

“The Ambassador” is a monthly communiqué designed to provide tips on best practices in effective communications. Next month, look for *Tailoring Your Talk — Reaching your audience with the right message at the right time.*

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SHOULD I USE HUMOR IN MY PRESENTATION? [...and, if so, how?]

By Jerry Doyle

As communications consultants, we have always advocated that the public forum is no place for original thinking to begin. We still believe that. But, creative and humorous thought prepared in advance is a good thing... even during speeches on serious subjects. Professionals — including CPAs — frequently ask us about the appropriateness of using humor in their talks. While we generally say “No” to jokes, speakers with a cultivated sense of humor can use it adeptly to enhance their presentations in many ways.

In this newsletter, let’s first take a look at why you may want to consider using humor in your talks. Next, it is important to point out the difference between telling a joke and all other forms of humor. Then, I’ll discuss when it is appropriate to use humor, how it can be used, what to use and where to get it.

Why use humor?

Humor can be a very effective tool in making your speech more compelling and in engaging the audience to listen and retain more of what you communicate. It can be used to clarify or drive home a point. It can illustrate a message and make it more relevant. Humor can even be a way to lower the nervousness of the presenter. Here are a couple of ways to use humor effectively in your speech:

The Ice-Breaker— This is especially useful when you are about to open your presentation to an audience filled with people whom you do not know. Often, you will be introduced with a flattering list of your credentials and accomplishments. One of the executives whom we coached recently started a speech by saying: “Thank you for that wonderful and glowing introduction. I’d like to meet the man you have me confused with!” Audiences often appreciate humility and he got a good laugh.

Transitions — When you are giving a speech that has many elements, you may consider inserting a PowerPoint slide which alerts the audience that you are moving on to a new subject. This is also a good place to include a cartoon or a humorous quote. It breaks the monotony and revives the audience’s attention.

Recovery— As we often mention, there are almost always technical glitches during a speech. Perhaps the teleprompter goes dark, or the PowerPoint slides are out of order or the laser pointer’s batteries run out. Sometimes the gaffe might just be that you are losing your place in the speech. The audience may become tense and even impatient. They want to know that you are in control. Be prepared with a one-liner so that you are able to buy some time, if need be. I once heard a presenter say, as he was trying to find his correct slide, “There are several secrets to giving a good speech. That was *not* one of them.” The audience laughed, they sighed a little and this gave the presenter time to find his place and move on without further disruption.

A Joke is Often *Not* a Laughing Matter

Ok, let’s talk about jokes. Poorly handled humor in a presentation can damage or destroy a speaker’s credibility and telling a joke may be the fastest way to do it. It carries the most risk. Telling a joke is like a forward pass in football... there are three possible outcomes *and two of them are bad!* One outcome is, of course, that the joke can go over well (pass received for yardage gained) and makes for, say, a good ice-breaker. But, even professional comedians like David Letterman are funny only about a third of the time. The other two outcomes are bad. The joke may fall flat (pass incomplete) and now you have 58 minutes remaining of your 60-minute speech and there’s an awkward silence that is deafening! The worst case is that the joke offends someone (pass intercepted). In our politically correct world, you are bound to offend someone even in a small audience. So, do not plan on starting your speech, for example, on Financial Literacy by saying: “So a priest, a minister and a Rabbi walk into a bar...” This may spell disaster.

What Is Appropriate and Effective?

So, what are those other less risky yet effective forms of humor that may be used?

Quotations — especially those from long-gone famous or even infamous people, are safe, for the most part, and they can work well to underscore a point. Between Mark Twain and Winston Churchill you can easily find a humorous quote suitable to almost any subject.

“Ancient” Proverbs — Again, these are easy to find on a multitude of subjects. But, unlike quotes, proverbs usually tell a story that may illuminate your point even better.

Media Clips and Video — Newspaper article headlines with visuals and video excerpts from the TV news or even movies can make for a memorable and funny high point. Be sure that the clip does not have a political bent (unless it is poking fun at politics in general). Also be sure to select a movie clip that is clean and not scratchy or marred. It is best to use an excerpt or segment that people may have seen before. As for video, make sure it is short — less than two minutes.

Cartoons — Take a look at the one below. This is a cartoon I might use while delivering a speech about presentation skills. I am, thus, driving home a point in a humorous way. A cartoon could also provide a break or a change to a new subject. It’s good clean, harmless humor that does not offend.



"You're not allowed to use the sprinkler system to keep your audience awake."

Self-Deprecating Anecdotes — sometimes the best humor comes from the heart. Is there a story you can tell from your own experience that is funny and self-deprecating? This is an excellent way to endear your audience to you; but before you try it, make sure that you find it funny yourself. Try your story on a smaller group of trusted peers and see how it goes over. Make sure it is not too long — especially if it is part of your opening remarks. Be sure it’s relevant to your audience and to your message and presentation. And, lastly, don’t start telling the story with “Let me tell you a funny story...” Let your audience decide for themselves. They will let you know.

Where can you get material?

As we are all well aware in the 21st century, the Internet is the fastest and easiest source on which to find good quotes, free cartoons, news clips, and even video snippets. There are more robust collections, however, that you may need to purchase if they are online or elsewhere. Also, visit your local library and check out books on quotations, political and business speeches, and biographies on the great communicators of our time. Sometimes the news seems to provide an endless supply of humor ready to use: newspapers, magazines, cable news, blogs and news websites; popular television, classic and blockbuster movies are good sources too. Remember that you are not necessarily looking for the obscure but for the relatable. After all, the best comedians are those who make a strong connection with their audience.

So, in conclusion, try using humor but stay within parameters of what works, prepare in advance and practice, be sure it resonates with your audience and test and refine it with a trusted group of colleagues and friends.

Have a suggestion on a topic? E-mail Carmen Encarnacion at cencarnacion@aicpa.org

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