

Top Ten Ways to Make Humor Work for You

At a recent luncheon of professional women, some attendees expressed discomfort at the suggestion of using humor in business. Their reasons ranged from fear of increasing laugh lines to fear of not being taken seriously. Ironic isn't it? Using humor won't decrease your credibility or increase wrinkles as much as worrying about laugh lines will! But, if you are not having fun and using genuine humor in your business interactions, laugh lines are the least of your worries.

Appropriate humor provides an edge and only detracts from your professionalism if it is inappropriate, too much, and not funny - the latter has never happened to this author, of course.

Humor is like a bathing suit: one that flatters gets compliments, while one that doesn't, isn't working for you. Your goal is to work your best "assets." You wouldn't go out in an ill-fitting suit any more than you would use humor that does not reflect and show off your personality. And working your humor muscle is cheaper and less painful than botox. I know someone who used botox so often it not only took the expression out of her face, it also took the wrinkles out of her clothes. But that's another story!

Here's what you need to know about humor:

1. Keep workplace humor appropriate – this goes for anyone. When in doubt, cut it out. Keep humor focused on circumstances, not on people. Cheap laughs aren't worth it.
2. Hone your organic humor voice. Don't try to be someone you're not and don't laugh at something you don't find funny just to fit in. Some people laugh out of embarrassment for the joke teller. Genuine humor comes from your authentic self. Now, if your authentic self tells unfunny jokes -and laughs at them- learn to tell great stories instead! Like a good bathing suit, pick something that focuses on your humor strengths, not your weaknesses.
3. Never apologize before telling a joke or a story. If you truly don't think it's funny, don't tell it. And if it's a joke you want to use in a presentation, test it first on people you know. Better to know before you plant a stinker on your audience. It's no fun for you or them.
4. Avoid overusing self-deprecating humor. Unless people know you personally, people can misconstrue your humor as a lack of competency whether or not that is the case. If your audience knows you well and your work is respected, the ability to laugh at yourself is invaluable. Like racy swimwear, deprecation is best used in moderation for maximum effect.
5. Concentrate on telling better stories rather than jokes – especially when speaking in public. Stories connect with people on a personal level, while jokes are canned humor that may or may not be funny. Moreover, storytelling works with your communication style. Stories appeal to our shared humanity and love of life's funny twists and turns.
6. Don't avoid humor out of fear. Some women fear that laughing too much means they won't be taken seriously. If you laugh at inappropriate times or if you chortle so hard you blow milk bubbles through your nose, then you may be right. Understand your audience. Even milk bubbles through the nose can be funny with the right audience and situation.
7. Want a cheap facelift? Smile. A smile is a universal indicator and signal of mood. Make that signal a green light, not a stop sign, in your business interactions.
8. Understand the link between pay and humor. According to a September 2003 Harvard Business Review article, managers that laugh more than twice as often as their counterparts make more money, have more fun and are seen as more competent. Appropriate humor makes you more approachable. And that's good for business.
9. Learn the differences that emerge with humor and various cultures. Humor is culturally relevant – what one culture finds funny, another may not. A good understanding of these differences will allow you to adapt your communication style as needed. And humor, like swimwear, comes in many styles that change with the occasion.

10. Humor is about play, not just jokes. Having a sense of fun about yourself and life in general helps you cope with life's setbacks. Laugh at yourself. It's good for your physical and psychological health and will keep you looking younger than botox can.

Developing your humor skills takes work. Indulge your "play" self by watching sitcoms, going to comedy clubs, and reading funny books and articles. Keep a humor journal and you'll notice that humor is all around you. Use these funny events as the basis for jokes and stories that concentrate on universals that everyone can relate to. Then, you'll have a bathing suit that works for you.

Now as for laugh lines, think of them as evidence of life's education. By that standard, I am well-educated, and still learning. Botox be damned....for now.

Kathy Klotz-Guest, MA, MBA combines 13+ years' of strategic marketing with a background in sketch comedy to help clients create powerful print and verbal communications that get results!

©2005. All rights reserved.