

What It Takes to Make People Laugh ***

By Larry Wilde

A bunch of San Quentin cons met in the recreation hall for their evening's relaxation. Suddenly one prisoner stood up and exclaimed, "72!" Everybody laughed.

Another inmate got to his feet and yelled, "53!" All the men guffawed. A third convict brought down the house just by shouting, "86!"

Weasel McCall, a new arrival at the prison turned to Lefty Lanier, a lifer, and inquired, "What's going on?"

"We're tellin' jokes!" he replied. "Instead of tellin' a yarn all the boys already know, we just yell out a number from our joke books... Saves time."

Anxious to get in good with the guys, Weasel stood up and shouted, "22!" Nothing happened. Again he tried, "17!" Silence.

So Weasel asked Lefty, "How come they didn't laugh?"

"Kid, the jokes are all right," said the con, "but you just don't know how to tell them."

Part One: NURTURING NATURAL TALENTS

The ability to tell funny stories has long been regarded as a unique gift possessed by a very special few. Most authorities agree that it's not a talent with which most people are born. As a result, really good storytellers are as scarce as free drinks in a Scottish saloon. In the hands of the unskilled or untrained, the best of jokes are completely spoiled through poor delivery, bad timing, unnecessary words and the lack of preparation.

The art of telling a funny story or an amusing anecdote can be mastered by simply knowing and applying the proper techniques. Practically anyone can learn these fundamentals. Comedy is a craft. The techniques used to make people laugh, though not generally known, are nonetheless possible to master.

In show business, some of the more basic procedures were passed along

by older veteran comedians to younger aspiring comics. But, by and large, to become a successful professional speaker one had to learn the tricks of the trade the old-fashioned way — through exhaustive, sometimes heartbreaking experience.

Times have changed. Today education and training grounds are more readily available. Schools and comedy clubs abound nationwide. Many comedy beginners write original gags, but for those who cannot create their own material, there are humor anthologies; which provide jokes, quips and stories on every conceivable subject.

For the countless humor lovers who wish to learn how to make people laugh, some practical tools are hereby presented. The following elementary rules and guidelines are offered to help hone the skills needed to evoke laughter from an audience.

IT'S ALL IN THE TELLING

The old adage “it’s not *what* you say but *how* you say it,” is the very essence of communicating humor. Tone of voice is all-important. People respond more to the tone than to the words. The funniest joke in the world will not receive its just due when obstructed by poor delivery.

Delivery is the articulating of words in manner or style that is convincing, authoritative, dramatic and entertaining.

In delivering a joke, listeners respond strongly to the tone used by the joke teller. The storyteller must get the essence of the subject matter across in a simple and direct manner. This is particularly important in verbal communication, but especially critical when the goal is to evoke laughter.

BENEFITS OF GOOD DELIVERY

There are at least four major benefits when comedy material is properly delivered:

The deliverer commands attention.

An audience becomes totally absorbed in the words used and is mesmerized by the tone in which they are expressed. They eagerly await each word and are caught up in the fervor, sincerity and enthusiasm of the performance. A good delivery captures attention and holds it.

Intimacy is established with the audience.

Good delivery conveys authority. If the words are convincing, exciting and entertaining, the audience is won over and they are anxious to hear every detail. A smooth, polished delivery establishes a closer rapport with the audience and makes listening to the speaker a pleasurable experience.

The audience laughs more easily.

When people are induced to listen closely because of *how something* is said they automatically absorb *what is* said more easily. It is vital that the speaker use every available device to insure that listeners understand each word. When clear comedic thoughts are expertly communicated, the audience will respond. Good delivery paves the way to laughter.

Competency is conveyed.

The audience senses that the speaker knows what he or she is doing. Self-assurance is perceived and the humorist gains respect. People willingly dismiss whatever reservations or doubts they might have had. They feel safe and comfortable. The presenter becomes their leader, their guide, their guru, a person they can admire.

An audience will eagerly and anxiously surrender its emotions to someone they trust. A strong, dynamic style captivates an audience. It conveys confidence and believability. But most of all, good delivery makes a statement: I am competent, skilled and gifted.

Of course, you just don't wake up one morning having automatically acquired a good delivery. It doesn't happen overnight. It takes years of concentrated effort and continuous rehearsal. However, there is a way to speed up the process by learning and practicing four basic techniques essential in achieving a good delivery: gestures, body movement, facial expressions and vocal variety.

ELEMENTS OF GOOD DELIVERY

Gestures.

