How to get audiences to love you in 60 seconds

Make 'Em Laugh

By Judy Carter
When I coach speakers and comics, a common concern I hear is, “What should I open with?”

Openings are hard! And it’s no wonder. Often you’re walking into a room full of people who are already busy doing something (web surfing, texting, eating, flirting) and you need to get their attention.

No pressure here, people, but openings are critical: Studies show that an average person will form an opinion within your first 17 seconds onstage. In comedy clubs, you’re judged even more quickly—and harshly. Plenty of comics have had hecklers scream, “You suck!” as we were walking up to the stage.

So, how do you grab an audience’s attention (and make them laugh) when they have a complete entertainment center on their phone?

Let me share some secrets from my book, The Message of You (St. Martin’s Press).

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**FORCE A REACTION.**

Thank the emcee and encourage the audience to join you with their applause. You can also say something nice about him or her. You might even try to get a laugh. One time, my emcee had a deep voice. As I walked onstage, I looked right at him and said, “Thank you, Darren. That was a great intro. Let’s give him a hand. (Applause) You have a beautiful voice. I realize now it was you who played Darth Vader.” (Laugh.)

So in less than 20 seconds, I accomplished the following:

• Everyone was looking at the stage.
• They had to put down their phones to applaud.
• I communicated appreciation, which gave me bonus points with the audience.
• I established I was in charge by getting the audience to applaud.
• I got my first laugh.

You can pretty much ask the audience to applaud anything and they will. You also can usually get a laugh just by mentioning things that happened prior to you going on even if they’re not that funny.

“And let’s also have some applause for the caterer who gave us for dessert both Apple Crisp and Rhubarb Crisp.”

People just like to feel they are “in” on the joke, so mentioning something obvious and inclusive will accomplish that goal. They want to feel that you’re being spontaneous, and if they see you working “in the moment,” they will react.

But how in the world do you appear spontaneous while sticking to your script? You have to set up a spontaneous “throw-away” moment.

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**SET UP THE “THROW-AWAY.”**

I always research my audience. I get to know their challenges as well as information about where they live. Here’s where that research pays off. You’re going to reference a moment the audience just witnessed and combine it with your research to create a “throw-away” line that seems effortless. This gets the audience participating with applause and shows them:

• You are confident.
• You are spontaneous.
• You are in the moment.
• Your speech is not “canned.”
For instance, right before I stepped onstage in Merced, Calif., they had a demonstration of tactics by the local SWAT team. When I was introduced, I ran onstage, asked for appreciation for the emcee, then asked for applause for the handsome and talented SWAT team. During my advance research about the city, I had learned that the primary industry in Merced is agriculture. So, my first moment onstage went like this . . .

“Let’s hear it for Sandy. Thanks for the great intro.” (Applause)
“And the handsome and talented SWAT team.” (Applause)
“Though I’m not sure why Merced needs a SWAT team.”
Then, I acted like a cop aiming a gun at a criminal and shouted, “Drop the strawberries, now!” (Laughter)

You may not know what this “throw-away” line is going to be until you actually get to the gig. That might scare you, but here’s the bonus of being spontaneous—you can get a good laugh without having to be uber-funny. When the audience knows you just made it up, they give you a lot of leeway. In that one moment of spontaneity, you get instant respect as audiences are usually awed by people who are able to be spontaneous and improvise. Some ideas about whom to target for your “spontaneous” moment:
• The guy who just fixed the air conditioning, the bathrooms, the lights, the mic
• The very generous bartender from the party last night
• The event volunteers or organizers who have been up since 3 a.m.
• The waiters who served chocolate for dessert
• The audience themselves for surviving three days of meetings

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DO A JOKE ABOUT THEIR FAVORITE TOPIC—THEM!

After 35 years in front of audiences, I’ve finally found the secret to a killer opening that works on almost any audience: Make your opening about *them*. After all, people want to be appreciated—or at least noticed.

Then, just mentioning some of the challenges you researched about the group is a surefire way to engage everyone at the start of your speech—especially if you do it with some humor.

One quick way to get laughs is to put the audiences’ problem into the “List of Three” formula: general problem, general problem, their specific problem.

For example:

“There are a lot of problems in the world, like terrorism (general), tornadoes (general) and your cafeterias that are always out of spoons (their specific problem).”

You’ll get their attention—and get them to laugh.

MAKE FUN OF YOURSELF.

Let’s face it, when a speaker steps onstage, he or she is facing an inherent hostility toward “know-it-alls.” The best way to curb that judgment and defuse hostility is to do some light-hearted self-mocking.

Having the guts to get a laugh at your own expense can appease even the harshest critic. Poking fun at yourself leads to laughter—and likeability. We all love people who don’t take themselves so seriously.

Make a list of what people see when you walk onstage—i.e., your weight, hairline, age, gender, clothes and attitude. Anything that makes you different can be comedy gold.

Speaker and standup comic Diane Kawasaki is a Little Person. She creates quite a buzz as she comes onstage.
Judy Carter is a speaker and coach who teaches the power of personal stories and humor. She has been featured in the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times and on CNN. A frequent contributor to NPR’s All Things Considered and a blogger for Psychology Today, she is also the author of The Comedy Bible and The Message of You: Turn Your Life Story into a Money-Making Speaking Career. Reach her at judy@judycarter.com.