail," people are going to say, "Hey, I wanted to pay, but I couldn't find the remote."

—Jay Leno

You make the beds, you do the dishes, and six months later, you have to start all over again.

—Joan Rivers

A survey says that American workers work the first three hours every day just to pay their taxes. So that's why we can't get anything done in the morning: We're government workers!

—Jay Leno

> Electricity can be dangerous. My nephew tried to stick a penny into a plug. Whoever said that a penny doesn't go far didn't see him shoot across that floor. I told him he was grounded.
>
> —Tim Allen
>
> Men do not like to admit to even momentary imperfection. My husband forgot the code to turn off the alarm. When the police came, he wouldn't admit he'd forgotten the code … he turned himself in.
>
> —Rita Rudner
>
> I am a marvelous housekeeper. Every time I leave a man, I keep his house.
>
> —Zsa Zsa Gabor
>
> The problem with the designated driver program [is that] it's not a desirable job. But if you ever get talked into doing it, have fun with it. At the end of the night, drop them off at the wrong house.
>
> —Jeff Foxworthy

And here are a few more quotes (funny and/or meaningful) from non-comedians. Sometimes the perfect quote for a situation comes from an unexpected or unknown source:

> Death is not the greatest loss of life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.
>
> —Norman Cousins
>
> The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up.
>
> —P. Valery
>
> Once the game is over, the king and the pawn go back into the same box.

—Italian saying

People who drink to drown their sorrow should be told that sorrow knows how to swim.

—Ann Landers

The world is moving so fast these days, a man who says it can't be done is generally interrupted by someone doing it.

—Milton Miller.

The salesman told me I should match the pattern on my tie with the sport coat. But I couldn't find a coat with chicken gumbo on it.

—Anonymous

When you miss the target, never in history has it been the target's fault.

—Unknown

The Fine Art of Weaving

How do you effectively weave another person's quote into your own context? Let's say you're talking about handling conflict at work. To spice up the topic a little, you may want to say, "Wouldn't it be nice if relationships at work were more like relationships with our dogs? As Dave Barry points out, 'You can say any foolish thing to a dog, and the dog will give you this look that says, 'My God, you're right! I never would've thought of that!' "

Now you've capitalized on the best use of a borrowed quote: You've illustrated your point while entertaining your listeners. Nicely done!

Take it From the Road … or the Wall

Some of the wisest and funniest sayings I've seen have appeared on bumper stickers, posters and signs. Pay attention to those "freebies" you encounter every day, and find ways to bring them into your program when applicable.

A few of my all-time favorite bumper stickers:

- This would be really funny if it weren't happening to me.
- I don't mind the rat race, but I could do with a little more cheese.
- I started out with nothing, and I still have most of it.
- It is easier to get older than it is to get wiser.
- The only time the world beats a path to your door is when you're in the bathroom.
- It's not hard to meet expenses… they're everywhere.
- We're not old people; we're recycled teenagers!
- Seven days without humor makes one weak.
- Abandon the search for truth; settle for a good fantasy.
- According to my best recollection, I don't remember.
- According to my calculations, the problem doesn't exist.
- Age is a high price to pay for maturity.
- All generalizations are false.
- All I want is less to do, more time to do it, and higher pay for not getting it done.

- Blessed are they who can laugh at themselves, for they shall never cease to be amused.
- Change is good … you go first!
- Confidence is the feeling you have before you understand the situation.
- Don't Take Life Too Seriously … You Won't Get Out Alive.
- Don't believe everything you hear or anything you say.
- Don't believe everything you think.
- Elvis IS dead, and I'm not feeling too good myself.
- Enjoy life; it's not a dress rehearsal.
- Ever stop to think, and forget to start again?
- Every silver lining has a cloud.
- Five days a week, my body is a temple. The other two, it's an amusement park.
- Follow your dreams, except the one where you're at school in your underwear.
- Have you ever noticed how nothing is impossible for those who don't have to do it?
- I can handle pain until it hurts.
- I can resist everything except temptation.
- I intend to live forever … So far, so good.
- I just let my mind wander, and it didn't come back.
- I used up all my sick days, so I called in dead!

- I'm not a complete idiot; some parts are missing.

- Welcome to reality … Come again soon!

Prop Yourself Up

The use of props can do wonders to generate energy and excitement during a presentation or speech. Tim Gard, a motivational humorist from Colorado, is a master at using props to involve his audience members and tickle their funny bone. He visits toy stores regularly, always on the lookout for a clever prop to work into his program. When speaking, he often hands out little toys to keep the audience engaged. One of his signatures is his nose flute band. He gives away nose flutes and invites members of his audience to join him onstage to create an impromptu nose flute ensemble. Suddenly his "band members" become little kids again, laughing while trying to figure out how to make a melody with a piece of plastic dangling from their noses.

He also uses the "Let Me Out" box—a motion-triggered box that, when activated, emits a loud knocking sound with voice that yells, "Let me out of here!" It's a great prop to help illustrate unwanted situations people may encounter: long meetings, airports, parking garages, traffic, etc., with a little silliness and a lot of laughs.

Using toys and props is an easy way to put your audience "in fun," and you don't have to be a comedian or a humorist to make them work for you. Now it's your turn: Start checking out toys and props in stores you visit and ask yourself, How might I use this to bring humor to a program, presentation, or speaking situation?

A Good Analogy is Like a Rear View Mirror …

Applying analogies adds creativity and humor to otherwise dry material. Case in point: "Looking at John dressed in a tux was like looking at a Volvo with a gun rack. It just didn't seem to fit …"

A side benefit of using analogies is the fact that you are forced to examine your material carefully in order to effectively weave them into a context. This lets you review your key points while allowing you to rethink aspects of your message that may be less than clear. In this sense, creating analogies becomes an editing tool that helps you stay on track.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Laughs

Using photos of you and your family helps your listener get you know you as a person. Better yet, use pictures to help illustrate some of the predicaments you've experienced over the years. A picture can be a springboard for a fun story or connection to your message. Aside from your personal pictures, you can find a nearly infinite supply of humorous images (many of which are free) on the internet and other published places. Do be sure to get permission before sharing if an image has a copyright.

Get 'em Involved!

Most people prefer interaction over passive listening. They want to feel a part of things, as though they're at least somewhat in control of their experiences whenever possible. You have wisdom and good resources right in front of you, so why not use them to break up the content of your presentation and make it more interesting? This can be as simple as getting your listeners

together in pairs or small groups to share ideas and feedback on a topic or program.

Who Me? Embarrassed?

One effective exercise I use in my humor workshop is for the audience to share their most embarrassing moments with a few other attendees. You can imagine the way this affects the rest of the program and increases the comfort level (not to mention the laughter level) among the group.

One of my favorite stories was shared by a man in a recent seminar. He and a pal had been invited by another friend to stay at his folks' house in the mountains. The generous friend had said, "The key is underneath the mat … so when you guys get there, go on in! Make yourselves at home, and feel free to grab a beer in the fridge and food from the pantry. My folks won't be back for a few days."

Well, the guys found the house, and were happily drinking beer and watching TV on the couch. Suddenly, an older couple walked into the house and yelled, "What the hell are you doing in our house?"

"We're so sorry," they apologized. "Your son Roger invited us over and said you wouldn't be home until tomorrow or the next day."

"We don't have a son named Roger! Now get out!"

Turns out they were in the wrong house.

They were terribly embarrassed, but they learned a couple of valuable lessons: Don't leave your keys underneath the front door mat, and check the address twice!

Do You Know Who You're Talking To?

One of my own most embarrassing stories started early one morning with a call on Skype from Christine, a lady from France. She was calling to inquire about the Global Speakers

Summit. After a nice chat with her, I then proceeded to write a note on Skype to Miyoung, the lady I was dating at the time:

> Headed out for an early run. Miss you, Sweetie.
>
> Hugs, kisses, and a little bite on the … neck.
>
> Scott

I then went out for my run, and when I returned, I looked to see if Miyoung had written back on Skype. Instead of a message from Miyoung, I got this message from Christine:

> Hope you had a good run.
>
> Hugs, kisses and a little bite on the neck, back at ya.
>
> Christine

Instead of clicking on Miyoung's Skype name, I had sent the message to Christine, the speaker from France. I had met her once. I felt the blood rush to my face at the embarrassment of what I had just done. Christine and I did have a good laugh after I explained what had happened, and we still chuckle about it today.