The calculated use of hands and arms is invaluable. Pointing a finger, making a fist, holding up the hands or waving the arms at an appropriate moment, helps to accentuate the meaning of what you're trying to convey. The gesture is the speaker's picture-painting device, and the premiere technique for reaching across the distance between you and the audience. Gestures demonstrate. They dramatically illustrate and emphasize what you are saying. Gesticulating at the right time helps generate bigger laughs.

For a real education in the art of gesturing, watch the great pantomimist, Marcel Marceau. After an evening with this French virtuoso, you'll very quickly understand and appreciate the importance of movement. It is the body's silent articulation.

Body movement.

The acts of posturing, posing, strutting, staggering, shrugging, bending, kneeling, leaning or bowing assist in creating the word pictures you are trying to paint. Body language is the message behind the words. It's been said that true communication is:

7% words,
38% voice quality,
55% body language.

Facial expressions.

The simple raising of an eyebrow, squinting, sneering, smiling, grinning, or any use of facial muscles, provides an additional dynamic dimension to what you are saying. You help the joke with action. An animated, expressive face prompts listeners to laughter.

Vocal variety.

Lowering or raising the pitch of your voice, speaking louder or softer, saying something sweetly, respectfully, angrily, shouting, whispering or

pausing for effect, are attention getters. Imagine how flat music would sound if it had no dynamics — no exciting crescendos or breathless pianissimos. In the same manner that dynamics add fire to music, vocal variety adds excitement to the spoken word. A well-modulated voice is stimulating and evocative, whereas a dull monotone speaker is a boring communicator with a ho-hum delivery.

Spending a few minutes every day on perfecting each of these techniques will lead to a more polished and professional delivery.

However, there's still one other technical skill that is absolutely vital to mastering the art of storytelling, and that is — timing.

Timing is the art of delivering words, phrases and sentences in a rhythmic or varying tempo with calculated emphasis in order to heighten their effectiveness.

Joke telling requires good timing. Without it, the laugh could be completely lost. On the other hand, when the audience is laughing, if you start speaking before the laugh begins to diminish, the response will be shortened, cut off. This is known as “stepping on the laugh.”

Good timing gets good results. Jack Benny, perhaps more than any other comedian, was recognized as the master of this technique. In the interview with Jack for my book, *Great Comedians Talk About Comedy*, I asked him his thoughts on timing.

“A good joke without timing means nothing,” Jack replied. “Very often good timing is not so much knowing when to speak but knowing when to pause.”

The same question to Bob Hope produced this reply: “At times I have good material and at other times I have great material, but I know how to cover up the merely good and make it sound great by timing.”

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF GOOD TIMING

Listeners comprehend more easily.

Everyone has a natural speech pattern, cadence, or rhythm, just as music has tempo. Once the audience is in sync with your particular cadence they respond more easily. Changing your rhythm abruptly is

jarring. When the delivery is rushed or words are out of sync, the audience loses the point. If they don't quite understand, the laugh will be sacrificed. Good timing assures the inside track to the listener's brain.

Interest is aroused.

The way in which something is said directly affects how the listener responds. When speech tempo is varied and significant pauses are employed at the proper points, words are underscored and the listener sees mental images more clearly. Good timing makes any speaker, even a novice, more colorful, appealing and entertaining.

The illusion of spontaneity is created.

The way in which one delivers words, phrases or whole sentences should give the impression that they are being uttered for the first time. To help the audience believe what is being said, speech must sound fresh and natural — not stale and rehearsed like a classroom recitation. Timing a joke is like dancing a waltz — the performer must be smooth and graceful and have a feel for the tempo.

Professionals make humor look effortless. But they **rehearse constantly to insure that their timing is flawless, relaxed and comfortable.** The preceding physical and verbal devices, when properly applied, help to cue the laughter response in listeners.

However, making a large group of people laugh is never easy. There are many intangibles that can militate against success. Sometimes there is a poor sound system. The room in which the show or the program is being held can be too warm or too cold. The seating might be badly arranged, perhaps the audience has difficulty seeing or hearing. The lighting may be insufficient, or — the performer's worst nightmare — the audience might be tired, indifferent, drunk or rowdy.

Any or all of these distractions, which are often beyond the performer's control, can dramatically stem the flow of laughter and cause disappointing crowd reaction.

But there are other reasons within the performer's control that cause unqualified and untrained joke tellers to get less than the laugh a funny story deserves. They are often unaware of the causes for not getting a

favorable reaction. The following are solutions for some common mistakes:

Part Two: EVOKING BIGGER LAUGHS

Don't rush the punch line.

