

How to make a comedic connection.

Delivering Cross-Cultural Humor

In an increasingly divided world, humor may be the last bridge that unites all of us, regardless of demographics. As Toastmasters, we are fully aware of the power of humor. However, if you have spoken to an audience in a different country or from a different culture, you know how challenging it can be to find appropriate humor that connects with the audience.

As a professional speaker from Singapore who addresses culturally diverse audiences on a daily basis, I feel your pain. Fortunately, through several years of experimenting, I have discovered two key strategies that can help you make audiences anywhere laugh:

1 When speaking in a different country, tell stories about personal encounters with residents there.

It helps if these stories are self-deprecating in nature. Not only are such anecdotes funny, they involve your audience, which makes them feel important. When I addressed a French company, I opened my keynote with a story about meeting a French girl who greeted me by putting her cheek forward. Wanting to reciprocate her openness, I kissed her... directly on the cheek! In that moment, I realized I had misinterpreted the intent of her proffered "air-kiss" greeting.

In a slightly surprised tone, she asked if this was how Singaporean men said hello. In order to save myself from embarrassment, I had

to say yes, and kissed her other cheek. The French bosses loved the story so much that they were howling in laughter for a good 30 seconds. Because the joke was on me, it created a strong rapport with the audience, and I had an easy time convincing them about my message.

How to apply this lesson:

If you have been invited to speak in a different country, make it a point to arrive early so that you can interact with people and experience what they are experiencing. Take note of the situations you get yourself into. "What if nothing interesting happens?" you ask. Impossible! Pay attention and you will find plenty of examples to talk about.

2 Pay attention to the country's idiosyncrasies. Another effective way to milk humor in a cross-cultural setting is by observing the country's idiosyncrasies and then playfully poking fun at them. Take the United States, for example. There's a stereotype of young Americans having very little geographical knowledge of the rest of the world. So when I delivered a speech in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I opened by recalling a conversation I had with an American college student. He was curious about where I came from. When I told him I was from Singapore, he thought that it was part of China. When I said it wasn't, he apologized and corrected himself – "I am sorry; I meant India."

The story generated a huge amount of laughter. I tried the same technique in Guangzhou, China. One of the more well-known aspects of Chinese culture is that they are open to eating a variety of animals – dogs, cats, snakes, rabbits and so on. So I told this joke when I spoke to an audience in Guangzhou:

"Do you know why Adam and Eve cannot be Chinese? Instead of eating the apple, they would have eaten the snake!"

Even more effective is poking fun of your own country's reputation. Many people still perceive my country, Singapore, as extremely strict. Remember Michael Fay, an 18-year-old American expatriate student who was convicted of vandalism in Singapore in 1994. He was fined \$2,200, and sentenced to four months in jail and six strokes of caning.

In my division-winning speech in a Humorous Speech Contest in Philadelphia, I started off like this:

"Good morning, my name is Eric and I am from Singapore. (In whisper) It's true. We do cane people. (Laughter from audience.) But seriously Singapore is a fine city. You get fined for anything. (Laughter.) We collect about 5,000 fines every day and 40 percent come from international tourists. Now you know why we welcome you with open

arms. (Laughter.) Welcome to Singapore! That's \$500, thank you very much."

How to apply this lesson:

I find speaking to local residents particularly useful when using the idiosyncrasy strategy. Ask them about the perceptions and peculiarities of their countrymen. What are they notorious for? For example, in Singapore we are well-known for pressing the "Close" button in an elevator when we see someone rushing in. In fact, the faster the person rushes in, the faster we press the button. Singaporeans all know this, even though we will never admit it. Hence, to milk the humor out of this truth, you can either turn it into a question ("What button do Singaporeans press when they see someone running into the elevator?") or share a story about how

someone tried pressing the "Close" button when you scrambled into the elevator. Either way, it will work.

As always, there are some rules of thumb to adhere to when you deliver your funny lines, regardless of what country you speak in or which strategy you employ:

- **Always test your jokes or funny stories with the locals or the representative group first.** If they find your bit funny, chances are the audience will feel the same way. If possible, make sure your joke or story has a point behind it. So even if the audience doesn't laugh, your material still serves a purpose.
- **Make sure that there is no jargon or acronym in your set-up or punch line.** Every word that you use must be easily understood by your foreign audience or

they won't be able to appreciate your joke.

- **Speak slowly and clearly so your audience can understand you.**

If you want to be a humorous speaker, find as many opportunities as you can to test your material. Get feedback from your audience and then refine. Repeat the process until you are satisfied.

I look forward to hearing you speak in Singapore some day! You can count on me to give you the loudest laugh. 🗣️

Eric Feng, ACS, is a member of the Braddell Heights Advanced Toastmasters Club in Singapore and a professional speech coach in Asia. In 2009, he was also the District 80 First Runner-Up in the Humorous Speech Contest in Macau. Reach him at www.ericfeng.com.

Wish You Were FUNNIER?

Dear Fellow Toastmaster:

Do you wish you were **funnier**? Do you believe that "funny people" **think differently**?

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Would a **step-by-step process** for getting laughs be helpful?

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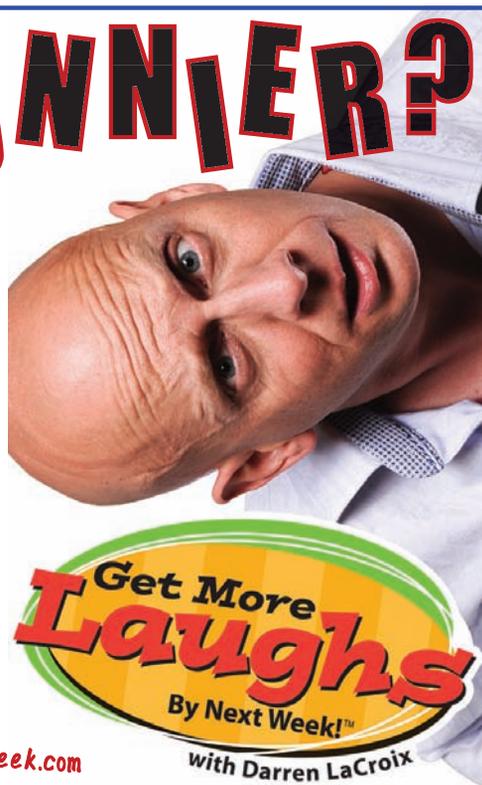
I never got laughs. I was quiet and shy and had severe stage fright. It was quite an epiphany for me when I discovered the simple exercises comedians use to develop material. A whole new world opened up for me when I was shown that humor was a *learned skill*, as opposed to a trait one must be born with.

Naturally, I did things the hard way, so it took me years of struggle and tens of thousands of dollars to uncover the steps that would take me from bumbling amateur to sought-after professional. This is a *proven* system. I've been teaching this process for more than ten years.

Stage time,

Darren LaCroix
2001 World Champion of Public Speaking

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