

HUMOUR: THE FUN SIDE OF BUSINESS

By

James Poon Teng Fatt

Lecturer

School of Accountancy and Business
Nanyang Technological University

Singapore

ABSTRACT

Humour is said to result from emotional chaos but what is seldom realized is that the lack of Humour may cause business chaos. The relation between business and Humour is that the seriousness of business requires a serious interest in life as does Humour. This paper will present Humour as the lighter side of business. It will describe how Humour functions in advertising, business Organizations, and training. Humour is seen as a form of tension release especially for business people affected by the current economic turmoil in the ASEAN region. Indeed, some people can become so sensitive to business and financial turmoil that they feel snubbed if disaster strikes them. Also examined are the effects of Humour on consumers. The subjectivity of Humour and its dynamics in the act of persuasion can bring either success or failure to any business but as long as Humour prevails, there is hope. After all, we must not forget that we are distinguished from all other animals by our faculty of laughter.

INTRODUCTION

Business people often perform the daily routine of doing business and making profits for their enterprise as their primary duty, not realizing that in fact the primary duty is to create a workplace environment that is conducive to the healthy growth of vital human resources in their business Organizations. We often hear of successful people in business who claim that they enjoy their work. Precisely, the most successful people in business do not just go out to work -- they go out to enjoy themselves in their world of business and making money is a dividend to them. This kind of philosophy is contrary to that of many managers employed in Organisations. These managers become particularly over stressed, always thinking that they are employed in a serious world of business which has no place for Humour. Humour is viewed as an unhealthy and unprofitable activity that thrives in the entertainment industry. The results of neglecting Humour as serious business are high work stress, communication breakdown, low morale, absenteeism, high labor turnover, poor productivity and low quality of service and products.

Douglas McGregor's management philosophies of work described in "Theory X" and "Theory Y" explain the place of Humour in business and work. According to Douglas McGregor, Theory X management philosophy is that workers see work as undesirable and they work for the sake of money. In contrast, Theory Y management philosophy is that work is interesting and rewarding, and workers respond positively to work as it is their personal responsibility.

Thus, in the interest of successful business and work that goes with it, we must make work enjoyable and Humour certainly has a role to play in this respect.

BENEFITS OF HUMOUR

The following are some benefits of Humour in business Organisations:

1. Helps us to deal with absurdities.
2. Lowers our tension, anger, pain and the stress of modern day living and working, resulting in better mental health.
3. Helps in solving problems that demand creative solutions.
4. Brings a bit of personality to the office when employees can express themselves through their dressing, styling, and things tacked onto their office walls, etc. In this way, the workplace can be humanized.
5. Lifts spirits and inspires motivation and productivity with less absenteeism.
6. Makes working in a team enriching with a constant free exchange of fun.
7. Helps to establish better business relationships with people who are fun to do business with.

HUMOUR IN ADVERTISING

Humour is often used effectively in advertising because advertising executives have high regard for Humour as a powerful sales tool. In fact, Humour is one of the criteria in awarding awards for the most effective advertisements (Eliot, 1994). However, advertisers commonly make the mistake of using Humour just for the sake of using Humour.

Stan Freberg, a humorist, satirist and advertising icon, advocates the use of entertainment and Humour in advertising, but with a warning:

Boredom is to me the greatest sin of all, but it's now being edged out by people misusing entertainment and Humour in an effort to keep you from zapping (from one channel to another). Just to keep people from zapping you is not reason enough to do something that is totally irrelevant to what you're selling (Miller, 1992).

Freberg believes that Humour should be used in advertising only if it can help to sell the product. When advertisers remember why they are using Humour, they can obtain remarkable results. To prove his point, Freberg agreed to help advertise *Kaiser* aluminum foil, at a time when *Reynolds Aluminum* had a stranglehold on the distribution of aluminum foil to retailers.

Freberg created a fictional *Kaiser* salesman who could not sell *Kaiser* foil to 'mean old grocers'. Real-life 'mean old grocers' responded and *Kaiser* won 43,000 new retail outlets from the advertisement. On the other hand, when *Burger King* introduced *Herb*, a fictional character who was meant to be humorous, the public viewed the character with indifference and even contempt. Why is there such a big difference in viewer response? Freberg explains: "Humour in advertising is like a gun in the hands of a child. You have to know how to use it. Otherwise, it can blow up on you." (Miller, 1992)

Effect of Humour on Ad Attention

Businesses spend billions of dollars every year to create humorous prime time television advertisements because advertisement practitioners believe that Humour is an effective way to gain attention in advertisements. Advertising researchers such as Madden and Weinberger (1984), Stewart and Furse (1986), and Weinberger and Gulos (1992) have studied magazine, television and radio advertisements and found that Humour used in such advertisements has a positive effect on audience attention.