Establish a natural, easy tempo and stick with it. Suddenly rushing the punch line unduly jars the audience. Speaking too quickly loses listeners and they might not catch what is being said. This abbreviates the laugh. The punch line should always be delivered in the same tempo and rhythm as the rest of the joke.

Use pauses for effect.

Pauses are part of good timing if used judiciously. Stopping in the wrong place will throw off the tempo you've begun, disrupt the flow, make the audience uncomfortable and ultimately lessen the laugh. Always pause at a point that is natural or that enhances the sensible phrasing of the joke. Smart, calculated pauses are absolutely indispensable to getting bigger laughs.

Speak with energy.

Enthusiasm is infectious. A passionate discourse is a foolproof way to enthrall a crowd. Conversely, an audience becomes bored quickly with a flat, dull, colorless speaker. A spirited voice is always more interesting. Speaking with energy insures that the audience will hear every word. If they can't hear what is being said, how can they be expected to laugh? To make sure that I'm clearly heard, I always turn up the sound system to the point just before feedback, then I lay back from the microphone at least six inches. By doing this I have greater control over the volume, and my delivery.

Articulate clearly.

Enunciate plainly and distinctly so that each member of the audience can grasp every word that is being uttered. Slurred or mumbled words confuse listeners. Good diction boosts the chances of getting big laughs.

Speaking so that everyone can follow from point to point insures that no one will ever be forced to ask, “What did he say? I didn’t get it.”

Shakespeare offers sound advice: Hamlet instructs a group of traveling actors who arrive at the castle to perform before the king and queen, “Speak the speech, I pray you, trippingly on the tongue ... Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand but use all gently ... you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.”

In other words ...

Don’t over gesticulate.

The use of gestures is essential to getting the point of the joke across but overdoing it can be distracting. When coordinating movements of the hands to correspond with words it is best to remember that less is more.

Don’t laugh at your own jokes.

Chuckling before or after delivering a joke is unnecessary and unwise. Let the listener be the judge if the story is amusing. Laughing at the punch line will not help the audience think it’s funny.

Avoid insult, put-down or off-color material.

They never pay. As long as there is a possibility of hurting somebody’s feelings, the performer loses. A cheap laugh sacrifices good will. No matter how funny the joke is or how much the audience chuckles, if someone has been offended, the effort ultimately fails. Stay away from sensitive subjects such as racial slurs, anti-gay remarks, extreme filth and humor that degrade women. The best axiom is if in doubt — leave it out. A firm rule should be—keep it clean. Never tell a story that might offend.

Talk less — say more.

Nothing stands in the way of a good laugh more than a joke that is wordier than necessary. The fewer the words, the greater the laugh. The size of the laugh you get is inversely proportional to the number of

words used to reach the punch line. Once again the adage *less is more* becomes the rule.

Note the number of words used in some of the greatest works ever written:

The Lord's Prayer — 56 words,

23rd Psalm — 118 words,

Ten Commandments — 297 words,

United States Department of Agriculture Regulation Governing the Price of Cabbage — 15,629 words.

This classic story is a good illustration:

Marjorie became attracted to the art of flower arrangement. When she entered competitions she didn't do well and finally asked one of the judges for advice. The kindly old judge gave her three envelopes to be opened one at a time when she next tried her hand.

The message in the first envelope read: Take out half of your flowers and rearrange the rest.

Marjorie did so. The second message was like the first: Take out half of your flowers and rearrange the rest.

She did as requested. The third message was the same. Marjorie followed instructions and won First Prize.

These final words from the Bard of Avon: "Brevity is the soul of wit."

Rehearse. Rehearse. Rehearse.

Tell your joke in front of a mirror. Practice it out loud. Repeat it to friends, family or co-workers — anybody who will listen. Repeat it over and over again until you can tell it without the slightest hesitation or mistake. Keep doing it until it becomes as natural as breathing and you feel comfortable and at ease.

Record it on audiotape exactly the way you would tell it before an audience. Play it back. Listen to it carefully and objectively. Be hypercritical of your work. Make sure you've followed the rules you've

learned. Then, record it and check it again. Do this a half dozen times for each joke.

Milton Berle says, “Security is knowing your lines.”

Practicing the craft of comedy is the ultimate training ground. Groucho Marx wrote in his autobiography, *Groucho and Me*, “All good comedians arrive by trial and error.” Anyone who wants to flourish as a professional funny person can only accomplish this goal by constant and disciplined drill.

Stand-up comedians sound spontaneous precisely because they are not.

