

“Before we get started, I promise not to bore you with a long presentation. I’m sure I can do it with a short one.”

Funny You Should Say That

A professional comedian provides tips for leveraging the power of humor in selling

The traveling salesman has long been a staple of joke tellers. But while providing others with a convenient source of ready humor, salespeople have just as frequently employed humor to their own advantage, whether to break the ice with prospects, build rapport, or foster long-term and mutually beneficial customer relationships. That’s the upside.

THE DANGER OF WINGING IT

As a former improvisational comedian and author of *Sell It with Humor* (Burtwithau Publishing, 2009), Burt Teplitzky points out that humor in sales can be a double-edged sword. Used properly, it can work wonders to break down barriers. But if it’s used improperly? Well, let’s just say an ill-advised joke is a great way to get yourself thrown out of a customer’s office. Which is why Teplitzky suggests that, contrary to traditional sales teaching, salespeople should never try to tell jokes off the cuff when speaking to customers.

“Ad-libbing is for professionals,” he says, “and even they don’t always get it right. You can really distance yourself from an audience when you think something off the top of your head is really funny. We’ve all faced that situation in which you wind up saying something awkward and it turns into a *Seinfeld* episode.”

LEAVE ‘EM LAUGHING – OR GROANING

Instead, Teplitzky suggests splicing canned humor – cribbed from joke books or speaking guides – into your sales presentations, even if the jokes are, as he describes them, “groaners.” The key is to be self-deprecating, he says, and to communicate that you don’t take yourself too seriously. One joke

he likes to use in front of customers pokes fun at his own presentation.

“I might open with a line such as, ‘Before we get started, I promise not to bore you with a long presentation. I’m sure I can do it with a short one.’ Now a line like that would never work in a comedy club,” he says, “but in an environment where people are glad for any release, they appreciate the humor, even if it’s a groaner, and then you go on to make your point.”

LEAD WITH YOUR GUT?

Tony Bell, district sales manager for Coca-Cola in Tampa, agrees that sharing a laugh with a prospect may be the best way to build relationships, but he prefers to rely on his selling instincts to decide when humor makes sense.

“True salespeople know whether they can use humor based on gut instinct,” Bell says. “In a lot of cases, you want to steer clear of humor because it’s not appropriate. But in other situations, humor can help you change the flow of a conversation. If you’re not making any headway on a call, even if you don’t know the person very well you can throw a little humor in, get the customer to laugh, and that may open things up.”

FUNNY YOU SHOULD STATE THAT OBJECTION

Timing is, of course, the key to humor, and the same is true in selling. And one point in the sales process at which humor plays a timely role, Teplitzky says, is during objection handling, particularly if a sales rep can use humor to deflect objections before they even come up.

“If your product has selling points that are not as strong as a competitor’s, you


might address [those points] in advance with humor and dismiss them,” he says. “So for example, Henry Ford used to say that customers could have a Ford in any color they wanted, as long as it’s black.”

Most salespeople are well aware of the objections they’re likely to face, Teplitzky says, and should prepare a range of funny, proven responses that deal with each one. On a sales call during which the customer will likely bring up the competition, Teplitzky says he might respond with the following: “We know we have competitors, but we really are the industry leader, with fifty years of experience. In fact, we recently interviewed a manager from another company who wanted to work for us. He took an aptitude test and failed. He actually got a zero. When he heard his score, he said, ‘I don’t deserve a zero,’ and our manager said, ‘I’m sorry, but that’s the lowest score we have.’”

“With a joke like this, you’re not attacking anybody,” Teplitzky explains. “You’re putting it out there that you’re the leader and your competitors don’t measure up, but you’re doing it with humor. I wouldn’t attack competitors individually because that makes the customer stick up for them, but this way you make the customer laugh, and then you move on.”

WHAT’S YOUR LINE?

Jani Campbell, a commercial-vehicle sales specialist with Unitrin Property & Casualty Insurance, admits to trotting out a favorite line whenever the independent agents she calls on mention turning to a competitor for writing lines of business that Unitrin also represents. “This competitor is known everywhere,” she says. “The company does a



Burt Teplitzky, former
improvisational
comedian and author
of *Sell It with Humor*.

lot of marketing – billboards, TV ads, you name it. And sometimes customers will say to me, 'I hate using this company, but I have to in some cases when I can't find anyone else.' And my spiel is to say back, 'You need to do more business with us, because we write those same things, and friends don't let friends write [that competitor's name].'

In just a few words, Campbell says, this joke communicates volumes about all the downsides to working with this giant competitor while simultaneously reinforcing an almost conspiratorial us-versus-them bond between Campbell and her customers.

Tony Bell admits that, while he generally prefers to use uncontrived humor during a sales call, he does have one joke he frequently employs to address the common "I'm happy with my current supplier" objection.

"If a customer is just blowing me off," he says, "telling me he or she is happy with the way things are, I'll say, 'That's fine. I've

been with Coke for eighteen years, and I have eighteen more years before I retire, so I'll just see you once a month for the next eighteen years and we'll go from there.' Customers will usually chuckle because [my response is] not expected. And then the floodgates open and they start talking."

Even if his joke doesn't get the desired result on that call, Bell says, he keeps at it, and during the next visit he'll respond to "I'm not interested" with, "That's fine. I've got seventeen years and eleven months left. I'll see you next month."

"They can't help but laugh and will soon open up to you, most likely the next time you walk in the door," he says.

TOO MUCH OF A FUNNY THING

Bell cautions that selling with humor, as with all things, only works in moderation. Some salespeople he's worked with take the comedy routine too far, he says.

"These are the salespeople who are always joking; everything out of their mouths is a wisecrack or a funny story," he says. "They just don't know when to stop and sometimes don't even realize that they're offending the customer."

One crucial time when salespeople need to stop being funny, Teplitzky says, is during the approach to the close. Humor sets up the close, he says, but it won't win you the business on its own.

"No customer is going to jump up and say, 'You were so funny! We enjoyed this; now give me eight of them.' That doesn't happen," he says. "But after you've anticipated and addressed objections with preplanned humor, you can turn old school and ask for the business. Humor will actually make the sales process friendlier and less adversarial. But at the end you still have to ask for the order."

– MALCOLM FLESCHER

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