Pick a Leader

A wonderful way to pick a leader is to have everyone point a finger in the air, and tell them to—at the count of three—point to someone in their group they'd like to see be the next leader. For whatever reason, this little game always evokes a big laugh from the group.

Divide and Conquer

Why not make dividing your audience into groups more fun? There are endless ways to do this. For instance, you can form groups according to color of socks, shirts, eyes, etc. You can have the person with the shortest (or longest) last name—or maybe the person who has traveled the farthest to get here—start first. Use your imagination, and always strive to find clever ways for group members to get to know one another.

I Pledge Allegiance … to Happiness

Another way to get the audience involved is by asking them to participate in a pledge. One that I use in my keynote:

> I, [state your name], promise to give myself permission to be happy … because I am good enough, I am smart enough, and I don't care if people like me. I like me! I am awesome! Love Ya!

And the Secret Word is…

One way to add instant fun to your program is to have a "secret word." The first person to say the secret word receives a gift. You don't even have to tell them about the game if you rather not; just make a note of a secret word, and if you hear it, give a gift.

Sing, Sing a Song

Have the audience sing a song when you start off—it's a great way to pick up the energy of the group, especially first thing in the morning. Two of my favorites:

Sung to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know it, Clap your Hands) I'm alive awake alert and enthusiastic
I'm alive awake alert and enthusiastic
I'm alert, awake, alive
I'm alive, awake, alert
I'm alive, awake, alert, and enthusiastic.

"My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" Try singing this old standard with a little twist. Each time an audience member hears a word with the letter "B" in it, they stand up. Then, when they hear another word with a "B" in it, they sit down. It's a great energizer, guaranteed to pick up the spirit of the audience.

Sneezing for Laughs

Each time someone sneezes in your audience, instead of saying, "Bless you," or "Gesundheit," how about saying, "You are SO good-looking!" After the first person sneezes, explain what just happened, and invite the audience to join in with you when the next person sneezes.

Summary

You needn't look far to realize that humor is all around. Practice readjusting your "humor lenses" to find it, and soon you'll realize that the laughs are just waiting to be discovered. Try keeping a humor diary, visiting funny people and places, and actively seeking out laughter-inducing books, shows, and movies.

Then, when it comes time to "show your stuff," remember: You don't always have to BE funny. You just have to know how to generate humor with what you have. Sometimes that will simply involve borrowing the right quote, prop, letter, or visual element.

The key is to relax, be spontaneous, and remain open and receptive to the funny side of life. If you let it, the humor will find you—and then you, in turn, can use it to lighten up the world, one laugh at a time. I can see the smiles already…



Chapter Eight

The Sixth Surefire Tip: Great humor is not written; It's rewritten.



Anyone who thinks that writing humor is easy has never written humor. Even the illustrious Woody Allen says that for every 10 bits of humor he writes, seven immediately land in the trash, and the other three need to be reworked. Writing or delivering humor is a process, and—like any other process—it takes time.

Gene Peret, a top comedy writer for the late Bob Hope, claimed that the most common downfall for those attempting humor is that they give up too soon. To really connect with your audience, you need to rehearse delivery over and over.

If You Want to be Funny, Start by Getting Serious

Treat humor as you would the pursuit of golf. Would you read a book on golf and then go right out and play 18 holes? Not if you're wise. First you'd go to the practice tee, and then you might try a driving range, a short course, etc.

The same principle of learning in stages works best for humor as well. After reading about humor or getting coached, you wouldn't head straight for the platform. Instead, plan to work in stages. Practice in front of a mirror. Work on your timing and delivery. Gather a few friends, and see how they respond to your material. Then, when you're ready, try it in a program.

You'll soon find that humor, like most everything else, grows best when cultivated with care and attention. Sometimes that may mean reorganizing your schedule to make sure it happens. How about spending 15-30 minutes per day writing and rehearsing humor? Don't let yourself get sidetracked until your commitment is complete.

If you Build it, They Will Laugh

People may tell you there are rules to writing humor, but I don't think of it in terms of rules or constraints. Instead, I like to approach it as a fun-filled building project, as outlined below.

Let's Talk Framework

Everyone knows that within every well-built structure lies a solid framework. And in the case of humor, that framework often comes in the form of a story. So let's begin by considering the most important elements of a well-crafted story:

- A good story has a well-planned, deliberate storyline or plot.
- A good story features suspense of some sort, which drives the plot.
- A good story builds towards a climax, or peak of action.
- A good story has an interesting and thoughtful ending.
- After it's read or shared, a good story will leave its audience thinking, feeling, or imagining its implications.

And Now for the Building …

Once you've established your framework (or at least you understand what it requires), you can start building your humor repertoire. Below are a few steps which might help you along in your process.

Look to the Past for Future Laughs

Go ahead … have a little conversation with yourself. Light some candles, invite yourself over to your house, and then sit down and ask yourself a few questions to jar your memory. For instance, can you recall an embarrassing experience? How about a standout (for better or worse) date? The first day on a job? Or maybe a funny thing that happened to you or a friend, a big mistake you made, or a strange dream?

Let your memory guide you. Here are a few more possibilities: travel experiences, hobbies, restaurant stories, poor service you received, the strangest foods you've seen or eaten, your early driving days, a high school dating memory, teachers and professors you've known, classes you've taken, your first job interview, the strangest gift you've ever received, stories about your family

(parents, spouses, children), etc. Always work your own humor history first. You have a wealth of experiences that can become great humor with just a bit of tweaking.

Keep it Universal

Universal material works the best. In other words, choose material that everyone can relate to. This will keep your listener thinking, I know exactly what he means, or, That has happened to me. What's most important is that your stories contain a relevant lesson for the audience.

Speaking coach Lou Heckler, also a Hall of Fame speaker, has shared some useful advice to help illustrate the importance of thinking universally:

> "I am always on the lookout for universal truths in life because I believe we are more alike than different. I like to ask clients what their people are talking about most—around the water cooler and around the board table. I also get papers from each city in which I'm speaking to get a feel for what people in that community are concerned about."

Get Out That Hammer & Nails

So how do you take your chosen content and apply it effectively to the framework we discussed earlier? Remember, all good stories must have truth, conflict, and resolution. These are things we all can relate to. They are the bricks, and the memory is the mortar.

The truth is, most humor is just pain, embarrassment, or great stress distanced by time. We can laugh at life's pitfalls now because they are in the past. Yes, we have survived! So at last, we laugh. If we can't, well then we're just not quite healed

yet. Hopefully, after some minor shock therapy and padded cell time, we'll come out clear enough to share the experience with others … in a wonderfully entertaining story.

As you begin crafting that humorous tale, remember to take your time and be a perfectionist. You never know when something you write might end up becoming your signature story.

And what is a "signature story"? It's that special story for which people remember you. It's the one that leaves your listener saying, "Of course I remember her; she's the one who told the story about …" Ultimately, it's the audience members who will determine which of your stories may be a signature story—for they will remember you by it.

Sorry, but it's NOT All About You

One caveat when choosing and constructing your tales: Make sure you're not always the hero. Your audience wants to relate to you as a normal, imperfect human being. What touches others most goes beyond your successes to where and how you failed, and (most importantly) what you learned. Humorist Ken Futch, CSP, asks an important question: "After hearing one of your stories, is your audience thinking, 'Me, too!' or do they instead think, 'So what?'… 'Me, too!' means they can relate to your pain. 'So what?' means you're probably just bragging."

We've all heard speakers who tell stories of victory. They've climbed huge mountains; they've done the right thing. They were right there helping when the moon was hung, too. The first story you hear them tell may leave you thinking, Hey good job, you're pretty cool! Then comes another one … That's impressive, too, but that's enough about your accomplishments. By the third self-promoting tale, your attitude changes to, What about me? Why is this all about you? I've heard enough. If there's a fourth story, you're likely to fall into something like,

Wow … how self-absorbed can one person be? That's it—I'm out of here, after which you run for the door.

On the flip side, when you showcase others as the heroes of your stories, YOU become the true hero.

Host an Open House for Your Story

Invite friends to hear your story. Make a note where they laugh, and where they begin to nod off. The best way to develop a potential signature story is to tell it, tell it again, and keep telling it—always while paying close attention to your listeners' reactions.

