

By Molly Cox, Mark Bergren and Jim Detmar, co-owners of Out of the Blue

HARD LAUGHTER

Conferences and conventions are serious business. They offer the opportunity to get away from the office to learn new ideas, meet people and find out what the future of any given industry holds.

But meetings don't have to be deadly serious. In fact, they're much more beneficial if they're not.

Talk to anyone who has attended a meeting where the speaker was able to engage them with humor or they learned about the new sales goal and market through a gameshow format. Ask what they remembered when they were not only taught, but entertained by the improvisation group. The answer most often will be "plenty."

Flip that scenario to a meeting where the material was presented professionally, but lacked any levity and you'll find that people didn't learn much because they probably weren't engaged in the material. In fact, take it one step further and ask yourself: Humor or no humor? And one more question: How excited would you be to go back to this same conference the next year if you knew it was going to be as painful as watching a Twins game in the Metrodome on a 75 degree sunny day?

Lose the clown nose

When we speak of humor, we're not talking about standard jokes, a stand up comedian or the appearance of the dreaded clown nose. Carefully placed

humor that is appropriate and themed for your meeting can ignite your attendees and take your content to a new level.

Consider, for example, a conference planner who hires an improvisation company to write a comedic sketch that highlights the problems the company (division) has been dealing with in the past year. The meeting opens and the actors portray the company and their competition with razor-sharp satirical accuracy. While the audience laughs they also get the fact that management understands what they've been going through. Not only has the company accomplished its goal, it has helped people to connect with one another and has created something that we call "commonality." Attendees now have something in common and humor (as they say) is the shortest distance between two people.

On the other hand, poorly delivered humor or humor for humors sake (see: clown nose example) is thought of as sophomoric and insulting. Give yourself the test on this one too. Example: *Who wants to be a Millionaire type game show* = Good. *Kum Ba Ya My Lord* sung by a puppet = Bad. You get the idea.

We don't have a humor budget

When meeting budgets are tight, the first thing to go is anything that might seem frivolous. And we'll admit, if you're slashing dollars, comedians,

humorous speakers and add-ons look tempting for the chopping block. But if you take a moment to consider the benefits of humor, you might just be better off to chop the steak from the dinner budget instead.

Herb Kelleher, founder of Southwest Airlines once said, "Life is too short and too hard and too serious not to be humorous about it." Considering Southwest Airlines is the one and only airline to continue to show a profit after 9/11, Southwest just may be the model company to watch when it comes to balancing work and fun.

Don't just think in terms of humor when you are balancing your conference, also think in terms of play. Obvious as it may seem, engaging in play may be an endangered practice for adults as well as children. In a *Time* magazine article, "Whatever happened to Play?" it's noted that play is "joyful, and emotionally nourishing." Stuart Brown, a retired psychiatrist and founder of the Institute of Play, believes that too little play may have a dark side. What Brown calls, "play deprivation" can lead, he says, to "depression, hostility and the loss of 'the things that make us human beings.'"

So, what can you do to add play and humor to your conferences without breaking your budget?

- Create a theme that is fun and will provide opportunities for laughter while matching the tone and content

Take a gut check and see if you would want to attend

- Hire a humorist that will customize their material for your meeting
- Bring in a corporate savvy improvisation comedy group to provide levity between meetings or speakers, or present the keynote to set the mood
- Bring in at least one or two speakers who are known for content *and* humor
- Balance serious meeting time with recreational activities such as a golf outing, boat ride, dance band or focused but fun teambuilding activity

Trust your own instincts

One of the most frequent reasons we get calls for our improvisation-inspired keynotes and entertainment is because

the meeting planner isn't going to "blow it again this year." For all the thousands of dollars that planners spend to have content-rich meetings, they realize (after the event) that attendance and retention go up if people are engaged and have a good time. We're not saying that humor programs don't offer content, they certainly do, but the delivery is always fun and entertaining and that makes all the difference.

When you look at the conference you're planning in its entirety, take a gut check and see if you would want to attend, instead of what the CEO or accountant will say when they see the budget. This one exercise can be pretty revealing. Then begin to build your case before you present the line up.

A good conference, balanced with con-

tent, networking and humor can positively impact people and provide a stimulating and engaging environment. A bad one can create stress, frustration and the need for a long vacation to a far away place where there are no meetings.

Molly Cox, Mark Bergren and Jim Detmar are co-owners of Out of the Blue, a keynote, training and sketch comedy company that bases its programs on the principles of improvisation. Their best selling book, "Improvise This! How to Think on Your Feet so You Don't Fall on Your Face," has been on the CEO READ top 25 list twice.

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