

BY ANDREA DRIESSEN

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NO JOKE

Well-placed humor can be a powerful tool for engaging with your attendees.

WHAT IF YOU COULD ADD JUST ONE ITEM TO YOUR MEETING TOOL KIT and boost learning, attention, trust, energy, adaptability, memory, collaboration and optimism; decrease fear, stress and resistance to change; and help build safer, more inclusive communities? You'd hold the Swiss Army Knife of meeting tools.

That tool? Humor.

Think I'm joking? Consult researchers and successful meeting planners who make a habit of incorporating humor into their events. Or just read on.

"Humor" in this context refers to thoughtful, strategic content that engages audiences on an emotional level and makes

them laugh because it surprises and delights—in relevant, contextual ways. It's not on par with comedic joke telling, which is pure entertainment.

Indeed, the capacity of well-placed humor to improve meetings is no laughing matter.

"Emotion drives attention and attention drives learning," explained Dr. Robert Sylwester, emeritus professor of education at the University of Oregon, in the journal *Educational Leadership*. And according to the nonprofit Information Age Education, humor increases memory and long-term retrieval, and can capture the attention of people who are easily bored and inattentive.

It helps us be creative, take risks and forge ideal spaces for learning, trust building and collaboration.

As a partner in countless meetings over my career, I consider humor the holy grail of engagement tools, because it alerts our minds as it lowers our defenses. And when participants' minds are open, they can naturally accept more input. We know meetings can be heavy, laborious and, yes, boring.

Pulling off a superb meeting is seriously hard work. Yet problem-solving is a greater challenge when our bodies and brains are under stress.

Inject levity and you add critical mental breaks, catalyze creativity and generate fresh

greater chance of producing more and better ideas than an environment that is high-pressure or negative.”

Ron Culberson, humorist and author of *Do It Well. Make It Fun.*, uses humor throughout his speaking programs because his funny stories anchor content in the brain. He also watches his participants as they laugh—and sees them turning to one another to share in a collective, memorable experience.

On the supply side, humor used strategically underscores authenticity and memorability. When you carefully craft your message to align with your brand and sales goals, and use appropriate wit, you gain a competitive advantage. You’re different in a positive way.

When groups decide to hold humorless meetings, it’s often with the belief that levity has no place in their businesses. That said, you’d be hard pressed to find an industry more serious than that which deals with death and dying.

Barbara Bouton, vice president of professional development and director of the Center for Grief and Bereavement at the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, views humor as crucial to caring for

Humorists’ segments, adds Bouton with a smile, are the highest-rated segments of her conferences.

Lacey Hein, CMP (MPI Washington State Chapter), adds humor to her meetings to intentionally engage audiences during energy lulls and amidst unavoidably dry content. She’s also given her subject matter experts presentation-skills coaching so they know how to do less data dumping and more delivering from an attendee point of view. That way, Hein says, their message-driven humor engages and improves participation.

Move beyond the meeting room to another location in which meeting professionals often find themselves: airplanes. As frequent fliers, we may pay little attention to airline safety videos, but Delta Airlines’ current safety series begs you to watch as characters board with typewriters, blenders, even a pizza. Looking around the cabin, I see people pointing to the screens and hear laughter in the aisles. If humor can engage us in a traditionally dull, predictable message, imagine what it can do for your attendees.

So when *doesn’t* humor work? Think relevancy. If a laugh line doesn’t further your

goals and messaging then don’t use it. And steer clear of humor when your intent is poignancy or pathos.

Krista Fleming, CMM (MPI Washington State Chapter), began her meeting career

staging learning events for a tough crowd: elementary school children. As president of KF Events, she and her team are committed to maximizing the attendee experience.

Fleming views humor as crucial in creating positive meeting memories, shifting perspectives and building empowerment for participants.

“We all want to be a part of a positive, affirming event—it helps us feel we are doing something worthwhile, and know that what we do makes an important difference in the world,” she says. ■

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thinking. Humor also lowers stress in part on a chemical basis as it releases feel-good dopamine and sends more oxygen to blood vessels.

According to Scott Christopher, co-author of *The Levity Effect*, “It’s not a stretch to suggest that if laughter increases vasodilation—facilitating more oxygen to the brain—people will not only be in better moods, they’ll also be sharper cognitively. For example, a brainstorm session that begins with humor or some other mechanism to get people laughing stands a far

her audiences of end-of-life professionals. Such care, by its very nature, is emotionally challenging. Burnout and compassion fatigue are common.

So Bouton and her organization intentionally insert humorous content into programming, especially to close.

“People have been listening to heavy sessions all week,” she says. “Ending on lighter, funnier notes ensures they return home inspired and encouraged. Humor engages their heads and hearts, and leaves them feeling buoyant.”