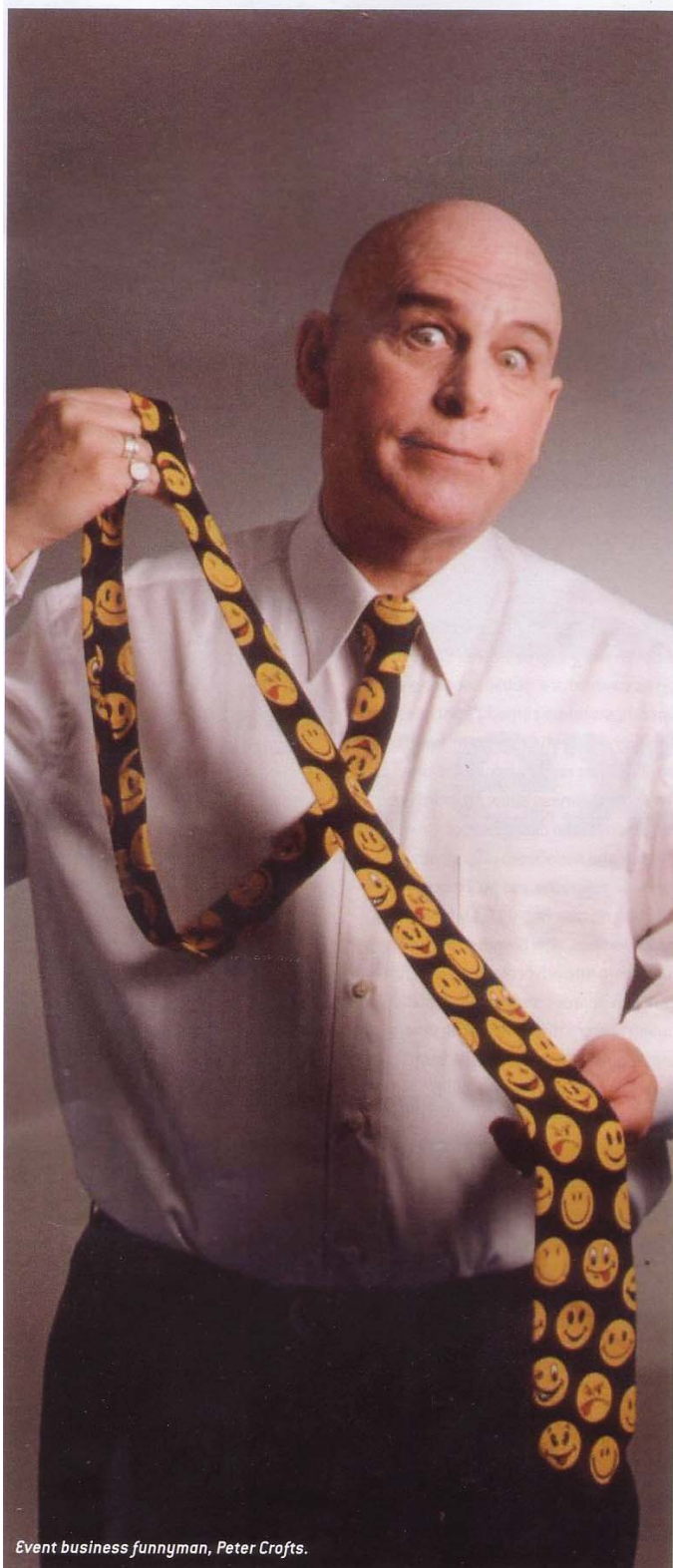


## THE BUSINESS OF FUNNY BUSINESS

Since work is inevitable, you'd better laugh along with it



Event business funnyman, Peter Crofts.

There's an old story about a police officer called to a home where a domestic argument is taking place and as he approaches, a television comes flying out the window. When the officer knocks on the door and an angry voice demands to know who it is, he cheerfully replies, "Television repairman". The officer quickly breaks the tension and shifts the mood at the scene.

The moral of the story: a little humour makes a huge difference.

"Positive humour communication in the corporate environment has practical value because it generates feelings of group trust, mutual respect and enjoyment, which places employer and employees in an environment of creative freedom and true purpose. That translates into money saved, money made and 'money's worth'," writes Peter Crofts in his book, *How to use humour in business and life*.

As expected, he applies what he advocates to his own life. Give him a call and you will be received by an enthusiastic voice asking, "Are you laughing this morning?"

**"Humour is an effective way of improving the attitude of staff."**

It's not a joke, but it's definitely funny business.

"There are a few work situations where appropriate humour cannot be used. It is, however, most valuable in three areas: business to customer communication (advertising, branding or simply the regular communication, e.g. invoicing); staff to staff communication; and staff to customer communication," says Kevin Ryan, from Ryan and Associates. Similarly to Crofts, Ryan has also written books on the topic.

"Years ago, enlightened businesses became aware that humour was a really successful way of improving the customer experience and making a brand more memorable. Lately, they have also realised humour is an effective



Kevin Ryan, comedy connoisseur.

way of improving the atmosphere of the workplace and the attitude of staff – addressing the growing concern of all business owners about attracting and retaining the right staff."