The material they use is constantly honed, refined and rehearsed.

Doing your comedy homework will enable you to approach the audience without fear.

If you want to master the skill of making people laugh, there really are no shortcuts. You must do the required work. Watching professional athletes before a game is a great lesson in what is required to become especially proficient at a particular skill.

Before each game baseball players practice fielding, throwing and batting. They do warm-up exercises. They run sprints. And they do this before *every* contest whether they’re regulars or will sit on the bench throughout the entire game. They do it because they know the importance of practice. They have to be ready, prepared to participate at a moment’s notice.

The following dictum is prominently displayed above my desk as a constant reminder:

Failure to prepare is preparation for failure.

TEN TIPS TO INCREASE HUMOR SKILLS

Most joke tellers don’t necessarily want to become professional humorists or stand-up comedians, but having a keen insight into the mechanics and techniques used to make people laugh provides a greater appreciation of the craft. Here are some helpful hints that will serve as a guide toward a better understanding of the mysterious and magical

world of evoking laughter.

1. Become familiar with humor classics.

The great humor writers are an invaluable source for educating the funny bone. Start with the works of Mark Twain, Robert Benchley, James Thurber, Dorothy Parker and George S. Kaufman, along with playwrights George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Nikolai Gogol and Oscar Wilde.

Studying their writing styles, comic characters and chuckling at the comedic insights of these celebrated writers offers a magnificent foundation; a basis from which to derive a better perception and comprehension of comedy.

2. Review books on comedy technique.

Until just a few years ago, there weren't any books on how to go about becoming a comedy professional. Fortunately, volumes are available now that are filled with information and cover a myriad of details.

Especially informative are Steve Allen's perceptive explorations into comedy and comedians, *The Funny Men*, *Funny People and More Funny People* as well as his *How To Be Funny*. Comedy writer Gene Parrot's *How To Hold Your Audience With Humor* is a must. And *Comedy Techniques for Writers and Performers* by former advertising exec Mel Helter is very worthwhile.

3. Watch comedians at work.

Many of the finer points in performing comedy can be learned by observing the pros. Watching them objectively is a golden opportunity to absorb and adapt techniques.

Study their methods. See how they set up the joke. Pay close attention to delivery. Observe their facial expressions, mannerisms and body language. Zeroing in on the harmonious movements of a skilled comedy technician is a sure way to improve your body's vocabulary.

Take in the audience reaction to the material used by the comedian. Measure how funny the material is. How the audience reacts to it.

Note the various crowd responses to different kinds of jokes. Tape the televised appearances of the best comedians and study the tapes. See how they respond to getting small laughs, big laughs or no laughs at all.

Get in the habit of studying the work of each comedian. Learn to analyze and critique the performance. Developing a critical eye and ear will help you become more objective when analyzing your own techniques.

Superstar Danny Kaye wasn't just a funny man, he was a great entertainer. The first time I saw him perform on a New York stage it was hard to believe that anyone could be so versatile. He sang, danced, told jokes and even turned the audience into his own personal choral group.

I went back to watch Kaye ten days later and discovered, to my amazement, that he did the exact same act, word for word, line for line, gesture for gesture. Every movement was carefully and artfully choreographed. There was not a single wasted motion or extraneous word. The performance was identical to the first one I saw, yet it seemed fresh and spontaneous. Pure genius.

Over the years, I watched Danny Kaye perform in person 27 times. The words were always the same, the gestures repeated, the movements exact. I marveled at his incredible talent. During each performance I mentally catalogued his comic delivery, the timing, the change of tempos in the songs, the audience rapport, his vocabulary, the gestures, even the clothes he wore. I was studying a master in the hope of acquiring my Ph. D. in comedy. What an education!

4. Listen to comedy tapes.

Pay close attention to the delivery and timing of the performer. Listen carefully to the vocal nuances used in communicating the material to the audience. Play the tape over and over in order to become completely familiar with the comedian's rhythm and his or her style. You'll soon recognize many of the techniques previously

discussed.

5. Practice gestures before a mirror.

Tell a joke or story that you plan to use in front of an audience and watch your hand motions. When you've come upon a natural gesture that looks good with a particular phrase or sentence, lock it in. Try to do it the same way every time. Make it part of your routine. Gestures are choreography. When they fit what you're saying, use them over and over again.

After a recent speaking engagement in Pennsylvania, an elderly couple approached me at the podium. "We really enjoyed your presentation," said the husband with a broad grin. "My wife wears a hearing aid so she usually doesn't like speakers."

