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For Stand-Up Comic, Employees' Stress Is Often a Big Joke

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Companies Hire Judy Carter
To Help Employees Cope
With Workplace Traumas

By KATHRYN KRANHOLD

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

LOS ANGELES—Did you hear the one about Southern California Gas Co.'s stress-relief program? It brought in a stand-up comic, Judy Carter, to fire up the employees.

And how about the Fresh Produce and Floral Council? It wanted to help its employees handle the daily grind at work. So it hired Ms. Carter for a lunch. Her jokes were fresh, not canned.



Judy Carter

Corporations and business associations have long hired acts to entertain them at meetings and retreats. But in recent years, companies have looked to comics for more than just a few yuks in between bites. They are now using comedy to help employees deal

with downsizing and other wrenching changes in the workplace—and Ms. Carter has carved out a profitable business here making them laugh through some of the stress.

Stalking the Audience

At last year's lunch at the Produce and Floral Council—which includes buyers and distributors for large grocery-store chains—Ms. Carter kicked off her routine, naturally enough, with a round of vegetable and fruit jokes. "I'm a big buyer of fresh produce, and some of you look familiar," she told the crowd. "Didn't I see you on the El Monte freeway off ramp with a bag of oranges?"

Stand-Up Comic Helps Employees Deal With Stress in the Workplace

Her finale: Hypnotizing a celery stalk, then levitating it, and eating the stalk in midair. "They were on the floor," recalls Ms. Carter, who charges about \$2,500 for an appearance. "Celery is very funny."

When the gas company was downsizing a few years back, officials there called on Ms. Carter as well. "She was hired to come in and make people feel better about their lives," says Jane Harrison, a planning associate at the company.

To do that, Ms. Carter says, she tries to figure out what is bugging workers on all levels, from secretaries to top managers. She also identifies a few of the highest-level executives who won't mind a few jokes at their expense. "I try to get the person with the most power to make jokes about himself," she explains.

After graduating from the University of Southern California in the early 1970s, she ended up at the Magic Castle in West Hollywood, where she performed card tricks. Soon Ms. Carter was traveling throughout North America, performing her magic act from Montreal to Manhattan in nightclubs and strip joints.

She made the switch strictly to comedy in 1979 when she landed at the Cincinnati airport without her bag of tricks; they had been lost with her luggage. "That's when I realized that comedy is less of a schlep," she says. "You can stand there and entertain people without having to levitate things"—except, perhaps, celery.

In 1987, Ms. Carter decided she wanted to know what it was like to work behind a desk. So she leased an office in Westwood, hired a secretary to answer her telephone—and sharpened some pencils.

Looking for material, Ms. Carter says, she walked around her office building and made small talk with the other tenants. One person in the building finally asked her what she did behind her desk. Very little, Ms. Carter admitted.

Within weeks, with this neighbor's encouragement, Ms. Carter started writing her first book: "Stand-Up Comedy The Book," published in 1989.

It was around that time that Ms. Carter's comedy business became just that—a real business. She started teaching stand-up classes. By the early '90s, she was making her way into companies to counsel them on how to use comedy in the workplace, charging them up to \$5,000 for a half-day workshop.

In the wake of downsizing, defense contractors hired her to entertain the diminishing troops. Then, as some water-cooler jokes became off limits, companies brought in Ms. Carter to teach politically correct jesting.

"A well-placed joke can ease tension," she says. "A bad joke can ruin everything. We all know we've done that."

Carmen McKay, who has a San Jose-based consulting business called Corporate Comedy, describes Ms. Carter as "a goddess for writing jokes."

Ms. McKay, who conducts in-depth seminars within the workplace, says she frequently turns to Ms. Carter to perfect a script. In turn, Ms. Carter relies on Ms. McKay to help her better understand corporate culture.

Beyond lunchrooms and boardrooms, Ms. Carter holds an annual weekend workshop attended by everyone from housewives to salespeople looking to get their big break as comics—or just land an account. She also coaches executives and other professionals on their speeches and how to deliver a winning punch line.

"It's called power joking," she says. "A well-placed joke can shift the balance of power."