Also, when practicing the telling of your humorous tale, strive to *be* the story. Don't describe the person; instead, describe the feeling you get from the person in as few words as possible. Act it out. Move your body. Show expression. Become the people you describe. Recall key phrases. Don't be afraid to pause and build audience anticipation. The pause will allow your audience to mentally fill in the blanks.

As humorist Mark Mayfield reminds us, you always want to rehearse and memorize your stories, but never make them sound that way. Share the story from your listeners' point of view. And as my good friend and mentor Lou Heckler reminds me, every time you tell a story and become one of the characters, the audience becomes the other.

A Little Renovation Reaps Bigger Laughs

How many drafts of a blueprint must an architect create before stumbling upon the ideal arrangement for a space? That's right—plenty. In the same spirit, write and then rewrite, again and again. Don't give up on a story until you've told it from a variety of angles. It may take many times of rewriting and retelling before you have something worth sharing.

Have you ever told a story you considered hilarious, only to find yourself at the end of it waiting for a big laugh that never came? If you have, then it's time for a little story face-lift:

Review the Essentials

First off, review the elements shared by good stories (above). The one that tends to be overlooked when stories flop is the element of dramatic climax. As a general rule, your story should build up to a point of great drama, tension, or action. At or after this point, most successful stories have the biggest laugh or surprise at the end.

Got Tension?

Getting ready for and delivering the punch line is a bit like blowing up a balloon while knowing exactly at what point you should let it explode. The more you blow up the balloon, the more tension you create—and the sharper and quicker the puncturing instrument, the louder the noise. So a really good story "explodes" into the punch line.

Team Up for Laughs

Two, three or four minds work much better than just one mind. Find yourself a coach, a friend, a comedian, or a mastermind group to help you with your stories. I'm part of a mastermind group of six; we get together with the single goal of helping one another develop great stories. We have a system wherein one participant tells a story, while the others listen for structure, clarity, congruence, and humor value.

One of the biggest mistakes that we often hear is the speaker's tendency to supply too much unnecessary detail. Remember, most stories improve significantly simply by shortening them! The feedback from the group helps each of us zero in

on what's needed, what's not, and what changes might energize our stories. Try it yourself: Find a group you can trust, and let the magic unfold.

Showcasing Your Work: Tips for Better Storytelling

When you're comfortable enough with your story, start telling it to others in a more public context. Enlisting an audience is the only way to get that unbiased sort of feedback that reveals whether or not you have a winner.

Even after practicing and succeeding in delivering a great story, no tale is ever truly finished for the professional speaker. I have been telling some of the same stories for over 10 years, and they continue to improve with each delivery. Every time you tell a story, pretend you're telling it for the first time. Be in the moment, and watch how you surprise yourself. Just as you're sharing it for the 387th time, out of nowhere that key line you've been waiting for will suddenly surface.

So how does this happen? As we grow and mature, we view the world differently. At times we're more relaxed; at other times we're in a context that inspires surprise. Just keep it fresh, and it will keep you fresh in return. To further help you along, check out the below tips for becoming a better storyteller:

Paint Your Story the Color of Confidence

The outer appearance of any creation is what draws people to it. Therefore, have confidence while presenting every story you tell. Any uncertainty or hesitation in your delivery will lower your chances of success. A basic rule of communication is that people tend to respond the way they are expected to respond. Humor is no exception. A delivery without confidence com-

municates that you don't expect anyone to find your material funny. Commit to the story as well as to the humor.

Matchmaker, Matchmaker…

Work, too, on matching your gestures with your words. Stories come alive when you paint the same pictures with both your words and your body. Gestures play a huge part in the success of your story, so strive to align your content with the brush-stroke visuals that gestures provide.

Brevity is the Soul of … Laughter

Shakespeare was right when he said that "Brevity is the soul of wit." The most common mistake storytellers make is in dragging out a story. The payoff has to be greater than the buildup. The laugh—or reward—of the story has to be worth more than the time spent in its telling. The truth is, as storytellers we may believe we need to include every little detail to express an incident completely. I'm here to tell you that we don't. In humor, less is almost always more.

To help illustrate this principle, I recommend playing "Half the Words" game:

The "Half the Words" Exercise

Take a story you tell, and retell it again—but this time, strive to cut the number of words in half. If it isn't essential add to the plot, or if it doesn't add good laughs to the story, leave it out. You'll be amazed at how none of your meaning gets lost in this practice. If anything, you amplify your meaning by cutting the excess and revealing the essence. Your stories suddenly come alive.

Exaggerate the Details With "What If?"

So what happens if you have a great story, but it just doesn't have that crescendo ending you wanted? It's building, building, building—but by the time you get to the end, it's flat. Here's little game to play with yourself to get yourself to that final, powerful laugh:

"What If?" What if the ending had really been … ? What if she had missed her flight? What if she discovered her neighbor's secret identity? As long as the integrity of a story remains intact, it still qualifies as a true story, doesn't it? Sometimes we need to exaggerate a little to make a good story into a great one. After telling your "revised" version a few times, even you will probably start to believe that it really happened.

One Story, Three Versions

Every story has three versions: the story that happened, the story that almost happened, and the story that might have happened. Take some creative liberties in creating better stories by playing with each.

Let's look at how I took a few creative liberties with an April Fools' Day joke I played on my mother:

> My mom and stepdad always move to Arizona for the winter and through April Fools' Day. A few years back on April 1st, I took a Denver friend (one with a voice they would not recognize) into their house. He left this greeting on their home answering machine: "Thanks for calling the Schmittenbergs. Bruce is out playing golf, Vicki is doing the aerobic thing, and the kids are getting in trouble somewhere. If you called to talk to the Shers

(my mom's married name), they can be reached in Scottsdale at 480-…"

I then had another friend call her in Scottsdale and ask her if there was someone living in her house in Denver. "What?" my mother exclaimed. "Why would you think that?"

My friend replied, "I called you in Denver and got a very strange message. You may want to call your house." And so she did.

Five minutes later, the phone rang, and of course it was my mother. (I'm the only one with a key to her house, by the way.) I could hear the panic in her voice. "Who are the Schmittenbergs?" she screamed.

"The Schmittenbergs? I don't know who you're talking about."

"Don't play games with me! Who are they?"

"Oh, *those* Schmittenbergs. Mom, they're the nicest people from Kentucky who moved to Denver a few weeks ago … but their house wasn't quite ready and won't be until May 1. So since you won't be home until May 10th, I thought, what would it hurt if they live in your place until theirs is ready?"

"What would it hurt? What would it hurt? I'll tell you what it'll hurt! The neighbors have been complaining. Their dog is knocking over trash and barking all night long! Everyone seems to be up in arms about the Schmittenbergs. You get them out by tomorrow."

"Oops, I guess I should never have signed that contract …"

> "Whattttt?" and she slammed down the phone. I almost called her back but thought, no—I'm going to let her worry about it for a while. Of course I got distracted and totally forgot about it.
>
> An hour later my sister called to give me Mom's flight information. She was on her way back to Denver to evict the Schmittenbergs, my sis informed me.
>
> Well, there's some good news and some bad news on how this story ends. The bad news is that, $350 later on a quick ticket, guess who had to pay for the flight? (The audience always says—YOU, meaning me.) I nod my head in agreement. But the good news is really good news. The Schmittenbergs left the place immaculate; you would've never known they were there.

Okay … so that's *close* to the way it happened. In fact, it's true, until my sister called me back to tell me Mom was coming home to get rid of the Schmittenbergs. At that point I said, "Come on, Wendy, you know it's April Fools' Day, and you wouldn't let Mom come home." But Wendy insisted she was on her way and told me to wait and see.

I called my mom at home in Arizona and got her answering machine: "Thanks for calling the Shers. Sorry, we can't come to the phone right now, but Litamae and David are on their way back to Denver and won't be back for a few days. Have a terrific day."

And I left this message on her machine: "Mom, for many years you have told me never to leave an outgoing answering machine message that suggests I'm out of town, for—according to you—criminals will break into my house, steal everything I have, and then set the place on fire. That's how I know you would never leave a message like this on your machine, so I

know you're not on your way to Denver. Thanks for being a good sport."

As I'm sure you've figured out, my mom had called my sister to tell her about me leasing out her house, and my sister told her to get a grip, it's April 1st … and … it's SCOTT!

It was a good story that illustrated my point about being more playful, thus giving others permission to be playful as well. The problem was, it fell flat at the end. I needed an ending with a real crescendo. So I gave myself creative license to rewrite the ending.