Humorous advertisements generally outperform non-humorous advertisements in four categories: initial attention, sustained attention, projected attention, and overall attention. However, there is a difference in effectiveness between 'related' and 'unrelated' Humour: Humour related directly to the advertised product works more effectively than unrelated Humour. Thus, simply inserting Humour into a given advertisement is unlikely to have the same impact on attention as using a more integrated Humour treatment (Weinberger and Gulos, 1992).

Effect of Humour on Ad Comprehension

Studies on the effectiveness of Humour on the comprehension of message in advertisements have produced mixed results. Weinberger and Gulos (1992) found that 64 percent of advertising research executives believe that Humour has either no effect or a harmful effect on the comprehension of message in advertisements. The researchers postulated that the type of Humour used may determine its effect on comprehension. For example, 'comic wit' was found to underperform the non-Humour treatment while all other Humour types such as satire, full comedy, sentimental Humour, and sentimental comedy outperformed the non-Humour treatment.

The type of product advertised also determines the impact of Humour on advertisement comprehension. Weinberger and Gulos (1992) classified products as either high-involvement or low-involvement. For example, fashion clothing and perfumes create feeling and involvement in the buyer, as opposed to low-involvement products such as canned goods or appliances that are purchased more for use than for emotional purpose. Weinberger and Gulos found that Humour worked better for low-involvement, low-feeling products.

Effect of Humour on Ad Persuasion

The intensity of the message can determine the effect of Humour on the persuasiveness of the advertisement. Research has shown that Humour in a low-intensity, softsell advertisement can positively increase the advertisement's persuasiveness. On the other hand, Humour in a hard-sell, high-intensity advertisement can decrease that advertisement's persuasiveness.

Effect of Humour on Source Credibility

The nature of the source and the type of Humour used determine the effect of Humour on source credibility. Sentimental Humour generally outperforms other types of Humour. Weinberger and Gulos (1992) define sentimental Humour as that in which the "process of empathy-anxiety-relief" occurs.

Effect of Humour on Liking

Research has shown that Humour enhances the likability of the source. For example, teachers who use Humour in the classroom are seen as more likable. The use of Humour by teachers has been shown to positively influence student attitudes toward education. Liking is important to the effectiveness of an advertisement. The liking measure is the strongest indicator of a commercial's sales success, outperforming all other measures. (Weinberger and Gulos, 1992).

People who like a commercial a lot are twice as likely to be persuaded by it than people who feel neutral toward the advertising.

Audience Factors

Advertising literature shows that better educated audience form the best target audience for humorous advertisements. Cultural background also strongly determines the effectiveness of Humour in advertising. In one experiment, Israeli Jews of Eastern and Western descent responded quite differently to absurd jokes. The subjects of the experiment shared the same language and even the same geographical location, yet their different cultural backgrounds affected the ways in which they responded to Humour. Other factors, such as political beliefs, also affect how one responds to Humour (Weinberger and Gulos, 1992).

Durability of Advertisements

Advertisements generally wear out over time. People enjoy watching humorous ads, but advertisements have served their usefulness once you have comprehended the message. Other advertisement experts disagree, among them *Miller Brewing* spokesman Eric Straus: "Beer drinkers identify *Miller Lite* with fun" (Business Week, 1993). *Miller* used Humour in its 1994 advertisement campaign, pairing wildly incompatible sports such as sumo wrestling and high-diving. *Budweiser* had its famous "give me a light" campaign. Both of these advertisement campaigns enjoyed tremendous longevity.

Quality of the Humour

The success of Humour in advertisement depends on the quality of the Humour itself. As Herbert Feid (1991), CEO of WB Donner & Co. says, "When you do it badly, nothing is worse. But when you do it well, nothing makes you or your product better-liked." Doing comedy well is precisely the challenge facing advertisers. Yet, despite the difficulty of comedy and all the controversies on the effectiveness of Humour in advertising, advertisers continue to use Humour, and perhaps for good reason, especially in tough economic times. As Feid says, "We in the business of selling will employ Humour or we'll run the risk of driving consumers to dejection and depression, and away from our products and stores. Rather than run that risk, businesses will turn to Humour to sell their products.

