



If you find yourself avoiding humor out of fear of failing, you may be overlooking one of the most powerful weapons available to you.

M eet Jones. He's giving a progress report on the new project he's managing and, since he wants to add some levity to his presentation, he starts off with a great new joke that landed in his e-mail box last week. But Jones doesn't realize that his "new" joke has in fact been circulating on the Internet for at least six months. Worse yet, if he's put any rehearsal time into the joke, it doesn't show in his delivery.

Humor 101

By Dave Zielinski



No one laughs. Jones begins to stammer and look nervously around the room. Somehow he salvages the presentation, but it's uphill all the way. Inwardly he vows: I'll never use a joke again.

Risky Business?

If you've ever had a Jones-like experience, finding more ways to inject humor into your presentations probably isn't high on your list. To your way of thinking, the risk of bombing far outweighs any gains or goodwill that might come from generating a few laughs. Perhaps you're among those who believe – or work in an organizational culture that propagates the belief – that work is work, fun is fun, and never the twain shall meet. Or maybe you've been told all your life that you're not a funny person, so to prove it, you wear your "I am a serious executive" persona whenever you step in front of an audience.

But if, as a speaker, you find yourself avoiding humor out of fear of failing, you may be overlooking one of the most powerful weapons available to you – and, possibly, undermining the effectiveness of every presentation you give. That’s because humor’s ability to poison a presentation is exceeded only by its capacity to lift it to another level.

The Magic of Mirth

Elusive as it may be, well-executed humor holds the power to deliver messages in an entertaining (and therefore memorable) fashion. Used intelligently, it can jolt us into seeing things from a broader perspective, enliven dull topics, diffuse tense situations and help speakers make a more human connection with their audiences.

Psychologists have long noted that when an audience laughs with you, chances are they’ll also be for you. After a laugh, people are more receptive to the message that immediately follows it, even if it’s something they don’t want to hear. And, let’s face it: With the inherent pressures and deadly earnestness in much of today’s workplace, there’s hardly a problem with too much laughter or merry-making in the corporate work setting.

Bring Out Your “Kitchen Person”

“So many managers we see are button-down and deadly serious – and so unlike the person they are in the kitchen at home, chatting with their friends,” says Cherie Kerr. The founder and CEO of ExecuProv in Santa Ana, California, Kerr teaches improvisational-comedy techniques to executives, showing them how to build more humor into presentations.

“The reality is, we’d rather be in the company of that ‘kitchen person’ than the guarded, inhibited one in the business setting,” Kerr continues. “Too many presenters think showing their funny or witty side isn’t acceptable in the business world. But when they show that side of themselves, everyone embraces them.”

In her book *Simply Speaking: How to Communicate Your Ideas With Style, Substance, and Clarity* (Regan Books, 1998), noted speechwriter Peggy Noonan says humor also serves another key purpose: “Humor is gracious and

shows respect. It shows the audience you think enough of them to want to entertain them.”

The Joke Is On Jokes

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to using humor effectively is that too many presenters still equate humor with joke-telling, flashing “Dilbert” cartoons or using wacky props on the podium. Speakers also tend to mistakenly think they must generate the rolling belly laughs of Robin Williams or Chris Rock for their humor to succeed. But there’s no sin in being mildly amusing instead of eye-dabblingly funny, particularly if your humor is intimately connected to your message.

One problem, say many humor experts, is that delivering a good joke is never as easy as it appears. The joke must be funny in itself, get a great delivery, and fit the audience and situation. That’s a difficult trifecta for most amateur presenters to pull off.

“Think about the jokes you receive from friends by e-mail,” says Paul Reali of CyberSkills Computer Training Centers in Greensboro, North Carolina, who discourages

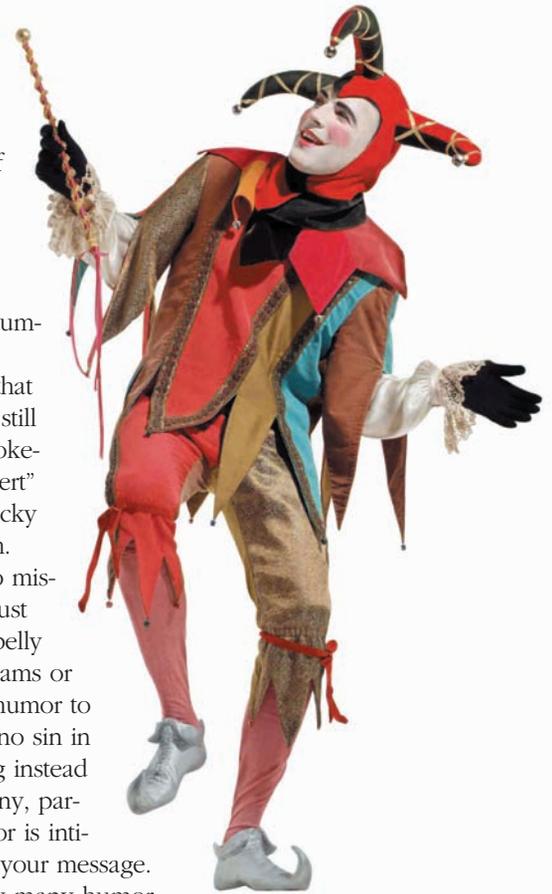
“Your audience would rather hear about the time you fell on your face than when you won the race.”