The new ending saved me over 90 seconds, and it also gave me the punch I needed to end the story. Did the integrity of the story stay intact? I think so. And had I not altered the ending a little, I wouldn't be using the story at all, for the payoff would fall short of the buildup.

The lesson is this: If you're having trouble making a story work, why not get together with a few colleagues or friends and play "What if?" It's a great exercise that can make all the difference.

The Rule of Three

Here's a little tip that's helped me in developing and delivering great humor: The Rule of Three. This involves listing three things, with the third thing being the surprise that creates the humor. It creates a subconscious rhythm or pattern in your listener's mind, thus heightening the impact of the humor. The rule of three is especially effective when you're involving your audience in a question/answer session.

Notice the use of the rule of three in a Q & A session when the following question was asked:

> What do you do if you're losing your audience?

Answer:

You can pull out your best story, immediately go into an exercise, or pull the fire alarm.

Beauty and the Pause

The pause is one of your most effective tools when telling a story. Comedians have banked their careers on the pause. Jack Benny was a master of the pause and knew just how long to milk a punch line. "Timing is not so much knowing when to speak," he said, "but knowing when to pause." The pause will dramatically improve your timing and rhythm.

Frame your pauses to give your audience time to visualize the story and catch on to the situation you're creating in their minds. If you want extra emphasis on a certain part of your story, pause—and your listener will stay in that moment, thinking of what you just said. The most critical time to use the pause is in framing the climax.

The proper time to communicate that you expect smiles or laughter is just before the punch line. A short pause alerts the audience that a punch line is coming, thus preparing them to laugh. Then when you deliver the punch line and pause again—the audience reads this as permission to laugh.

When we are waiting to get that laugh, though, one second can seem like an hour. Many speakers will get nervous waiting for the laugh and not pause long enough to let the audience know that this is the place they're supposed to laugh. Many a good laugh line has been stepped on this way, rendering them chuckle-less.

Got Quirks?

If you study top professionals, you'll see the little quirks they've used to cue the audience to laugh after a punch line. George Burns, for instance, would take a puff of his cigar. Bob Hope

and Johnny Carson simply stared straight at their audience. Joan Rivers dramatically nods and points her finger around the room. Such gestures announce that you've just heard a joke, and that it's okay to laugh now.

Develop your own quirks, and watch your audience laugh away.

For the Record

Record yourself speaking (i.e., delivering your material) as often as you can. You never know when one of those spontaneous, brilliant "keepers" will find its way out of your mouth. Later, as you listen to yourself deliver your content, you'll find ways to make it better—and funnier.

A Few Final Words from the Experts

> "Give us a quarter turn when you switch characters." —Lou Heckler
>
> "Use odd voices." —Janie Jasin
>
> "Relax. Shtick happens." —Steve Wilson
>
> "Tell people your story so in it they hear their life. We can then change the world one story at a time." —Max Dixon
>
> "People don't remember what you say; they do remember the pictures you created in their minds. " —Patricia Fripp
>
> "Drop out the unessential by watching the eyes of the listener." —Terry Paulson CSP, CPAE

And finally, Cavett Robert, founder of the National Speakers Association, wisely said that a story isn't really a story until

you've told it 50 times. It takes that many times to master the timing, the delivery, your movements and body posture, and the rest of the story's nuances. As you continue to tell and retell your story, you'll be amazed at how much it evolves. The right story, delivered well, may be the sole measure between a good and a great speaker. Therefore, never underestimate a story's power.

Summary

Think about it: Creating anything is a process. Think of writing humor in the same way. You begin with a framework and build from there. Look to your experience to find the perfect story. Almost anything goes—but the best material will usually make light of a tough situation.

From there, continue to expand and refine your work. Ironically, the real expansion often happens when you cut out half the words. Consider enlisting the help of others along the way. Sharing in a group of like-minded writers can make a tremendous difference in the quality of the outcome. Remember, more feedback leads to better results!

Keep all this in mind as you revise and improve your story. Like an architect with the luxury of moving a wall even after your structure is built, you've got unlimited freedom when writing humor. Enjoy it—and watch your ideas take shape into something that will stand against both the elements and the test of time.



Chapter Nine

The Seventh Surefire Tip: Spontaneity is better the second time.



Did you read that twice because you weren't quite sure what I meant? Let me explain.

Have you ever done something foolish? Or has anyone ever said something to you where you wished you'd had a comeback, but nothing came? Well, wouldn't it be nice to have something to say in these sorts of situations?

Next time someone says, "You're not yourself today," look at them and say, "Why are you telling me?" After all, if you're not you, then they wouldn't be telling you, right?

Not long ago, I was at a Chinese restaurant playing with my Chow Mein with chopsticks. When I asked the waiter for a fork, he looked and me and asked, "Ahhh, getting hungry?" I'll bet he says that to any customer who asks for a fork after

attempting to eat with chopsticks. This is a guy who knows the value of planned spontaneity!

I was out with Tim Gard, a good buddy and fellow motivational humorist, when the speaker we were hearing fell right off the back of the stage. After making sure he was all right, Tim turned to me and asked, "What would you say right now?" I thought about this and answered, "Don't mind me; it's just a stage I'm going through."

I asked Tim what he would say. "I will now take questions … from the floor," was his response. Now if either of us should ever fall from a stage, we'll be ready. I think I may have to go with Tim's comment, though— I like it better.

Planned Spontaneity: A How-To Guide

Even if you're the best ad-libber in the world, it's always a good idea to have a response ready to go, just in case. For starters, make sure you've acquired enough knowledge around your topic to prepare you for whatever "surprises" may come your way. We all face little (or big) unanticipated challenges or slip-ups when we're speaking in front of others. How many times have you been in a situation where something unusual happens, and five minutes later, you find yourself thinking, If only I would have said … , It would have been perfect. Why did it come to me so late? If you write down these "what if" thoughts, you'll have them ready to go for the next time.

Once a group of people walked out in the middle of my program (apparently, they had to leave the conference early). All I could think to say was, "Hey, where are you going?" After the program, I thought of two far better lines: "Hey, look! My first walking ovation!" and "You know, there is a penalty for early withdrawal."

The lesson is this: Keep track of your lines. Write them down, memorize them, and review them once in a while so

they'll be ready to go.

Better Banter

Have you ever witnessed a comedian skillfully bantering with an audience?

> "Sir, what do you do for a living?"
>
> "Nothing, really."
>
> "How do you know when you're done?"
>
> "What's your name?"
>
> "Ira."
>
> "Oh, so your folks named you after a tax shelter?"

Comedians are master ad-libbers, in part because they rehearse their spontaneity. The key to delivering rehearsed spontaneity is to pause for a moment after the incident or comment, look up like you are thinking, and then—boom—deliver the line.

The audience will believe that you've made it up on the spot. Brilliant!

Mutual Distraction

When do you make mention of distractions? If only a small number of your listeners have noticed the incident, no need to react at all. If, however, over 30% of your audience is aware of the distraction, the unwritten rule is that you should comment on it.

Why is this important? During a distraction, your audience becomes uncomfortable. The focus shifts from your message to the distraction. This creates tension, which needs to be released.

Let's say, for instance, a chandelier were to come crashing down in the middle of my speech. If you were in the audience and I didn't say a word about it, what would you think? Would you think that I'm too nervous to mention it, or that I just don't have the skills to handle it? Either way, I'd lose both my credibility and my audience, who by then would be collecting shards of glass while looking for the exit.

But there's some good news in this scenario. In tense situations such as these, the standard for good humor becomes lower. Your audience will laugh at almost anything because your remark will relieve their tension. What's important—and funny—is the speed with which you respond. We all admire rapidly-improvised wit, and we laugh to show our appreciation. It doesn't matter how funny (or not) the line may have been in another less pressing situation; in the midst of chaos, we're both grateful and giddy!

When Things Go Wrong, Take a Quick Right

Here are some of the common things that have been known to go wrong, as well as some quick comebacks to help you through the situation. Remember: Keep it light to make it right!

The microphone goes silent:

- Evidently, someone has heard this speech before.
- May the force be with you.
- Let me have a show of hands … How many of you read lips?
- This is carrying "Silent Night" a little far.

