

Finding the Funny Through the Years

By Jan McInnis, Keynote Speaker and Comedian

What's the one thing that the past, present and future have in common? Change! Emergency management isn't static for sure. From rules and regulations to the constant stream of new technology, you aren't doing business the same old way. And one of the biggest changes is the way in which we communicate information to others.

People are being exposed to hundreds of more messages a week than they were 10 years ago, so if you're communicating your message in the same way that you have always done, then your message may be getting lost in the noise. The face of communication also has changed over the decades. Thanks to the boom in social media, people are more casual and want to connect on a more personal level.

One way to get people's attention with your message, and make your message more personal and memorable, is through using humor.

Using Humor to Handle Change

At the 2015 IAEM Annual Conference, I had a great time sharing my keynote, "Finding the Funny in Change." I hope those of you who attended are using some of my tips – if not, this is your friendly reminder! At that conference, we talked about using humor to handle change, but it's perfect for many other business situations. As a follow up to my keynote, and to catch up with the rest of you, here's a quick refresher article with some ideas on using humor in your message.

Emergency management may not be funny, but how you get people to listen to your message, and remember it, *can be*. Humor grabs people's attention and gets

them to listen. Experts say that if you want people to retain information, you must connect that information to an emotion. Humor is a great emotion to use because people will take time for something funny, and they also remember it and want to share it. A lot of cats got famous on YouTube because they pawed a piano or stole a dog's bed (seriously, look up "cat stealing dog's bed").

Do you need people to remember some important emergency information? Use a little humor. Businesses spend millions on funny ads because they understand that humor works. You can use humor too, without spending millions.

Humor also helps defuse tension, and as we know, emergency management can be chock full of tension. If you need to calm people down and release that tension, then use humor – it'll change the energy. Is your staff stressed? A little humor can get them from ruffled to relaxed in a heartbeat.

And humor tells you about people. Listen to the humor that others use. It'll tell you about their state of mind. Sarcastic humor lets you know that the person might not be taking things seriously, while self-deprecating humor clues you in that the person doesn't take *himself* too seriously. If you want to gauge the people on your team and what they're thinking, pay attention to *their* humor.

So, do you want to try your hand at using a little humor in your next message? I'm not talking about being a comedian, but rather using it as another business tool that you have at your disposal. Here are some tips:

■ **First off, be counterintuitive like Southwest Airlines.** They get

people to listen to their safety instructions because the instructions are funny, and they make the instructions funny by saying things that *seem* to be the opposite of our common sense. One of my favorite lines, after they've finished their safety spiel, is: "To those of you who listened to our safety instructions, thank you. To those of you who didn't – good luck!" Instead of scaring people into listening to their safety instructions, they do the exact opposite. They wish them good luck. It gets a laugh, and people remember it.

So say something that goes against what we think to be true. An email, for example, on "top reasons you *shouldn't* prepare for an emergency," with a fun list of things that they probably really *don't* want to do, may get more people to read that email. Include ideas such as "Don't prepare...it's much better to pay \$50 bucks for a gallon of water rather than have an emergency supply ready that costs you nothing," may get people laughing *and* get them to remember to prepare.

And speaking of top lists, joke formulas like these are great ways to inject humor. Thanks to late night TV, people are used to seeing top lists (and other joke formulas). The lists grab people's attention, and people will usually take the time to read them. And remember, it doesn't have to be Top 10 . . . it can be Top 8 or Top 18, or whatever you come up with.

■ **Another quick and easy way to use humor is self-deprecating humor.** It's personal, and it creates a fast connection with others. In my keynote, I talk about my size 12 feet. Sadly, it's true! And after every

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keynote, I have people come up to me and tell them their shoe size. Our big feet connect us. Mentioning something unusual about yourself or a funny/weird experience you had, draws people in to what you're saying. What has happened to you over the years, on vacation or at a family gathering for example, that would be a fun way to connect with others? Start with the funny, and you'll catch people's attention.

■ **Which brings us to...it's all about asking funnier questions.** Comedians don't take the world at face value. We ask funny questions that lead to funny answers. You can do this too. Here's a quick exercise to practice using humor. The next time you're at a networking event, such as your IAEM Annual Conference, move off the standard script when you meet someone, and ask them funnier questions.

Replace the "Where do you work" question with a "What was your weirdest job" question. We've all had weird jobs, whether it was a first job in high school or a side gig that helped pay the bills. When I ask this question from the stage, I get some funny answers – from cleaning Exxon bathrooms (yuck) to plucking chickens (and much worse). There's usually someone else in the audience who has done the same thing, and we have an instant connection and a few laughs.

My worst job? Telemarketing! Yeah, I know, awful. I lasted six hours, which gave me seniority! As I point out, nobody lasts long telemarketing anything.

Social media has made this the "me" era because everyone wants to share about themselves! So dig deep, and share your personal

information. You'll find out interesting stuff about others, which leads to connections and being memorable.

Once you're comfortable asking funnier, off the "beaten path" questions, you'll be able to do it to break the ice during tense moments when you really need to calm someone down or during calm moments when you have to prepare them for tense times.

■ **And remember – with humor, start small!** Comedians start out doing three minutes at open mic nights because we don't have the skills to do an hour of jokes at first. So, just pick one thing – ask one funny question while networking or write a few lines for a top list. Get a little success and experience with using humor, and you'll enjoy it and want to do more.

Change how you've communicated in the past, by using humor in the present, so that people listen to and remember your message for the future. You'll find out that using humor is not only easy, but also fun.

About Jan McInnis

Jan is a keynote speaker, author, comedian and comedy writer who shows businesses how to use humor. You may remember her from the IAEM 2015 Annual Conference. She has shared her keynotes with thousands of groups, has written comedy for everyone from The Tonight Show to guests on Jerry Springer (her parents are proud!). Contact Jan at www.TheWorkLady.com or Jan@TheWorkLady.com. ▲

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