trainers on his staff from telling jokes. “Even when you get a really good one, you don’t forward it to everyone on your list. Instead, you select only those people who can appreciate it, wouldn’t be offended by it and who wouldn’t judge you badly because you liked it.”

What’s a Sorry Joke-Teller to Do?

So if joke telling should be kept to a minimum, what *can* you do to add humor to a lackluster presentation? Plenty, say the experts. The truth is, there is a world of humor opportunity out there besides slapstick silliness and joke telling. In most cases, any appropriate humor you use will be favorably received by an audience – as long it doesn’t look too canned, *and* provided you get your point across.

You needn’t look far for someone to make fun of. For a humor alternative that packs a bigger punch and has a high “safety factor,” self-effacing humor is a good



way to go, says Tom Antion, a Washington, D.C.-based presentation skills and humor consultant who himself has delivered more than 2,000 presentations. Being willing to tease yourself creates strong rapport with most audiences, he says.

“We’ve all had problems, and telling funny stories on yourself creates an impression that you’re secure, confident and likable,” Antion says. “Weak people feel the need to inflate themselves; confident people don’t. Your audience would rather hear about the time you fell on your face than when you won the race.”

But don’t pour it on too thick, he cautions – a little self-effacing humor goes a long way.

You Are Your Own Material

Where can you find good material if you don’t like jokes, if you think most props are sophomoric, and if you can’t for the life of you find a funny quote or cartoon to fit your content? Your life is the mother lode.

Humorist Jeanne Robertson has been turning her own life experiences into humorous presentations to corporations and associations for more than 30 years. She first discovered that personal tales held more power than joke-telling during a reign as Miss North Carolina, when she’d tell stories about drinking from a finger bowl at a formal banquet and being shot by kids with peashooters during a small-town parade.

Good jokes get passed around and worn out, Robertson says – speedier than ever now, owing to the Internet. Personal stories, on the other hand, are uniquely yours. Mining them also diminishes the chances an audience has already heard your material – *and* your supply is continually refreshed.

Robertson estimates that 95 percent of the humorous material she uses in her 100-plus presentations a year is drawn from her own life experiences or from those around her. She’s constantly probing friends, family, co-workers and even perfect strangers for new material – what she calls her “Big Bag” philosophy, the discipline of continually filling a metaphorical bag with new material. Robertson keeps a journal so that when potentially humorous situations happen, she can immediately write them down to refine and use later – relying on complete sentences and paragraphs, she says, not just disconnected thoughts on scraps of paper.

Robertson does have a word of caution, though: Never pretend someone else’s story happened to you, even if you’re speaking in a remote village in Greenland. If it’s a good enough story, it’ll make the rounds, and it’s not worth the risk of making a false claim in front of someone who heard it told differently elsewhere – or, worse, was part of the original story.

Mixing the Message and the Medium

Although using humor for humor’s sake has its advantages, your comedy will pack far more punch if it’s tied directly to your content, or if it has a strong learning hook. “An audience will forgive you if your humor isn’t all that funny, but is connected to your message,” says Tom

Antion. “If it’s funny, so much the better. But if it isn’t, at least you made your point.”

Brian McDermott, a senior consultant with Minneapolis-based GrowthWorks Inc., ties his use of humor closely to his company’s themes of innovation and creativity training, noting that humor has long been linked with enhanced creativity, on the job and elsewhere. Good humorists, he says, lead listeners down a linear path, then throw in something unexpected. “It’s that leap to the side, the stride off the beaten path that makes us laugh, and also is a key to innovation and creativity,” he says.

A favorite such McDermott story: Ted Turner, Jack Welch and Bill Gates all die on the same day and arrive at the Pearly Gates. God asks each to answer one question – *What do you truly believe in?* – before they can be granted entry. Ted Turner says: “I believe in speed and accuracy. Give people what they need quickly and reliably, and you’ll be successful.” Great, says God; come in and sit at my left hand. Jack Welch says: “I believe in product quality and being No. 1 or No. 2 in your marketplace. That will make you successful and an asset to society.” Wonderful, says God; come on in. Then Bill Gates steps up. “What do you believe in?” asks God. Gates says: “I believe you’re sitting in my chair.”