You get feedback from the microphone:

- Pretend like you're listening intently and then say, "Jimi Hendrix 76."
- If I wanted feedback, I would have asked for feedback.
- Stare cautiously to the left while listening to the microphone buzz. Then say in a concerned tone, "Whatever it is, it's getting closer."
- Okay, you win (looking as if talking to the sound). Microphone, you take the parts, I'll take the melody.

A Loud Noise Interrupts Your Talk:

- And that concludes the musical portion of the program.
- Mom, can you be a little more careful?
- Just set that down right there.
- (At a banquet) There goes my dessert.
- Is that my five-minute warning?
- Look up as if you're talking to God and say, "Okay—if you don't like that topic, we'll change it."

A bell or fire alarm goes off:

- Time to take my pill.
- So that's what happened to my wake-up call.
- Saved by the bell!
- There goes another one trying to escape from _ (whatever organization you are speaking to).

A slide or projection appears upside down:

- This one's for those of you standing on your heads.
- This is the Australian part of the presentation.

There's a spelling error on your projection or printed page:

- Mark Twain once said he never respected anyone who couldn't spell a word more than one way.
- I said I was a professional speaker, not a professional speller.
- I'm known for my creativity; you should see how many ways I can spell this misspelled word.

You run out of ink while writing on a flip chart or white board:

- Obviously, I've come to the dry part of my presentation.

A participant walks out:

- Look, my first walking ovation!
- You know there is a penalty for early withdrawal.
- It gets better; I promise. Even I walked out of my first talk.

You lose your place in a presentation:

- "I'm going to have to start over." Then, truly start over and repeat the first 10 seconds of how you opened. They'll howl.
- I'm sorry. While I was running off at the mouth, my train of thought seemed to derail.

- I just want to wait a minute in case any of you have lost your place … like I have.
- Sometimes we say the most with silence … not this time, but sometimes.
- If any of you have heard me speak before, please go on to my next thought and I'll catch up.

An audience member says something funny:

- Thanks for the help, sir. I'll take it from here.
- You must not have read the rules; you're not supposed to be funnier than the speaker.
- Thanks ma'am; that was great … You can leave now.
- How about going on the road with me?

People are chatting while you're trying to speak:

- Rather than saying anything, go over and stand next to them and continue speaking.
- Go ahead—I wouldn't want to interrupt you. That would be rude.
- Would you like to share that with the whole class?

People are reading magazines, flossing teeth, or blowing bubbles:

- I'm sorry, but if you don't have enough for the entire group, I'm going to have to ask you to stop.

A bright spotlight switches on:

- No, no! I said I wanted a Bud Light!

You rush into the wrong meeting:

- Wait—this isn't the Goldfarb Bar Mitzvah?

Music rises from another room:

- Does anyone have a baton?

Someone is going on and on and on while sharing:

- Put your arm around them and say, "Could we please hear the abridged version?"
- Do you happen to have the Cliff Notes on the story?

A participant doesn't answer a question:

- Oh well, thanks for playing.

The lights flicker or go out:

- I've often had people doze off during my talk, but never an entire chandelier. (Gene Peret)
- Why do I have the feeling that when all the lights come on, I'll be alone?
- I do my best work in the dark.
- Is that my five-minute warning?
- Now we're all in the dark.
- I know you're on a tight budget, but really.
- I forgot to mention we have a curfew.
- This lighting really plays tricks on your eyes. I'm actually a lot more handsome and skinnier than I look.

Case Study: Out of the Dark

I was speaking for the Colorado Health Care Association several years ago when, in the middle of my program, the entire room went dark. Thankfully, I knew what to say. Just as I was about to say, "I do my best work in the dark," someone from the outside opened a door. All you could see was a little bit of light streaming in from the open door. A new line just popped into my head. So, instead of saying my rehearsed line, I said, "Ready? Okay! One, two three … Surprise!"

… And a Few Generic Cover-Up Lines from Terry Paulson, CSP, CPAE:

- Is this Candid Camera?
- Some days you're the bug; other days you're the windshield. Guess which one I am today?
- This life is a test. It is only a test. If it had been a real life, I would have been given instructions on where to go and what to do.
- Someday, I'll laugh at this. May I start now?

Even when you have a line ready to go, be open to the spontaneity of the moment, and dare to replace your plan with something better. Playing off of what is happening at the moment the distraction occurs will score big points with the audience.

Dr. Heckler and Mr. Hide

It's an after-dinner speech. You look around and think, Why did the cocktail party go on for over an hour? You'd think some

of these people had never had a drink before. They're loud. They're obnoxious. But they'll be quiet once I start my talk. Right? Not a chance. These folks are out of control … and there's nowhere to hide!

Sound familiar? If not, you're lucky. When you speak regularly at after-dinner functions, a scenario like this is just a matter of time. Some folks I know won't even consider signing up for an after-dinner talk. I prefer to approach things this way: We do the best we can with the skills we have. So, if it happens to be one of those nights where the audience is a bit "lively," I just get in there and give it my best anyway.

But on nights like this, you're more likely than ever to encounter that often-feared monster of the speaking world: the dreaded heckler. You know—that poor, misguided person who enjoys watching people broil on the hot seat? Unfortunately, you can't hide from him or her once you're in the spotlight. However, you'll be far better equipped to handle the heckler if you've got some ammunition ready to go. Read on…

You've Got the Power – So Keep It!

The first thing to remember is that the control of the audience is in your hands—so don't compromise it to a loud voice vying for attention. You'll lose control if you shout at your heckler or let his or her comments disrupt the message. If you give a heckler too much attention, you're making the choice to turn your meeting into their meeting.

That in mind, you still need to put a stop to the heckling, whether you're in a public space (such as a comedy club) or at a meeting with familiar colleagues. In a public arena, most people don't know one another. Therefore, it's more acceptable to be confrontational in handling hecklers. The audience will tend to side with the speaker or comedian. In a meeting, however, more dynamics are at play—so speaker beware! One wrong

move in handling the heckler, and you'll risk becoming the bad guy. Why? Because the heckler may (ironically) turn out to be the president of the company or one of its leaders. Offend the wrong person, and you may find yourself without an audience, a laugh, or an invitation to return—ever.

What We'd LIKE to Say…

Just for fun, I'm offering you a list of inappropriate lines—you know, the ones we'd love to say to shut down the hecklers, but the ones that would land us in big trouble. Go ahead and enjoy them in that imaginary place … but I wouldn't recommend that you use them from the platform, unless you'd like to be escorted out:

- One day you'll find yourself, and you will be disappointed.
- Sir, did you just come down from the mountains for supplies?
- The stork that brought you should have been arrested for smuggling dope.
- Another example of what happens when cousins breed.
- Hey buddy, let's be fair. Do I come in and bother you at work when you're putting together Happy Meals?
- "Look, I've only got five minutes here to make a fool of myself. You've got the rest of your life."
- When your IQ gets to 75 … sell.

As tempting (and funny) as these or other insults may be, remember one of the Golden Rules of speaking: Never put down an audience member.

Putting the Halt on Hecklers

Instead of taking the "low road" by blurting out one of the above comments, try one of the following to shut down your heckler. Each of these directly addresses aspects of the heckler's identity or motivations. A little psychology can be great medicine!

Ownership

If your listeners don't know one another, get the heckler to take ownership for rude behavior. Simply say, "What's your name, and would you please repeat that comment?" Once the heckler's identity has been revealed, he or she won't want to appear too foolish.

Come a Little Closer

Moving closer to your heckler will usually put an end to the shenanigans. Heckler-types will generally lose steam (or guts) when you're standing right next to them. When my friend and colleague Robert Henry was alive, he used to walk over to hecklers, put his hand on their shoulder and neck, and gently squeeze while continuing his talk. These days, you could face trouble if you touch someone without their permission; however, you can still make your point through proximity. When you enter his or her space, the heckler will get the message without disturbing the audience or the flow of your talk.

Learn to Spot a Heckler Before He Heckles

If you pay close attention, you'll often find that a heckler will give you a clue that he or she may be trouble even before you talk. When I speak to high school audiences, I always look for the kids who have that certain "I'm-here-to-stir-up-trouble" look. I introduce myself to them with that "I'm really not all

that bad—you could even like me" look and try and make friends. I always ask their names, too—as once you've made that human connection, you lessen the likelihood that someone will bother you.

What the Heck? Is that a Heckler on Your Stage?

