



WHY DID THE TRAINER



Humor can have a positive impact on audience learning and speaker perception.

BY BRIDGETT MCGOWEN

CROSS THE ROAD?

Is humor a requirement for a successful presentation?

The short answer is yes.

Before you balk and react with “Are you kidding me? I can be a success without cracking jokes” or “I’m here to train and teach, not to entertain or create fun,” I wholeheartedly agree with you. Delivering content and ensuring learners walk away having actually learned should be your top priorities and are at the heart of what makes for a successful presentation. Furthermore, humor and fun in and of themselves are not what lead to learning nor will the absence of either equate to a failed presentation.

However, teaching and training are not just about delivering content. Each one is about creating aha moments. You want to get people moving, acting, thinking, changing behaviors, seeing the bigger picture, and looking beyond the past and the present to plan for the future. You also want people engaging in dialogue that brings us together around common as well as dissenting ideas.

According to the *Advances in Physiological Research* article “Humor, Laughter, Learning, and Health: A Brief Review,” teaching and training are “about forming relationships and strengthening human connections”—they are about learning, and “humor creates an environment that promotes learning.”

Your goal is not merely to give the audience a good time. That becomes a byproduct. More importantly, humor improves your presentation’s effectiveness. Just as you promote learning via traditional audience engagement tools where learners discuss, write, or move, the addition of humor deserves some serious consideration as a viable tool for reinforcing your message.

What’s fun got to do with it?

Adding fun has even greater implications, extending past creating an atmosphere that primes listeners to receive your content—it sets up you, the speaker, for success. Carmine Gallo, communications coach and author of *Talk Like TED: The 9 Public-Speaking Secrets of the World’s Top Minds*, writes that “Humor lowers defenses, making your audience more receptive to your message. It also makes you seem more likable, and people are more willing to ... support someone they like.” They see you as being human, and the wall that can exist between the speaker and the audience is torn down.

Incorporating fun into a presentation serves a greater purpose than to give the audience a good time. Choice theory, developed by American psychiatrist William Glasser, posits that along with survival, belonging, power, and freedom, fun

is a primary human need. Fun is one of those factors that will motivate human behavior, and according to Glasser, “fun is the genetic reward for learning ... ask students who is a good teacher and they will tell you the one who makes learning fun.”

So, you’re not simply making people laugh. When you add levity to your presentation, you create a community of learners that is no longer attending a “sit-n-get” but one that is attending a session where they all feel that they belong and where they feel empowered and free. When done well, injecting humor and elements of fun into your presentations can add to and have a positive impact on your training, teaching, and learning. In short, humor improves your effectiveness.

When done well is the operative phrase here, because there is the proverbial instance wherein an attempt at humor goes terribly wrong or where the most unfortunate happens—no one laughs. It’s easy to draw the conclusion that the speaker simply isn’t humorous or, quite frankly, isn’t a professional comedian. That is possible, as are myriad other considerations, which raises the question of how does someone effectively integrate humor into a presentation. First, it’s imperative to understand why presenter humor has the propensity to fail—that way you avoid that from happening when you do add some wit to your script.

How soon is too soon to tell a joke?

Do not tell jokes. Period. “Jokes work for only those professional comedians at the top of their game,” Gallo says. Instead, add humor.

Jokes are amusing stories or something said or done with the goal of amusing others, whereas humor is the overall quality of being funny or comical. A joke can be humorous, but it is not necessary to tell a joke to be humorous. A joke is “Two priests, a rabbi, and a duck walk into a bar ...” But humor is displaying an outrageous facial expression in response to a surprising, questionable, or interesting statement you made. It’s sharing a personal story that is funny but that illustrates a point you’re making or adding in jargon that’s unique to you. (For instance, I like to use “That’s the actual factual” when I want to reiterate the veracity of a point.)

However, if introduced too early in a training or teaching session, humor can flop. The first words your listeners need to hear are words that connect and that bring value. If you do both of those right away, then you’ve given the audience a reason to laugh. A moment of humor in and of itself, especially

when offered prematurely, is an insufficient means for forming a connection, especially in the training industry.

Therefore, once you demonstrate the significance of your topic and the takeaways everyone will gain after engaging in your presentation, then you deliver relevant content, and you are positioned to offer up some quick wit. As I explain in my book *REAL TALK: What Other Experts Won't Tell You About How to Make Presentations That Sizzle*, even if the remark is not funny, because people are engaged, they will laugh; but that happens only if you have first given everyone a reason to listen to you.

Take participants on a ride

A presentation—regardless of whether it's a training program, demonstration, meeting, workshop, or keynote—should connect with and take your audience on a ride, and humor provides opportunities for those ties to develop and for detours and departures from your objective content to occur. When we laugh, according to Naomi Bagdonas, co-author of *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life*, “our brains release the hormone oxytocin, and we're essentially cued to form an emotional bond with [the] person” who made us laugh. Humor makes you memorable, it creates for a good time, and it holds your audience's attention.

Scientific studies over the course of several decades have well documented that humor facilitates audiences sitting

up and taking notice while making content more memorable. Here's a case in point: At about the 40-minute mark of President Barack Obama's 2011 State of the Union address, he includes a moment of levity to illustrate the complicated and convoluted layers of government bureaucracy. “The Interior Department is in charge of salmon while they're in freshwater, but the Commerce Department handles them when they're in saltwater,” he said, adding: “And I hear it gets even more complicated once they're smoked.”

On its own, that last sentence is not all that funny; however, in the context in which he presented it, it caused the room to well over with chuckles and laughs. The day after, National Public Radio surveyed its listeners, asking them to describe Obama's 60-minute speech in three words, and the one word most frequently mentioned was *salmon*. As such, peppering levity into your presentation can set you up to give your audience an experience that stays with them long after your presentation has concluded.