What If I’m Missing the Funny Gene?

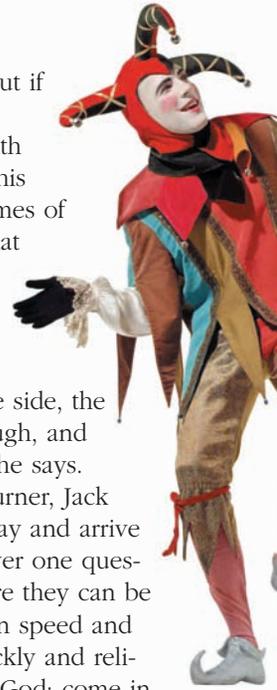
The humorless do walk among us, of course. While some of us simply were born without the humor gene, more have had it drummed out of us by family beliefs, by bad experiences with early attempts at humor, or by corporate cultures that allow little leeway for lightheartedness amid the serious business of work.

Yet we know that many of the humor-impaired yearn to let their sense of fun out of the bag, even if they’re presenting only a few times a year. So where do these walking wounded start? By laying the groundwork, brick by brick, even if it means tooling along on training wheels for a while.

“Someone who’s known as staunch or stoic on the job can’t just suddenly get up there and start attempting humor, especially if the audience knows them,” Antion says. “That’s a big disconnect.” Better to start getting your humor chops on the job, he says, and let that bleed over into presentation scenarios. Try a funny line or two in a memo you’re writing; pass around a funny story sent to you via e-mail; work your way up to telling a brief story over the cubicle wall about something that happened to you. Your colleagues need to perceive your humorous side before they can embrace it when you present.

Once the groundwork is laid, you can move on to presentation content. Start slow with slides of funny quotes, cartoons or other props that speak for themselves and help take the pressure off you – things that say it better than you ever could.

“People often will remember a funny quote longer than other parts of your presentation,” Cherie Kerr says.





"I remember listening once to a long speech, little of which I recall today, except the speaker saying at the end, 'And, to quote Lily Tomlin, remember that we're all in this alone.' It was funny, but it also drove home the point she was trying to make."

A Spirit of Spontaneity

Timed correctly, a humorous comment or offhand observation can be the icebreaker that makes everything else in your presentation fall into place. Leslie Bruner, a Portland, Oregon-based consultant who helps trainers extract more humor from their sessions, promotes a concept she calls "humor aikido" to help turn negative situations into positive ones.

In the martial art aikido, students are taught to use their opponent's energy – what's moving at them or against them – to their own advantage. "Instead of resisting, you use the energy flow to disarm your opponent," Bruner says. If you're leading a training session with mandated attendance, for instance, and employees are showing obvious resistance to being there, "play off that resistance with humor," she says. "Maybe talk about your own resistance as a trainer to having to teach the session, and create more of a light, we're-all-in-this-together moment."

Bruner encourages business presenters and trainers to move away from humor-by-formula ("show a cartoon every 30 minutes; tell one joke in each curriculum module"). Instead, she says, you should work toward creating a light mood that encourages spontaneity and enhanced learning through mirth-making.

"Fun and play are not always what we make happen, but what we *allow* to happen," Bruner says. "We encourage that through invoking a playful spirit in the classroom, and spontaneously taking advantage of moments that arise during a session. It's more about drawing humor out of situations than putting it in. I don't think joke telling, for instance, connects you with an audience the way a light spirit can."

Improvisational Training

Recognizing that an arsenal of jokes is not enough to ensure a successful or lively presentation, some companies are turning to improvisational-comedy training as a way to help presenters become more expressive and "in the moment" onstage. Many are also finding that such training also improves other parts of an executive's performance.

Ritch Davidson is among those who teach improvisational techniques to corporate America. The "senior vice emperor" of Playfair Inc., an international consulting company that stresses the value of humor and fun in building creativity and productivity on the job, Davidson believes improv's biggest benefit is the way it teaches businesspeople to be less judgmental and more collaborative. One fundamental of the improv technique is called the "yes/and" adjustment. In essence, he says, it means keeping an open mind to new ideas.

"How many times have you been in a meeting where someone brings up a new idea, and people immediately say why it won't work?" Davidson asks. Instead of saying "Yes, but" to a new idea – essentially making it DOA – improvisation teaches players to say "Yes, and." This gives new suggestions a chance to breathe, allowing teammates to build on them and possibly improve them.

Much of Playfair's approach is supported by research, Davidson says, in particular the work of David Abramis at California State University at Long Beach. In his studies, Abramis has found that people who use humor and are playful on the job are more creative and productive, get along better with co-workers, are better decision-makers and have a lower rate of absenteeism and sick days.

They also make outstanding presenters. And that's no joke. ■

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