If a heckler isn't being too offensive and you're willing to take the risk, ask him or her to be part of the show. For instance, let's say you have an audience participation exercise that works best with colorful characters. Invite your heckler up to the stage—just make sure your verbal skills are at their sharpest. I've done this five or six times with great success. I've also tried it with less success … but I enjoy the risk vs. return opportunity. Plus, "colorful" audience members can make colorful things happen!

Positive Lines Work (Most) Every Time

Always deliver your comeback line for a heckler with a smile. You'll keep the power in your court if you refuse to get angry (which obviously feeds into the heckler's agenda). The following lines are tame enough for most any professional setting—yet tough enough to make your point to the offending commentator:

- How many of you believe in feedback? Okay, take out a sheet of paper, wad it up, and throw it towards the second row.
- Would you care to go outside and say that? Good, then I can stay in here and finish my talk in peace.
- Are you the kind of person who goes to a movie and talks back to the screen?

- Let's see a show of hands. Who would rather hear this person shouting, or who would rather go with the previously-planned programming? Sir, maybe it will be your turn the next time.

- (Mute button: Pretend you're hitting a remote and say, "Mute!")

Again, the smile is an important element of your delivery, as it shows that you mean well.

Summary

While many things can and will go wrong, remember to stay in control. The best way to do this is to be prepared for anything! Ultimately, your skill as a speaker will be tested by all sorts of unexpected circumstances. Now it's your turn to take it from here and practice some of your own "what if" scenarios. It's fun to imagine what might go wrong—then plan how you'd respond to it with humor and grace.

As you grow in confidence and skill, you'll become better at dealing with everything from hecklers to power outages to unforeseen mini-disasters. So get out there and greet the unexpected like you'd greet the rain: Bring your umbrella and raincoat, and plan to have a splashing good time!



Chapter Ten

The Eighth Surefire Tip: If they don't laugh, it wasn't meant to be funny.



I was listening to a famous football player known for his religious beliefs and moral stature. He started off his talk with this joke:

> A nun got out of the shower and was standing naked when the doorbell rang. She asked who it was.
>
> The response was, "The blind man."
>
> She figured, instead of going back and getting a towel—he was blind, after all—she'd just open up the door.

> She did, and the wide-eyed man said, "Excuse me, ma'am, but where would you like to install these blinds?"

At this point, the football player didn't say another word about the joke; he just launched right into his motivational talk. There was no connection whatsoever to his message.

This is one example of an introduction gone wrong. Why? Because starting a speech with a joke that has nothing to do with the forthcoming material renders the joke irrelevant. Even if the joke is hilarious, your listener is bound to wonder how it fits with your topic. Worse, if the joke isn't that funny, the speech starts out awkwardly, and you've lost credibility. Not much of a payoff, is it?

Yet for some reason, people do this all the time. Maybe somewhere back in the Dark Ages a caveman entertained his guests by etching a cave guy slipping on a banana peel. And maybe this broke the ice at his cave party, setting a precedent for every speaker since—and leading us all to believe we should always begin our talks with a joke.

But don't be fooled. While it's true that you should start any presentation with something that "grabs" your audience, breaks preoccupation, and invites them to listen, the opening material must apply to your speech. That's why an irrelevant joke is your worst option.

The Elegance of Relevance

Relevance reduces resistance. When humor is used to make a point, we are much more open to accepting it. And this way, even if the joke isn't that funny, at least you've made a point.

Relevant, appropriate humor is a powerful tool. Most professionals would agree, as this wise advice illustrates:

> Keep your humor "on target" by making sure it relates to the content of your program. That way, it enhances instead of detracting. On-target humor provides pegs for retention, illustrates key points, and generates genuine enthusiasm in an audience. Don't ask, "Is it funny?" Ask, "Does it work in getting my point across and increasing commitment to my message?" –Terry Paulson, PhD, CSP, CPAE

Risk and Ye Shall See Big Returns

An audience greatly appreciates those speakers who can create humor out of whatever is happening at the moment.

Victor Borge once said, "The natural reaction to things is the greatest humor that I know of. That is the essence of humor; to grab the moment. It is the truth of the moment."

Not All Humor is Created (or Received) Equally

"Humor at the Moment" is sometimes funny only in your own mind. So what happens if the audience doesn't laugh?

I was presenting a talk for a group of singles in Miami. As I stood up to speak, a guy in the front row threw me a carrot (the real, vegetable kind) and said, "Here—catch this!" This being a singles program, I thought fast and said, "How many of you ladies are looking for a carat or two?"

Well, I thought it was a funny line … but boy, was I wrong. They all just stared at me. What would you have done in a situation like this?

Fortunately, I've had the opportunity to come up with many "saver" lines—you know, for those times when my audience's

level of sophistication just isn't quite up to par with mine. All right, I admit it: Sometimes I'm the only one who thinks I'm funny … but do you think that's ever stopped me from plugging on? Of course not!

So back to my well-intentioned "carat" joke. I've found that often the best way to handle a situation like this is to simply be honest. In this case, I said, "Well, I thought that was pretty funny; after all, this is a singles talk. I figured you'd laugh with me and we would have a warm, loving relationship for the rest of the speech. So now what am I supposed to do? Can we please start over?" Immediately, the audience loosened up, and the presentation was a great success.

"Life" Lines (For Awkward Times)

Coming up with good saver lines can help you create even better rapport with your audience than you might have experienced had the humor worked. That's how a pre-planned "saver" line becomes a lifeline.

Johnny Carson, former host of The Tonight Show, was famous for the way he responded when an audience didn't laugh at his humor. He'd flash this cute little comfortable smile after a joke had bombed. Audiences across America were so taken with that expression, they would actually look forward to seeing it. Johnny would also make funny, self-effacing comebacks to shed light on failed humor. His talent for taking risks and then gracefully dealing with those that fell short became one of his most endearing trademarks.

If you plan on being playful when speaking—and I think you should—let your unique and humble style shine through when things don't get the reception you'd hoped for.

Scott's Partial List of Generic Comebacks

The below list of comebacks are meant for those moments when a joke falls flat. See if any of these fit your style—and keep creating your own to suit that trademark humor you're developing as you read this book:

- Some jokes I do just for me.
- That's the last time I buy a joke from (member of the group who is known as the "funny one").
- I'd now like you to bow your heads and join with me in silent prayer for that last joke that just died.
- (Look at your notes) … It says here, "Pause for laughter." Okay, I'll wait. One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand…
- This is one of those times I need to remember three things: 9-1-1.
- And to think, I cancelled a dentist appointment to be here!
- Look, just because the last speaker was lousy doesn't mean you have to take it out on me.
- Luckily, the story has a powerful moral.
- Did you ever get the feeling your talent is on hold?
- Hey, that's humor… I thought. I guess I must have thought wrong.
- I wasn't born here, but I'm sure dying here.
- I was trying out new material; thanks for the feedback.

- That's just the kind of material that has kept me from the big time.
- (As you're ripping up a card or scratching out notes) I thought that one would be a biggie.

You do have another choice. If they don't laugh, you have the choice to keep moving on like it was never meant to be funny in the first place. Better yet, you can let that "failed" moment become an authentic opportunity to bond with your audience by bravely and happily poking fun at yourself.

Summary

Learning to add humor to your communication is not an end in itself. Rather, it's a way to deliver your most important ideas within an open and comfortable context—one that invites the listener to take in truths. That's why it's important to keep your humor relevant to your aims. Even if it doesn't exactly reflect your bigger message, let it help you get there.

Sometimes, though, your best effort at humor won't be taken the way you'd hoped. Instead of laughter, you might get rolling eyes, or worse, silence. These times might sound like a communicator's worst nightmare, but fear not! The "bombs," as we call them, can re-ignite the audience's connection with you if you play them well.

The bottom line is this: You can't force humor, and sometimes your best shot just wasn't meant to be funny. As artist Scott Adams once said, "Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep." It's the way you handle the big picture—along with the risks you're willing to take—that will determine your success.

Chapter Eleven

The Ninth Surefire Tip: The richest laugh is at no one's expense.



The highest form of humor is that of laughing at ourselves. The lowest form makes someone else the brunt of our joke. If someone in your audience gets hurt or is offended by your remarks, then the material—and thus you—have been inappropriate. If more than one person is offended, you've failed. That's why I always say, When in doubt, leave it out.

