

Q: I like when I see the use of humor in advertising, but is it effective? Sometimes, I pay so much attention to the “joke” that I miss the company putting the ad on.

Alan

A: For my money, the use of humor is one of the most underrated tools in your business tool chest.

Sure, there are all sorts of other keys to small business success, most of which I have discussed in this space in detail, but humor is special because it can quickly help you leapfrog to the head of the class.

Humor creates rapport, defuses tough situations, endears you to co-workers, and puts hair on your chest. Well, maybe not the last one, but you get the idea.

Why is that?

Because even in this wireless, tuned-in, 24/7 world of e-commerce and instantaneous global communications, at its core, business is still about relationships. Your ability to succeed then just might be in direct correlation to your ability to crack the well-timed joke.

Here is an example: I just saw an interview with John McCain. While I don't quite remember the question (about tax policy, I think), I sure do remember his answer: “Well, I have discussed this before – during my first run for the presidency – right after the Coolidge administration.”

In that moment, by not only using humor, but the most effective form of humor of them all – self-effacing humor – McCain turned the issue of his age upside down.

Here's another example: I have a friend who, like me, is a business speaker. This guy is top-notch - smart, moving, funny, full of good stories, the whole enchilada (damn him!)

Recently, I went and saw him speak. He started this way: “Thank you, thank you. I bet you have really been looking forward to seeing a high-energy, pump-you-up, great motivational speaker! Someone with the most positive point of view ever! A virtual Energizer Bunny of a speaker!”

“Sorry to tell you,” he deadpanned. “but I am not that guy.”

Everyone cracked up. He then explained that his purpose there was not to get us excited, but was more important than that. It was to actually have a positive impact on our ability to be more successful in business.

Needless to say, from the get-go, he had us in the palm of his hand, and for the same reason – he used self-effacing humor to get us to like him.

Such humor works because, first of all, people like people who do not take themselves too seriously, and second, and equally significantly, making fun of yourself subliminally signals that you are confident, secure, and easy going.

Who would not want to do business with someone like that?

But you need not just use self-effacing humor to be effective; really, almost any type will work. Whether it is a joke you memorized on purpose, or the quick wit of a well-timed jab, or just a humorous observation, humor in the workplace works.

This all said, a few words of caution are also in order:

- Don't use stereotypes
- Avoid racy humor
- Avoid sexist humor

The bottom line: Lighten up! Crack a joke. Have some fun. Don't be so serious. It is akin to golf (though yes, I am indeed the last person who should be giving anyone golf advice) – the harder you try, the worse you do, eh?

Too often I meet business people who think they have to act a certain way, a serious way, in order to be taken seriously. Of course that is sometimes true, but probably not as often as they may think.

A light touch goes a long way.

Today's Tip: Humor is also something that can be learned if it does not come easily to you. I regularly receive an excellent e-newsletter that teaches people to use humor effectively (whether you can tell or not!), especially in business and presentations. It's called [Humor Power Tips](#). Steve says Check it out!