According to Ryan, an article published by the *Sun Herald* in 2002 reported a humour at work program had decreased staff turnover at a call centre from over 30 per cent to just 13 per cent.

Crofts, however, counters this research through a humour workshop held some time ago at the Digital Equipment Corporation in Colorado, USA where productivity increased 15 per cent and sick days were halved.

The ancient Greeks coined the word *komos*, which meant 'comedy', explains Crofts. And comedy stood for 'rejoicing, festivity and anyone in cheerful spirits' up until the Renaissance. Then comedy became confused with the word 'humour', which was derived from the term *humours* meaning "the fluids in the body that stimulated a pleasant attitude and healthy disposition".

Therefore, humour is not comedy.

"It's much gentler and 'less in your face'. When comedy doesn't work, people are often offended; whereas when humour doesn't work, more often than not it goes unnoticed," emphasises Ryan.

Just as the ancient Greeks would love it, a comedy's primary aim is to generate laughter on average six times a minute – which probably wouldn't work too well in the workplace! With humour in the work environment, the aim is to add warmth and light-heartedness to professional interactions.

Everyone has a natural humour style. "I estimate that in conferences and workshops over the past few years I have asked over 5000 people the question, 'Is there anybody here who, in the last 24 hours, has not made at least one other human being laugh, chuckle, giggle or smile?'. Only one person has ever put her hand up – and she was immediately reminded of an occasion by her friends.

"I teach people to build their 'humour confidence' by identifying their own humour style and then using it because they know it will work," Ryan says.

### “Selling with humour is not about telling jokes.”

Crofts adds the quality of humour you generate will improve enormously if you blend the eight eyes of humour into the construction, which defined by him are:

- Persona-ise: be you
- Economise: keep it brief
- Bull eyes: target carefully, don't attack anything that people hold too dearly
- Personalise: tailor humour to the target, time, people and place
- Localise: similarities that make emotional connections simple and you and your humour become genuine
- Topicalise: use today's news, but avoid extremely sensitive topics
- Modernise: humour is a very trendy substance that must be new
- Humanise: identify with your listeners – talk about yourself, ask about them.

"Use humour that is laughing with, not laughing at. Amusing, not abusing; supportive, not sarcastic; based on caring, not contempt; goes for the jocular vein, not the jugular; excites feeling, not violates emotions; has empathy, not lack of sensitivity; builds confidence, not destroys it; brings people closer instead of dividing them," recommends Crofts.

He also mentions eight functions where humour can benefit people: coping with survival, handling stress and burnout, enhancing self-image, building relationships, motivating and increasing productivity, gaining attention, selling successfully and caring for customers.

Being a salesperson and being a comedian are very similar, believes Crofts.

"You have to respond to the way your

'audience' responds to your performance. You need 'prepared spontaneity'."

But Ryan warns "Selling with humour is not about telling jokes."

"Judge your customer. If you sense that they are not in the mood, don't try. Thankfully, most customers appreciate a light-hearted attitude. By adding humour, you are turning the interaction into something that is much closer to a social discourse than a sales negotiation. Their guard comes down; they relax. Self-deprecating humour works well.

"More often, senior management is convinced about the value of the concept, but middle management is sceptical. I am always very clear that for any workplace humour program to work, there must be an acknowledgement of its value in two places: for the necessary time and/or dollars to make it happen; and for management to be assessed (ideally at their annual review) on the workplace mood/atmosphere that they create."

According to Ryan, activities 'imposed' by management do, generally, need to be constantly pushed. While these are often necessary to 'get the ball rolling', the best workplace humour is that generated by the staff themselves (within 'safety guidelines' provided by management). Humour created by the staff themselves is natural, spontaneous and self-perpetuating. He mentions one of his stories of success.

"Fun was used in the launch of a new retail chain as a point of difference in the marketing. The advertising focused on photos of customers having fun with the product. The store layouts were modified to be lighter, brighter, roomier, with lots of cheeky names for product groupings. Quirky touches abounded. The staff

were trained in creating light-hearted moments with customers."

Ryan says the triumph of the event was obvious in two days. The market research showed that within three months this chain had the highest unprompted recognition of any retail liquor brand in the country, and the retail outlet became the part of the business where staff most wanted to work.

Crofts also comments on his achievements. "I ran the program 'Leadership Through Humourship' with a large international company. They were very satisfied with it and extremely fired up by the creative thinking aspect of humour. As a consequence, they booked me to run our 'Creative, Innovative, Outrageous Humour Thinking' program, which was a fantastic experience."

Humouriversity programs are organised in groups of six to 10 people and run from seven to 12 months, one two-hour session a week, either in the morning or in the evening, with one-on-one sessions for each participant between the group sessions. Some of the topics covered are: public speaking with humour, stand-up comedy principles, the laughter lifestyle program, how to tell jokes that really work all the time, profitable business show presentations and discover the clown in you.

Ryan and Associates offers both in-house programs and public courses, focusing on how humour can make your business, how humour turns your customers into advocates and how fun at work can improve staff communication, loyalty and creativity as well as others.

It appears the concept of a 'last laugh' is over. Funny that; keep smiling!

By Flavia Soares Julius