The Changing of the Times

Recently, a late night talk show host offered a national apology for a politically offensive line—a line that, ten years ago, may have been considered mild. Had he made the same comment

in a comedy club, people would have laughed and brushed it off. Why? Because people who pay money to hear comedy essentially give up their rights to be offended by the material. Unlike the comedians, however, we do NOT have license to offend when we are speaking out in the business or public realm.

This is a critical point: In a public or professional setting, we have NO LICENSE to offend—regardless of the circumstance. Times have changed, and any of us will put our career at risk if we don't fully understand and abide by that point.

The standard used to be that if there was no malice in your heart, then there'd be no malice from the platform. The audience would forgive you. A couple of decades ago, you'd even hear the top speakers of the time telling sexist or "put down" jokes. Men and women would laugh out loud, and it appeared universally acceptable to take this approach.

Sorry, folks, those days are long gone.

You're Hired—You're Fired!

In 1989, when I was President of the Colorado Speakers Association, I was in charge of securing the speaker for our yearly event. The man I chose was a best-selling author and humorist. Although I hadn't heard him speak, I'd heard great things about him. I thought I was a step ahead when I invited him to be our keynote speaker.

To my embarrassment, his jokes ended up like passages right out of The Sexist Joke Book. I was offended. The audience was offended. Needless to say, that speaker never got an invitation back. And I learned another important lesson as well: Always screen a speaker before you hire him or her to be your keynote!

The Forecast: Mostly Funny With No Chance of Offending

Remember what we said earlier about the importance of paying attention to the current social, political, and emotional climate? The current climate says you'll be offensive if you drift into any humor that might be labeled sexist, racist, or in any way provocative or insulting to a person or group.

Simply put, it's no longer acceptable to make fun of anyone. If you want to be successful in your communications, you have to consider the state of your audience—not just as a group, but as individuals.

And why is this so, you ask? Many folks these days are living in a constant state of stress. Coming from this place, people tend to look for ways to be offended. After all, complaining is one way to release stress, isn't it? Upon waking up, frazzled people everywhere might be brushing their teeth and asking themselves, "How can I be offended today?" And if you're not careful, you could be just the answer.

The following excerpt might help you better gauge whether or not your material might be crossing the line:

> When someone blushes with embarrassment … when someone carries away an ache …when something sacred is made to appear common … when someone's weakness provides the laughter … when profanity is required to make it funny… when a child is brought to tears … or when everyone can't join in the laughter … it's inappropriate humor! –from Making Humor Work by Terry Paulson (written by Cliff Thomas)

Good Intentions Aren't Always Enough

Some of you are probably thinking, Hey, I never mean to be offensive; this is the way I am. I've always told these jokes. Get over it, Scott.

Well, allow me to respectfully ask YOU to get over it. You needn't rely on cheap shots to get your message across. So please, don't tell those jokes from the platform (or elsewhere). Ask yourself, Will anyone get hurt from this material? And if the answer is yes, or even maybe, find new material.

Baggage is Heavier Than You Think

Sometimes humor does not work simply because the person sharing it is still angry over a situation. For instance, a speaker who was wronged by someone might find that, while telling a "funny" story about it, cynicism and sarcasm creep in and steal the light from the show.

I mentioned this earlier in the book, but it's important enough to warrant another go: If you're still hedging on bitterness about a situation, find another subject for your funny story. Audiences can smell bitterness and spite from the back row, and it always detracts from the intended message.

Sorry, Mr. President

Early in my career, I made fun of a former company president at a talk for that company. I actually knew the guy—he was a friend of mine—but the audience didn't know that. To them (and ultimately to him as well), I appeared to be a kid who was totally disrespectful of this well-respected executive. Let's just say I didn't earn great reviews that day.

Dancing (Carefully) on the Line

WARNING: This is a dangerous strategy and should be reserved for skilled and experienced speakers. However, if you decide you want to push your material into the "questionable" zone a little, just remember how thin that line really is, and how easy it may be to cross it and offend someone.

This always brings to mind a joke I once used that (sort of) backfired. It's about a guy who goes to a supermarket to buy some Dramamine to avoid sea-sickness on his upcoming cruise. While he's there, he notices that some condoms are bargain-priced, so he picks up a box of those as well. Anyway, in the punch line, the druggist says, "If it makes you so sick, why do you do it?"

The first time I used that joke was at a morning speech for a group of bank tellers. I thought it would work well, since there had been a recent flood of publicity about how condom ads were being refused on television but could be used in supermarkets.

Unfortunately, I was only partly right about how the joke would be received. I thought it was funny, and the audience did, too. The speech organizer, on the other hand, was not amused and made sure I knew that I'd never work for that group again!

Does this mean I should ditch a joke or a line forever once it strikes a chord of discontent in someone? No, but these days I'd only use it in a situation wherein I'm sure I won't be chased by peasants with torches. Ultimately, it all depends on the situation, and with time and experience, you'll learn to gauge what's safe and what's not.

The Credibility Conundrum

Everything hinges on your credibility with the audience. Once the audience loves you, you can take a few more risks. That's because the audience knows you're there to push that proverbial

envelope. They've laughed with you before, and they're willing to give you a little more room to play.

Summary

Appropriate humor enhances your message. It invites people to listen while increasing the length of time they'll remember what you've shared. Offensive humor, on the other hand, creates the opposite effect. It interferes with what you have to say by shifting the focus from your intended message to the offensive material (and the resulting anger or resentment). The more you practice, the more you'll be able to read your audience and your venue to determine just how much you can "dance on the line," if at all.

The renowned comedy writer Gene Peret reminds us that "The reason we should not use off-color material is not because we have ladies and gentlemen in our audience, but [rather] because there is supposed to be a lady or gentleman on the platform."

People want to believe us when we behave and speak with kindness and good judgment. And let's face it—funny or not, we believe in ourselves more fully when we do the same. The most important thing you may ever hear about writing or sharing humor is this: *When in doubt, leave it out*. The audience may laugh tonight, but they may not respect you in the morning. And that respect is the only thing that will truly carry your message out into the world.



Chapter Twelve

The Tenth Surefire Tip: You are your own best style.



When we hear a great speaker or comedian, it's so tempting to want to emulate their style. Or maybe we hear a story or joke that gets a big laugh, and we think about how we might be able to use it ourselves. The thing is, if you try to be someone else (or rely on their material), it will never work. Your style must be congruent with who you are.

The Difference is You!

Everyone wants to be different. We all want to shine and somehow leave our mark. Yet even more important than being different is being congruent. Why? Because when you are congruent with your true self, it's likely that you will be different.

In other words, the best style is the one you already have!

It may just need to be developed or uncovered a bit, but trust me: Your "trademark" style is there and waiting. Make it a top priority to develop the parts of yourself which set you apart.

Knock, Knock … Who's There? It's Your Style!

So how do you figure out what your style is? It's not always easy, but with a little applied research, you can do it!

Exploring Your Own Taste in Humor

The first step is awareness. Pay attention to what makes you laugh. Think of what comic strips you enjoy. What type of humor do they use? For instance, are you familiar with the Calvin & Hobbs comic strip? Look at Calvin and his devilish curiosity. With everything he does, we expect him to act with this impish wonder. We anticipate it and are just waiting to laugh because it's who he is. What can we expect from you? Are you consistent? Are you congruent?

And how about your favorite comedians? What makes them favorites? How do they deliver their humor, and what sets apart their style? See if you notice a pattern in the material you enjoy.

Ask Around

Ask your friends about your style. Do they notice anything consistent? What tips would they give you about writing material that's congruent with your nature? People want to feel comfortable when you are speaking or presenting. They want to like you and trust you, just as they like and trust a friend. Therefore, if

your wit is too different from your true personality, you'll unknowingly create tension and distrust. Our genuine selves are more transparent than we might realize. That's why your audience will be far more sympathetic and understanding if they sense you are being authentic.

On the other hand, if you're uncomfortable with your material, the audience will be, too. Humor is like a finely-tailored suit. It's got to fit and feel good. So ask around a little and see what others see in the authentic, funny side of you.

Your Right to Write

The best way to develop your own material is to keep writing. The more you write, the more consistencies you'll discover in your writing. Your sense of humor and style will emerge. Those who spend all their time collecting material but who never get to the writing may never find their true style.

Special Delivery

When developing and discovering your own style, never underestimate the power of your delivery. It's the cheese and the tortilla of the whole enchilada.

