

LIGHTEN UP YOUR SPEECH

Judy Carter

How to use stand-up comedy techniques to get laughs.

I recently got a call from a humorist who wanted coaching on his speech for the Toastmasters Humorous Speech Contest. I listened as he presented his material, which was a collection of jokes, half-baked comedy ideas and funny stories about himself. I knew immediately he had three major problems: One, his jokes were funny but they weren't his; he'd lifted them off the Internet.

Two, his funny stories were about an audience's least favorite topic — the speaker. And three, his speech didn't have a message.

Before I write one joke for a speaker, I have to make sure he or she has a message that makes sense, because a confused audience doesn't laugh. Once a speech is coherent, then I do a comedy pass. Making a great message funny isn't as hard as it sounds.

I spent 17 years on the road as a headlining comic before I started speaking professionally. Using a few basic comedy formulas, you can add clean, observational punch lines to your speeches. Clean because you want to get paid, and observational because you want to convey confidence and spontaneity.

I can already hear you protesting: "Spontaneous observational humor?! But I'm not a comic!" Here's the good news: Getting laughs as a speaker is a lot easier than doing stand-up. Speakers aren't expected to get laughs every 10 seconds, so when you do deliver a funny line, it's a happy surprise. Plus, using real-time observations wins an audience over. They appreciate being in on the joke. They appreciate your awareness of their surroundings. If you know how to look for it, there's "funny" happening all around you. There's funny in the parking lot of the conference center. There's funny in the hallway as you prepare to go on stage. Hey, take a look in the mirror! Now that's funny.

So be brave and add these comedy formulas to your speeches.

Formula One: The First 10 Seconds The second you're introduced, you can go for your first observational laugh by thanking the emcee and pointing out an obvious (and positive) feature about him or her. One time, my emcee had a deep voice. As I walked onstage, I looked right at him and said, "Thank you, Tom. That was a great intro. Let's give him a hand. (Applause) You have a beautiful voice. I realize now it was you who played Darth Vader."

You can pretty much ask the audience to applaud anything — and they will. "Let's have some applause for the dessert chef who gave us cake and pie!"

Like I said earlier, people like to be in on the joke, so mentioning something obvious and inclusive accomplishes that goal. When the audience knows you just made something up, they give you a lot of leeway. So, don't always plan the first thing you'll say. Allow for spontaneity as a result of what you observe before you step on stage. It might scare you, but your audience will love you — and that's a great way to start off your keynote.

For your spontaneous moment, consider the following examples: “Let's have some applause for ...”

- The guy who just fixed the air conditioning, the clogged toilet or the microphone that was squealing a moment before.
- The generous bartender from the party last night.
- The guy on the spotlight who is awake and able to follow me.
- The audience, for surviving three days of meetings. •The people from Canada, for always being so nice.

Spontaneity is a skill of an experienced speaker. Your ability to risk being spontaneous in the first minute will grow with stage time. But eventually you will need to take this courageous step and trust your instincts. With that said, here's a quick warning: Always remember you're the outsider. Be respectful of where your clients live, how they talk and how they may be different from you. You need to be the butt of your own jokes — not your audience. Don't use your opening for cruel or sarcastic jokes. Like your mother said, “If you can't say something nice, then don't say it.” And never, ever diss the person who signs your check.

Formula Two: You Are the Joke Make fun of what the audience is looking at — you! Let's face it, when a speaker steps onstage, he faces an inherent hostility toward “know-it-alls.” The best way to curb that judgment is to engage in some light-hearted self-mockery. Having the guts to get a laugh at your own expense not only creates laughter, it creates likeability.

Here are a few steps to make light of yourself for laughs:

- Make a list of obvious physical attributes that an audience will notice when you walk onstage; for example: your weight, hairline, age, gender or clothes. Choose something that could be seen as a negative trait. That expanding waistline? It's your punch line! Anything that makes you different can be comedy gold.

Note that none of these things should be funny, but they should all be authentic. Keep your list focused on things the audience can actually see or notice. “I'm short” is better than “I'm lactose intolerant.”

- Now make a list of the advantages of these negative attributes. For example, looking nerdy: “Ladies, why go for tall, dark and handsome when a nerd like me can fix your computer in a flash?”

Using the lists above, fill in the “I know what you’re thinking” formula: Say “I know what you’re thinking,” act out what the audience is thinking, and then give the advantages of what you’re poking fun of. For instance: “I know what you are thinking. ‘Does she realize her hair’s the same color as a bag of Cheetos?’ Well, there are advantages to having bright orange hair. On the weekends I donate my head to guide planes into the gates at the airport.”

Formula Three: The Mash-Up

This formula is excerpted from my forthcoming book, *The Message of You: Turn Your Life Story into a Money-Making Speaking Career*.

It’s hard to listen to speakers who drone on and on with lists of information that don’t include a laugh. “I’m from blah blah, I went to school in blah, blah, and I got a degree in blah, blah.” Boring! This is a lost opportunity for a laugh! Here is a way to introduce your credentials that I call “The Mash-Up.” Let’s say you want to tell the audience you’re a nurse and a stand-up comic. All you have to do is add the words “so that means I ...” and then add the mash-up of the stereotype.

Let’s do some brainstorming:

Make a list of your ethnicity, parents’ nationalities, your hobbies and your current and past professions.

Pick two of the items you wrote and insert them into the following formula:

“You may not know this, but I’m _____ and _____ (or “I’m part this and part that”), so that means I _____.”

For example, “My father is from New York and my mom’s from Texas, so that means ... I like my bagels with gravy.” Or,

“I have a degree in astronomy and I’m an actress, so that means ... I know exactly why the sun revolves around me.”

Formula Four: The List of Three Three is a magic number in comedy. Using the “List of Three” formula, a comic sets up a pattern with two serious ideas, and then adds a twist on the third. For this formula to work, it’s an absolute necessity that your first two statements be real and serious. You want to lead the audience down a path of sincerity and then surprise them with a joke! You never want them to see the funny coming. The surprise is what makes people laugh. Two easy ways to set up this formula are “Big- Big-Small” and “Small-Small-Big.”

Set Up: Big-Big-Small

“It’s a scary world out there: We’ve got terrorism, the war in Iraq, and ... Lindsay Lohan is out of jail.”

Set Up: Small-Small-Big

“There are three subtle clues that your marriage might be over: You’ve stopped sending each other love notes. You’re not kissing as much. Your husband’s new girlfriend has issued a restraining order.”

This formula saved me when I was hired to speak to a cosmetics company and I was told that management had announced there would be no bonuses that year. Management actually asked me to do “something funny with that.” That was a tough assignment! But using a List of Three helped me get a laugh. I observed that right before my keynote, the audience participated in a workshop on conceptual selling. So my list was:

“I understand that you learned today about conceptual selling. That means you aren’t selling lipstick but rather the concept of beauty. It’s not about the mascara but the concept of glamour. And I guess it’s not about the money but the concept of a bonus.”

People literally fell off their chairs. Now, that was observational humor at its most potent! The List of Three is also a great way to make your PowerPoint slides more entertaining. Break your learning points into lists of no more than three bullets, and always have the third slide be a funny surprise.

So when adding humor to your speech, first have a good message, and then look for opportunities to add laughs using these formulas. After all, laughter is the best medicine for every audience. It’s a feel-good, legal drug. It makes people happy, you don’t need a prescription to use it, and you’ll never get arrested for driving under the influence of it. But best of all, speakers who get laughs connect with their audience, win contests and get booked.