

Hiring the Right Humorist for the Right Event: 7 Tips

Tip 1: Hire a professional.

“When in doubt, leave it out” is the mantra of an experienced professional humorist. As in every field of expertise, a humorist’s ability to read his or her audience gradually develops over time. Like most endeavors, mastery comes from trial and error, falling down and getting back up. Put a group of humorists together and they will spend hours, even days, discussing challenging moments from the road.

“One time I was introduced just seconds after a CEO announced the company was downsizing an entire division of employees and most of them were in the room!”

“You think that is bad? Midway through one of my presentations, someone charged in and announced the OJ Simpson verdict.”

The power goes off. The opening speaker runs 35 minutes over time. Someone attending needs medical attention, the ceiling collapses from a torrential downpour. In cases like these (all have happened to me, by the way), the experience gained from professional training and years of “paying one’s dues” is priceless.

Tip 2: Don’t be “taken in” by slick marketing materials and impressive gimmicks.

Ask for references. A well loved humorist will have a list of program participants and meeting planners who are happy share the inside scoop. Troubleshoot by making a list of your concerns or any feelings of uneasiness. Check those out with someone who has worked with the humorist you are considering.

Anyone with money can create a brand and hire a marketing/PR firm. It’s easy to edit excellent “moments” onto a video demo or post glowing testimonials on a website. Talk to someone who has worked with the speaker. How much repeat business does the speaker do? How willing is the speaker to give you a range of references?

There are professional designations speakers can earn through the National Speakers Association. I am working toward becoming a Certified Speaking Professional, or CSP. This designation is based on numbers of speaking engagements and income earned, as well as meeting both competency requirements and high ethical standards.

Tip 3: Ask about the speaker's style of humor

Humor is very subjective. It is always appropriate to ask a professional speaker to help you understand their humor style. I would generally describe my humor in the following way:

I deliver important messages using clean, inclusive, humorous stories. I reinforce the message and help attendees apply them by

- Using PowerPoint to share funny as well as poignant images
- Adapting lyrics and writing personalized songs and parodies
- Sending attendees home with a take home memento

In general, humor aimed at oneself is well received by others. When we are the target of our own humor, others share our humor but are not threatened or injured by it.

- I usually begin with a song that expresses my fears about speaking for a particular audience. For example a when speaking at a wellness event, I may share my fear that everyone else will be so toned and fit they may be wearing a leotard, or worse yet a thong! Because we are all concerned with measuring up and fitting in, this confession actually sets everyone at ease. I am sharing my own insecurities rather than insulting the aerobic teachers in the group.

Consider these types of humor:

Clean humor	vs.	Off color language and subject matter. Jokes and references to bodily functions or "toilet" humor.
Humor aimed at ourselves	vs.	Putting other's down (Male bashing as an example)
Humor that delivers a positive or uplifting message	vs.	Leaving participants feeling diminished and disempowered. Humor fueled by an underlying anger.
Inclusive humor that draws people together	vs.	Humor about persons or cultures unlike the particular majority.
Real life stories and examples	vs.	Telling jokes, reading jokes found on the internet, using other's material

After you think you have a sense of the speaker's humor style, clarify once more. **For example, is clean humor the same as family friendly?** I do clean humor but unless you specifically asked for program material suitable for children, I would not consider my typical style "family friendly." I don't use profanity, but subjects appropriate for adult women may be considered inappropriate for young teens.

Tip 4: Does the speaker understand your purpose and objectives?

When looking for a professional speaker, your purpose can range from purely entertaining a group to impressing them with in depth, late breaking educational information. Shaking up current thinking and stimulating creativity is a different goal than summarizing and solidifying a given base of knowledge.

Are you looking for a comedian or a juggler? Are you looking for someone to motivate or inspire the group? Must the presentation meet measurable outcome based objectives and include handouts? Would you like to see group interaction and active participation, or would you prefer the attendees simply process the material at their own pace according to their particular comfort level and learning style?