"But I understood every word you said," added the woman. "I especially enjoyed the way you use your hands. They're so expressive."

I couldn't help remembering when I first started to perform. Gestures were a big problem for me. I felt uncomfortable using my hands. They always seemed to get in my way. It was frustrating, but I knew that if I was going to stay in show business I'd have to do something about it.

I bought a record album of Strauss waltzes and as the music blared from a little portable phonograph, I stood in front of a mirror and conducted the orchestra. My hands were awkward and clumsy. The arm movements looked lumbering and ungraceful. I practiced hours on end, but as the weeks wore on, I still felt uncomfortable. It was tiring and boring.

Then one afternoon, I began to feel a freedom when I gestured. It was relaxed and effortless. My arms had a mellifluous movement. I realized that I'd finally gained control of my hands. From that day on I was comfortable gesturing.

The couple in Pennsylvania reminded me of my effort in front of the mirror all those years ago and made it seem very worthwhile.

6. Take acting classes.

Reading plays, learning lines and acting out scenes with other actors helps enormously to cultivate communication skills. These exercises demand concentration; they improve memory, and require a wide range of vocal expression as well as body language. Learning to relate to other people on stage provides practice in eye contact and encourages a range of emotions to be expressed. Rehearsing and delivering the exact lines of a play as the playwright intended is an invaluable discipline. This priceless experience will nurture your talent, boost your confidence and equip you with know-how that will last a lifetime.

7. Join a dance class.

To use the body effectively when expressing ideas or feelings, you must have control of it. Modern dance and ballet teach discipline. There must be no wasted motion. Every professional actor at one time or another takes dance classes. Even athletes are often found alongside ballerinas studying to strengthen their legs, add dexterity, and gain ease of movement.

8. Get voice training.

Speaking to audiences frequently requires a strong, healthy voice; one that will stand up with constant use and won't break down when a cold or virus strikes and you must work. Knowing how to use the voice properly is just one more tool to help communicate effectively. These basic techniques are learned from a competent voice coach. Get one.

9. Read a joke book 15 minutes every day.

Prolific humor columnist Art Buchwald told me that each day before he begins work he likes to prime the pump by reading jokes. The more joke plots you know the more ideas you will get to create your own material. You'll learn construction. You'll discover the many different joke forms (one-liners, quips, puns, limericks, stories, etc.) and where to fit them in your routine. Then there's the advantage of building up your own joke file. Save

all the gags you like and list them under specific headings or subjects.

Get in the habit of telling one new joke every day to anybody who'll listen. Recounting the same joke to twenty people makes you more familiar with it. Delivery is improved with each telling. Timing is perfected. This is a safe opportunity to experiment, to find out if the joke is funny — and if it works for you. Best of all, you are practicing your craft.

10. Seek guidance from a pro.

Especially if you wish to be a paid presenter. Coaches groom athletes. Teachers train musicians. Pros seek pointers from other pros. The more proficient you want to become, the more you need instruction and direction to enhance and polish your skills.

After switching careers — from stand-up comedian to motivational humorist — I sought guidance in putting together a suitable program for the speaking profession. I worked with veteran comedy writer and producer Milt Josefsberg (*All In The Family*, *Laverne and Shirley*, *Lucille Ball*, *Jack Benny*, *Bob Hope*, et al) on my keynote speech.

I gave him the script and a tape of a live talk. He made many suggestions for trimming sentences, cutting words and adding amusing lines to stories that would make them funnier.

Long hours were spent perfecting the script, making subtle changes that most people would never even notice. In addition to improving the comedic quality of my presentation, Milt provided me with a better handle on the kind of humor required of me from the platform.

Even more valuable were his enthusiastic comments and encouragement. These kind words, coming from a master of the craft whom I highly respected, boosted my morale and gave me a feeling of accomplishment.

No polished professional ever got that way without the counsel and objectivity of other pros.

These tips and pointers are meant to be time-savers, simple suggestions to help pave the way toward achieving greater success in the art of storytelling. Making people laugh is an honorable and noble undertaking. From the medieval days of the court jester to the contemporary antics of Jay Leno and Robin Williams, funny people have nurtured and contributed to one of the world's greatest natural resources — laughter. The work is demanding but the rewards are sublime for those who devote their lives to it.

In his book *All My Best Friends*, George Burns writes, “There is nothing that feels as good as standing on stage and hearing the laughter and applause of an audience.”

May that joy be yours in abundance.

*****Excerpted from the Larry Wilde book *Treasury of Laughter***