

## **Using Spontaneous and Observational Humor**

**An impromptu quip will hit the target more often than a canned joke.**

**By John Kinde, Accredited Speaker**

Imagine this. I arrive at a junior high school auditorium for a teacher in-service program. While setting up my session, I note two unrelated signs posted one above the other. Most of the 300 arriving faculty members had seen those signs many times. But probably none saw them as I did. In my opening remarks, I shared with them, "This is a unique facility. Look at the sign over the back door. 'Restroom--Capacity 475!'" That fresh and creative bit of humor helped me attract interest and build a relationship with the audience.

Spontaneous humor is a wonderful way to connect with an audience. An impromptu quip will hit the target more often than a canned joke. Audiences are flattered when the humor is created just for them. The teachers knew the comment about the signs was not a part of my script. And often, an improvised touch of humor lends a fresh appeal to your entire talk.

**Here are four keys to the effective use of spontaneous humor:**

1. Preparation
2. Observation
3. Courage
4. Practice

First, let's look at preparation.

What? Prepare to be spontaneous? Of course! Have you ever visited a comedy club and observed how the stand-up comic has an "off-the-cuff" ad lib for nearly anything that comes up? Think of those times when the comic chats with people in the front row and makes a witty remark if someone happens to be from Chicago, or works in the medical field, or is visiting the club with someone other than his or her own spouse. Such exchanges appear to be very spontaneous. But in reality, the comic is often making the "spontaneous" remark for the 50th or 100th time! The seasoned comic has prepared to be spontaneous.

In speaking situations, it's a good idea to be prepared with humor to handle unexpected events. For example, what will you do or say if the lights go out or the sound system fails? If you're armed with a humorous ad lib, the audience will be won over when they see the problem hasn't gotten the best of you.

Preparation should also include a study of your audience. If you circulate a preprogram questionnaire to obtain "inside information" about the group, you'll be able to customize your humor and make it seem much more spontaneous.

Here's another tip: carefully note any effective off-the-cuff humorous remark made by you or an audience member, then recycle it during your next talk. Although it may seem contradictory, being ready with a few humorous quips can actually create an illusion of spontaneity.

The second key is observation. Since most humor is based on relationships, the more observant you are, the more likely you'll be able to create humorous relationships and pictures in the minds of your audience. "Restrooms--Capacity 475" is an example of being observant. It was a bit of humor that created a funny picture in the minds of the audience.

On another occasion, while attending a holiday luncheon, I noticed a gentleman wearing loud green and red plaid pants with a black sports coat. On my way up to the stage, I passed by his table and asked him to join me. Once in front of the audience I said, "Bob has started a new tradition today. To carry on this tradition, next year when you arrive at your holiday luncheon, you'll be required to exchange an article of clothing with someone seated next to you. Would the gentleman wearing the other half of Bob's suit please stand up." With only a simple gesture and without any advance coordination, a gentleman wearing a loud plaid sports coat with black pants stood up! It brought the house down.

It's also a good idea to listen and observe as other speakers make remarks and presentations before you speak. At a company awards luncheon it seemed as though nearly everyone receiving 5, 10 and 15-year service awards had started in the company's telemarketing department and had subsequently worked their way into other jobs. I added a new line to my opening monologue. "People call me a comedy magician because they laugh at my magic and they're mystified by my jokes. But I wasn't always a comedy magician. I used to work in telemarketing!" It was on target and received a great response. The audience appreciated the fresh, spontaneous nature of the remark.

Then there was the time I attended a function where a wide variety of recognition were being given for club service. During the course of the ceremony I noticed that some of the recipients were present and some were absent that evening. So one of my best lines came from a simple observation: "This is my kind of club. You gave out perfect attendance awards to two people who weren't even here!" Simple? Of course. But highly effective.

After you've prepared and remembered to be observant, you'll need to exercise the third key...courage! There's no doubt about it: Trying out new jokes takes guts. But the more you do it, the more comfortable you'll become. It's worth the risk. Besides, if your audience doesn't laugh, just pretend you were serious!

The fourth key is practice. You learn humor and spontaneity only by exercising your skills. I recommend you set a goal of using some humor in every presentation you give. Your humor comfort zone will increase and so will your spontaneity as you gain confidence.

A great way to practice your use of spontaneous humor is to join a Toastmasters club. Their meetings help you hone your critical speaking skills. You have the opportunity to give prepared and impromptu speeches. Testing your humorous ideas, you'll sharpen your skills.

When the opportunity comes to say a few words at the close of a meeting, for example, use a bit of observational humor created out of the circumstances of the meeting. Or, if you're assigned to present a joke during the meeting, bring a "hip-pocket" joke only as a backup. Then, during the meeting, attempt to create a fresh, new joke by exercising your observational skills. It's not as difficult as it might seem at first. You'll become more observant and will eventually be able to create five or six pieces of observational humor by the close of every meeting. You can practice this technique at any type of meeting.

By using these keys of preparation, observation, courage and practice you'll become more spontaneous. You'll add a freshness to your presentation as you customize humor to your audience and your environment. Your talk will hit the mark...and the funny bone!

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