Perhaps none of the above options are mutually exclusive. I have seen magicians motivate and teach. I have seen high content clinical information delivered as a song parody. I have seen physicians deliver scientific research using comedy. I always say that I would rather “be funny” than talk about it, yet I am very qualified to share the latest information about humor research and application. It is not uncommon for a humorist to also offer a repertoire of breakout or workshop options, more didactic in content.

If you make your goals and objectives very clear, a true professional will be honest about their limitations, and probably be able to recommend a colleague who would be an even better fit for your needs. Saying yes to every opportunity is the sign of an inexperienced speaker.

Tip 5: Does the humorist understand the audience demographics?

Be sure the humorist fully understands the make up of the audience. Did you know that women react to humor differently when even one man is present in the room? A group of work colleagues responds differently when supervisory or administrative personnel are included in the mix. Something a group of nurses or medical professionals find funny over lunch may seem absolutely inappropriate (translate: disgusting) to share with any other group.

Professional humorists know how to adjust their material to accommodate these, and a full a range of other factors.

Tip 6: Work with the speaker to create an optimal set-up and setting

I am often asked to kick off an event and then return for an afternoon presentation (to keep them awake after lunch!) or present a closing session that includes humor that has occurred throughout the day (to leave them feeling good about their entire experience).

Professional humorists know the pitfalls of coming on too strong at 8:00 AM. They know the pacing required to keep the momentum going when they are the final session of an event. Professionals can also advise you about the room set up and the timing of announcements and comfort breaks. Because I have presented programs for hundreds of women's wellness and appreciation events, I may well be the "queen" of having seen clever centerpieces and themes! Shorten your learning curve by asking!

Tip 7: It's always OK to clarify any concerns

If they are adequately informed, a professional speaker can handle most any situation with grace. But just like spouses and co-workers, they can't read your mind!

If you are concerned a certain phrase may offend your particular gathering, let them know. Better yet, inform them of any hot button issues to avoid. Is there a hot button issue they can help with? Bounce the idea around.

True Story:

Early in my career, I arrived for an engagement prepared to speak to front line healthcare givers employed at a large residential facility for special needs children and adults. Instead, I walked into a venue filled with wing-tipped shoes and elegantly dressed women adorned in furs and diamonds. These were philanthropists and benefactors of the facility. I am sure all who were attending had huge hearts, but they were probably not going to relate to songs and stories about bedside care! To my surprise, seated at the front tables were about a dozen residents from the facility, mostly in wheelchairs.

Over dinner, seated next to a young adult with severe cerebral palsy, I adjusted content of my presentation to the best of my ability. The awards and announcements were taking more than 45 minutes longer than schedules in the program booklet. Finally I was introduced by the woman who hired me, a very kind nurse from the facility. By this time, not only was the entire audience fading, but the residents were becoming increasingly uncomfortable and restless.

Looking out across the huge ballroom, my nurse brain kicked in and I was filled with concern for every bladder in the room!

Taking a breath, I began with an upbeat song. Suddenly the residents became excited and began loudly shouting and singing along. People began laughing, first uncomfortably, and then uncontrollably. It felt like the place was up for grabs!

It was too late to clarify audience demographics, or consider the room set up. It was too late to change into more formal attire or admit I wasn't the best fit for such an evening in the first place. I certainly hadn't clarified their objectives or defined my style!

What happened, you ask? I drew upon what I know best - nursing. Moving off the stage, I took my guitar to the front tables. Being close to the residents had a calming effect.

I asked some of the children how they felt about the people who cared for them at the facility. I asked several parents to comment. I shared a short message about making a difference.

Throughout the much abbreviated presentation, the young man from my table continued to sing. Closing with a "lullaby for grown ups", I moved the microphone in such away that we sang together. He happened to have an uncanny ability to immediately pick up any tune. The presentation ended as he sang a verse by himself: "I'll cradle you deep and hold you while angels sing you to sleep."

I will never forget that evening (sometimes I count it as a near death experience!), nor do I ever forget to ask plenty of questions! I encourage you to consider these tips and hope your next meeting or event is wildly successful. Whether or not you are interested in one of my programs, feel free to call if I can help in any way.

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