

# HOW TO USE HUMOUR SUCCESSFULLY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

**Yes, trying to raise a laugh does have its place in business and can bring many benefits. But beware; it could land you into hot water, too! Here's how to harness humour to work for you, not against you.**

by Suzan St Maur

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For generations people have been saying that laughter is good medicine.

And now the scientists have taken an interest, it turns out great-grandma was right. The boffins have discovered that laughter releases helpful goodies in the body which boost your immune system.

In fact, the therapeutic benefits of laughter are now being harnessed by academia and the business community into laughter workshops and other formalized chuckle sessions. Get the workers laughing and you raise productivity, so it seems.

However **it is extremely easy to get humour wrong**. And a joke that's sent to someone who doesn't see the funny side will create more ill health through raised blood pressure than a few laughs could ever cure.

So what's the answer? **How do we harness humour** and make it work for us, not against us?

People often say that the internet's international nature makes it an unsuitable environment for humour for fear of it not translating across national boundaries - and inadvertently causing offense. But there are a couple of simple rules which - although not universal panaceas that always work - can help you use humour without risk.

**Use humour about situations, not people.** If you think about it, the butt of many jokes and other humour is a person or group of people, so it's hardly surprising that offense is caused. The more extreme types are obvious - mother-in-law jokes, blonde jokes, women jokes, men jokes - but there are many more subtle ones too.

Then there are the nationality gags. I remember in one year hearing exactly the same joke (in three different languages) told by an American about the Polish, by a Canadian about Newfoundlanders, by a French person about Belgians, by a French-speaking Belgian about the Flemish, and by a Flemish person about the Dutch.

Obviously most humour is going to involve people in one way or another. But as long as the butt of the joke is a situation or set of circumstances, not the people, you're far less likely to upset anyone.

And there is an added advantage here. Whoever they are and wherever they come from, **people will usually identify with a situation**. Take this one for example...

*Some people are driving along at night and are stopped by a police car. The officer goes to the driver and warns him that one of the rear lights on his SUV isn't working.*

*The driver jumps out and looks terribly upset. The officer reassures him that he won't get a ticket, it's just a warning, so there's no problem.*

*"Oh yes there is a problem," says the man as he rushes towards the back of the car. "if you could see my rear lights it means I've lost my trailer."*

As the butt of the joke is the broken rear light and the loss of the trailer, not the policeman or the driver, no-one can be offended. And most people can identify with how that would feel.

The other key issue with humour is **wordplays, puns, and anything else that's based on figurative speech**, slang, or jargon. The short answer is they don't work internationally. However if the play or double entendre is in the concept rather than the words, it probably will work.

These may be funny to us, but would not be understood by anyone who is not a good English speaker because there is a play on the words:

*Deja moo: The feeling that you've heard this bull before.*

*The two most common elements in the universe are hydrogen and stupidity.*

These, however, probably would be understood because **the humour is in the concept**, not in the words themselves:

*You don't stop laughing because you grow old. You grow old because you stop laughing.*

*The trouble with doing something right the first time is that nobody appreciates how difficult it was.*

Overall, I think it's wise to **use humour as a spicy condiment in your business communication**. And just as you would with the chili powder, use it in moderation if you don't know the audience well ... and if you know they have a very sensitive palate, don't use it at all!