But what about your credibility?

Will learners only remember the funny moments, though? Will they take you seriously? For many speakers, such thoughts give them pause, resulting in them completely foregoing any lightheartedness. Remember: Start your presentation in a way that immediately demonstrates what value you will bring to your audience—what everyone will



know or be able to do by the end of your presentation. Deliver on that promise, and you instantly establish credibility. Yes, your hilarity may be more memorable than those pie charts you've included, but connect a funny story to how the pie charts came together or offer a hilarious observation relative to a data point, and you increase the likelihood of participants also remembering the data in the chart.

Next, consider this: Jennifer Aaker, professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, says in a 2020 podcast interview that "Showing your sense of humor can make [others] attribute even more perceptions of confidence ... and even status to us ... while also cultivating a sense of trust." It will be, in part, because of your personality and the lighter side of yourself that you bring to the presentation that makes you memorable and seen as a poised, self-assured speaker.

Follow your personality

Before adding humor to your presentations, examine what your personality says you should do. If you are known for your quick wit, outrageous facial expressions, or a vast collection of stories, then use those as the basis for making your audience laugh.

Self-deprecation works well, too; however, novice presenters should avoid it. Self-deprecating humor can undermine

credibility. For that reason, only after speakers have clearly established themselves as authorities on the presentation topic and only after they have established themselves as expert presenters who know how to effectively navigate and manage the overall audience experience should they feel comfortable with offering up self-effacing humor.

Other ways to add humor include:

- Quoting someone who said something funny
- Presenting cartoons from your favorite publication
- Incorporating puns
- Dissecting or calling out the absurdity of a court ruling
- Riffing off industry magazine content or current events
- Using hyperbolic analogies and metaphors
- Showing images that illustrate a point but that also break the pattern of what participants' brains expect to see.

Be careful, though, with any references to politics, religion, and money—those are three of the most polarizing topics that can result in your presentation taking a turn for the worse. If you offer hot-button commentary that leads to people expressing strong opinions one way or the other, which is a high probability if you introduce any one of those topics, then you may see your presentation completely derail.



A favorite strategy of mine is to take listeners in one direction, then suddenly shift gears with an image that pulls them in a different direction. Audiences have experienced that in a presentation I facilitate on effective communication. The session starts with me saying, “You show up in life every day with every intention of making it a good one. Then, just as you’re hitting your stride—I’m telling you, you are ready to go around the office and high-five everyone in the building—it happens. You bump heads with someone who just doesn’t speak your language.” All the while, I show images of professionals going about their day, attending meetings, smiling, and engaging; I’m setting a tone, creating a certain expectation until *bam*—the second I say “language,” I simultaneously display an image of an angry man turned vicious-looking green monster action figure. It always brings a grin or two to the audience because it wasn’t expected. It broke the pattern of what their brains expected to see.

If you present on a heavy or controversial subject matter or on what may generally be considered taboo material, drawing on your unique personality to add humor may work to your advantage. Such topics include but are not limited to privacy rights, global climate change, civil rights, vaccines, gun control, and federal livable minimum wage. According to the *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* article “Use of Humor to Enhance Learning: Bull’s Eye or Off the Mark,” about using humor to enhance learning, you can use humor to deal with sensitive topics, and it can be useful for tedious and difficult subject matter. It can lighten the tone, give a hint of hope, and make learners more comfortable with covering content of a serious nature.

Mistakes to avoid

While positive strategies as mentioned above can serve you well, humor can take you down the wrong path if it is sarcastic, offensive, or excessive. Mocking others, having a distasteful tone, or using humor too much to the point that it overshadows what you and your audience need to accomplish will ruin your efforts. Moreover, negative attempts that make reference to a person’s ethnicity, sexual orientation, appearance, or a disability are just that—negative attempts and ones that should remain off limits.

Even in moments of lightheartedness when you may sense there is less pressure to be perfect, in reality, there is a greater pressure that you exercise diligence in your choice of words. Use the acronym THINK to ask yourself whether

what you are about to say is thoughtful, helpful, important, inclusive, necessary, and kind. The answer must be yes to all six factors. If not, then revise your message.

For instance, if you casually tell everyone, “It will be really helpful if everyone logs into their account before tomorrow’s session; that way, it’ll be easier for us to get to the part of the training that I know all you guys have been really wanting to see.” That message is thoughtful, helpful, important, necessary, and appears to be kind, but it’s not inclusive. “Guys” has a masculine connotation, and if you have people in your training who identify as female or non-binary or who use the pronouns she/her/hers or they/them/theirs, then you have inadvertently excluded them from your messaging.

Moreover, the statement assumes without officially confirming that everyone knows how to log into the account in question. And one may go so far as to point out that you have not confirmed that everyone knows what account you’re referencing. Any of those observations poses a problem with inclusiveness too. Keep your goal front of mind, and always remember how you want your audience to feel.

A memorable experience

For some presenters, the goal is to see smiles in the audience, thereby, gaining a sense of approval. Whatever you do, don’t force it. Do not show up with the intent to be funny. To ensure your likability—whether you prompt smiles or not—give your listeners what they came to get.

At the start of your presentation, give them what you promised you would give them, and here is the bonus: When you do that and if you utter the lamest phrase on the planet, it will result in laughter.

Bear in mind that the goal is not to be funny or to make them laugh. It is not about being someone you are not. It is about creating a positive experience and a feeling they won’t soon forget, and laughter is part of what you create. Participants laugh because they believe in your message. They laugh because they can relate to you. They laugh because they believe you can relate to them. When participants believe you can relate, they connect with and like you. And when they like you, smiles and laughter will naturally occur.

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