

Humour Me!

Of all the tools we use in ordinary human communication, humour may be the one we use least often when we're trying to write persuasively. And yet it's one that almost everybody loves. Humour can add a powerful charge to any persuasive message.

The problem, of course, is that it's risky. The wrong kind of humour, used the wrong way, could turn our entire proposal or sales presentation into a joke; however, if you follow some guidelines, you can use humour safely and effectively. Here are some suggestions for incorporating humour into your proposals and presentations.

According to David Knight, "an expert is someone who is one page ahead of you in the instruction manual."

Now that's a pretty good quote. It's witty, it makes us smile with recognition, and if you used it in a presentation or a proposal, it might make your audience see you as accessible, not arrogant. Those are all good things if we're trying to build rapport and persuade the audience to work with us.

Yet very few sales presentations or proposals use humour. Most of us feel that it's just too risky. What if the audience doesn't get it? What if humour offends them? Maybe they'll think we're frivolous, whimsical, unprofessional, or emotional rather than logical.

Those are legitimate concerns, but knowing your audience and understanding what kind of humour works and what kind you should avoid will protect you from embarrassing yourself.

Humour has potential value in persuasive communications because it can make our message more interesting, can add impact, and may help us establish rapport with the audience. Used tactically, it can defuse tension and relieve stress.

If you're going to incorporate humour in your arsenal of persuasive techniques, make sure you think carefully about the audience first. When I first began my career as a business writer, I was hired by an aerospace firm to write the script for a video about

their new technology. They wanted something appropriate for general audiences, everybody from girl guides to politicians. They wanted it to be upbeat, interesting and an image builder.

So I wrote a script that was based on the premise that the Wright brothers come back to see what's going on in aerospace. Their ghosts visit the facility, interact with an engineer who can see them (no one else can), and learn about all the exciting developments. There were a few special effects, but basically the video's humour came from the interaction between the brothers and the engineer, who was quite convinced he was losing his mind.

In one sense, the video did well. It received a major international award as the best industrial video of the year, beating submissions from Kodak, Sony, IBM, and others. But in another sense, it didn't do so well. Namely, the client hated it.

I remember sitting in the chief engineer's conference room, surrounded by his staff, all of them staring at me as though I had just grown another head. What they couldn't understand was why I had taken an approach that suggested they weren't serious about everything they do. As one of them said at the meeting, "I think I detect whimsy in this video, and we are not a whimsical organisation."

Well, they certainly weren't that day.

So the bottom line is that I messed up by not understanding my client better, and they messed up by not reading the early drafts of the script.

What kinds of humour will work in a persuasive, business setting? I think there are half a dozen kinds that work and one that definitely does not.

One kind of humour that will usually work includes self-deprecating comments because they help break the ice, reduce the sense of distance, and establish rapport. Just don't overdo it. One or two self-deprecating comments are humorous. A whole series of them will sound like a therapy session.

Witty remarks also work well. A sharp observation, a clever turn of phrase, or distinct insights are all usually welcome.

Similarly, creative uses of language (a clever acronym, a rhyme, or an analogy that makes a point more vivid in an expected way) are usually well received.

Even safer forms of humour are to quote a humorous remark from somebody famous. Who's going to complain if you start out, "As Einstein once said,..." and it just happens to be one of Einstein's funnier remarks? Historical anecdotes work the same way. Audiences are usually receptive to an amusing story that involves a well-known figure or event.

In every case, humour will be most effective when you use it to reinforce a point you are making or to introduce a topic. Just saying something funny because you want to get a laugh is not going to maintain a professional, businesslike tone in your presentation or proposal. View humour as a tool to achieve the broader end of effective communication.

Okay, so what's the one kind of humour to avoid? Any kind that has a victim. This kind of humour still creates a strained atmosphere. It undercuts your credibility and professionalism, suggests poor judgment and a lack of respect for others. It's not worth it.

So good luck in adding a little spice to your presentations or proposals.



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