What feels good? What fits? Experiment with tone and inflection. Try out your gestures, and consider potential props. In other words, throw all sorts of possibilities against the wall, and see what sticks.

And as we discussed earlier, don't forget to play with the pause. Many times, we say a lot more with silence than we do with words. Timing is always of the essence.

Gauge Your Style to the ol' Laugh Meter

When you're communicating in the professional or public realms, you'll be met with a variety of converging elements. Everything from the venue to the time of day to the food being served may factor into the way you'll be received by others.

Here are a few "insider tips" I've learned over the years. Knowing these will help you bring your best to the stage, thus letting you shine with your own brand of light.

Humor Rises and Sets With the Sun

Early in the morning, expect a more subdued crowd. Even if they're "coffee-d up" and ready to go, people generally aren't prone to laugh that early in the day. Adjust your style accordingly if you must speak to the early birds.

But as the sun rises, so does the tendency towards laughter. By 10 a.m., people are usually primed and ready to laugh. Immediately following lunch, the laugh meter rises, followed by a mid-afternoon "full-belly" lull.

The laugh meter cranks up again after dinner—at least for a while. By 9 or 9:30 p.m., the energy and laughter fade, along with the audience, no matter how charming or funny your presentation may be.

Distance Makes the Laughter Grow Louder

You can always expect fewer laughs when your audience members are preoccupied with something else. So keep in mind that the farther you can get from your listeners' normal environment, the more likely they'll be to laugh.

If you speak at a company on site (such as in a conference room), chances are your listeners will have work on the brain. Have you ever tried to laugh with work on the brain? It's not easy. On the other hand, at a vacation resort—especially after settling in for a day or two—people will be much more relaxed and ready to laugh. In that setting, your material can also be a little looser, since vacation mode is always a little easier and breezier.

Working With What You've Got

You may not have the luxury of choosing your time of day or venue for delivering humor. Even so, knowing what to expect will help you prepare accordingly. Sometimes, you can even play off the less-than-ideal aspects of a situation to increase the funny quotient of your material. Once you become more fluid and confident in your own style and abilities, you'll be able to face even the most challenging logistics and come out delivering laughter to spare.

Summary

None of us becomes great by copying someone else. That's why your most important mission is that of finding your own brand of humor. Make it a great adventure to discover what makes you tick as a person, a speaker, and a humorist.

Judy Carter, author of Stand Up Comedy, makes this point well:

> People who steal material are destined for doom. They are avoiding the essence of who they are and will never dig deep and discover their own unique way of looking at the world.

Creating and delivering your original best will take time and practice, but the outcome will be worth the effort. Know what to expect, given both the elements you can control and those you can't. If you have the luxury of choosing your time and/or venue, choose wisely to maximize the potential for a good reception.

Ultimately, your success or failure (though remember, "failure" is just another term for "lesson learned") will hinge on one thing above all else: You being YOU, and no one else.



Chapter Thirteen

The Only Surefire Tip to Wrap This Up: Get out there and make it happen!



Congratulations! You've now collected 10 "Surefire Tips" to get you rolling on becoming a more thoughtful and humorous communicator.

Hopefully, you're now fully inspired to leave your comfort zone and make some laughs happen! Above all, I hope you've learned about the important balance between confidence and humility, as well as the pivotal role character and authenticity play in creating our best (and most successful) material. The more you tap into the real YOU, and the more you seek to bring out the same in your audience, the more power you'll pack into your presentations.

You bring an important gift to the world when you create a safe, fun, and informative opportunity for others. Not only

will people learn from you; they'll also connect with their own truths while freeing themselves of worries through your humor.

So let's take one more look at some of the key elements covered in this book, and from there it will be up to you to take your best out there into the great beyond.

Where We've Been; Where We're Going

In my view, some of the most important "gems" to remember are these:

- Pay close attention to what's going on around you.
- Cultivate a habit of writing and rewriting.
- Take some risks, and then take some more risks.
- Remain mindful of the power of your words. Keep them *kind and appropriate*, even in your risk-taking.
- Find yourself a humor buddy, and share the laughter.
- Exaggerate, play "What if?" and find humor where you are.
- Dare to be none other than *YOURSELF*. Originality is paramount.
- Bring real *meaning* into your material, and let the humor give it wings.
- Have fun along the way!

… and finally (drum roll, please) …

A Few Closing Words of Wisdom from the Experts

I'd like to leave you with a few of my favorite quotes on the subjects of humor and speaking. Let these inspire you as you set out on your own course:

> Sounding "rehearsed" is often the result of consistent, predictable patterns in rate and pitch. For rate, try adding some short and long pauses, as well as elongating some sounds. In the pitch area, avoid coming up in pitch on the ends of words and sentences. Make sure that you are using lots of pitch variety. Pitch variety helps make speakers sound interesting. There are a lot more variables that could make a difference in the perceived sound, but these will be a good place to begin. —John Cantu (HumorMall.com)

> Remember eye attention. Before you begin to speak, give your total eye attention to one person. Do not take your eyes from that person until you have reached the end of the sentence. Then move to another person and speak the same way to them. Don't just look through each person; truly see each one as you speak to them. Your sincerity will carry to the back of the audience. —Mary Jane Mapes, CSP

> You can learn more about speaking from two Broadway shows than you can learn in ten speech classes. Watch how people move, where they stand, how they add fantastic vocal variety. Ask yourself, "What are they doing when I can't take my eyes off them?" Then adapt that movement or

method to your own style. —Lou Heckler, CSP, CPAE

I never want the audience to say, "She was really funny—but what does that have to do with us?" The best compliment people pay me is when they say, "I feel like you've been looking over my shoulder for a month." Then I know my humor was relevant. When they see themselves in the humor, it's easier for them to understand the message and apply the information. —Kathy Passanisi, PT, CSP

If you are tailoring … then get out there and tailor, lurk, develop, ask, share, snoop. — J. Jasin, CSP

The difference between a good comedian and a great comedian lies in the amount of energy each is willing to put into his or her material. Great comedians try lots of new gags and see what works. Robin Williams is brilliant because he tries so many new things. Don't be afraid to take some risks and push the limits of your humor, always remembering to stay true to yourself in the process. When you dare to access your truest and most vulnerable self—and start from that place when building your material—everything you create will shine with authenticity.

This book may be coming to an end, but the ride to the funnier side of speaking has just begun. Like any other skill, the more you practice, the better you get; the better you get, the more fun you'll have; and the more fun you have, the more money you'll be able to make. Hopefully, the strategies and tips in these pages will inspire you to become a more engaging, humble, and authentic speaker.

So go on—get out there and take your truth for a joy ride. May this and all your journeys lead you to work and live Happily Ever Laughter!

Your grateful tour guide,

Scott Friedman

For more information about Scott, his products and services, or the information in this book, visit www.ScottFriedman.net or contact him directly at Scott@ScottFriedman.net.

Humor Resources

- The Humor Project Inc.
  Dr. Joel Goodman, Director
  http://www.humorproject.com
  info@humorproject.com

- Therapeutic Humor
  Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor
  http://www.aath.org

- Laughter Works
  Jim Pelley
  http://www.laughterworks.com
  info@laughterworks.com

- Dale Irvin's Funny Business
  The Friday Funnies
  http://www.daleirvin.com/friday.htm

- Funnier Speeches
  www.FunnierSpeeches.com

- Ron Culberson
  http://ronculberson.com
  Ron@RonCulberson.com

- David Glickman
  www.DavidGlickman.com
  David@DavidGlickman.com

- FunnierU.com
  info@funnieru.com

- Humor Mall
  John Cantu
  www.HumorMall.com

- The Humor Potential
  Loretta LaRoche
  www.lorettalaroche.com

- International Society for Humor Studies
  http://www.hnu.edu/ishs/

- The Lunar Antics
  Bob Walters
  http://lunarantics.com

- Humor Month
  Steve Wilson
  www.humormonth.com

Humor Search Engines

- Humor Links
  www.humorlinks.com

- Comedy Zone
  www.comedy-zone.net

- Laugh Directory
  www.laughdirectory.com

- Search Humor
  www.searchhumor.com

Music Resources

- Jana Stanfield's Music
  www.janastanfield.com

Video Resources

- www.videometry.com
- www.artbeats.com
- www.footage.net
- www.revostock.com
- www.t3licensing.com/video/home.do
- www.buyoutfootage.com
- www.istockphoto.com/video
- footage.shutterstock.com