Problems in Using Humour in Commercials

One problem in using Humour in commercials is that Humour is a very subjective thing. What may be funny to one viewer may not be funny to another. Hence, when integrating Humour into a creative format, care must be exercised to prevent creating controversy. The subjectivity of Humour could be a serious pitfall if the Humour is too esoteric in its conception (Poltrack, 1983).

A second problem arises in blending the humorous details of a commercial and the sales message to be delivered. If the commercial merely entertains the public, it is not doing its job. The main objective of a commercial is to inform the viewer to a point where he or she is motivated to make a purchase. Therefore, the most effective humorous television commercials construct their Humour around the product purchase or usage situation.

HUMOUR IN BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS

Smart entrepreneurs frequently look for low-cost ways to make their employees happy. The following creative employee benefits that can bring Humour in the business world need not

cost much.

Declare a fun day at least once a month

Doing business is not just about operating seven days a week and working long hours. Even Marc Andreessen, co-founder of Netscape Communications Corporation, discourages his colleagues from working over 50 hours a week (Business Week, 13 April 1998). Once awhile, declare a surprise holiday for all employees and on that day bring them out for a treat.

If Microsoft has company-subsidized cafeterias, other businesses too can have subsidized treats such as cinema shows, visits to an amusement center, etc. For some employees who may not wish to join in such company functions for reasons of their own, allow them to treat themselves in their own way and reimburse their expenses within reasonable limits.

Schedule flexible work hours

Flexible schedules are a valued perk in today's business world. Even if machines cannot be shut down, employees can still be scheduled to work at their convenient time, given that employees have our own preferred times and best times for working.

Forget about having a dress code

As long as employees 'dress up' and look decent in clean dressing which is free of offensive slogans or graphics, it costs absolutely nothing to let employees come dressed up the way they like. The company can even save on the costs of company uniform and the time of having employees taking time off for measurements.

Allow employees to enjoy community service

Give employees some paid leave days in a year to do community service which some particularly like such as rendering their service in an old folks home or playing with children from deprived homes, etc.

Reward acts of kindness, etc.

Awards need not always be centered on productivity; it can be given for a lot of other things such as kindness, drive, jovialness, asking dumb questions which can help revolutionize traditional methods etc. By giving recognition to what different individuals can contribute, the firm is recognizing that all employees can have a chance to get an award of some kind. Besides, it also encourages employees to speak their minds without fear of being laughed at or being blacklisted.

Organize monthly in-house luncheons to promote camaraderie

Employees often lament the lack of social interaction in the business world due to long working hours and the fast pace of work. If businesses cannot afford any other time for employees to socialize, then have them socialize at times when they move away from work and come together during lunch hours or tea breaks.

Communicate Humour

If reports, especially company reports, are boring to read, make them more imaginative. Even routine correspondence involving memos, faxes and telephone messages; bulletin boards; and minutes of meetings can be presented with Humour and imagination which can gain better employee response. A company newsletter can be made more fun to be read if it has features like competitions, quizzes, crosswords, classified advertisements, promotions, jokes and good news columns, etc. A newsletter for the people and by the people in the business organization will be better received because it will be viewed as a people-oriented newsletter that reflects what a people-oriented organization should be.

Set up fun committees

Meetings can be made more fun with fun committees run by fun people democratically elected. Employees can give their ideas to these committee members who will meet perhaps once a month to sieve through the ideas before offering the best ideas to the top person in the business organization.

Set up fun rooms

Although more fun clubs have yet to be seen, business Organisations can set up their own fun "clubs" or at least fun rooms where employees can adjourn for some fun. Employees are free to suggest what they like to be included in the fun room. Ideas can be on anything such as having different colored walls, comedy videos, comics, an in-house comedian, etc. The idea is that in this room employees are free to relax and this propagates the fun culture of the organization.

Show the smile in you

People with a winning smile win simply because they can smile. In today's competitive business environment, people need their full creative potential to succeed and part of that creative potential includes Humour.

HUMOUR IN TRAINING

Business and corporate trainers use all kinds of Humour, such as short stories and exaggeration to help trainees to relax and make their training interesting. Knowing what kinds of Humour trainees like also helps. Here are some tips on using Humour in training.

1. Engage trainees with toys, such as working with Playdough, knowing that children learn while playing with toys . Besides, toys have a liberating effect in training. They can help break the ice and the barriers of rigid adult thinking. What we need to consider is Eric Berne's (1961) transactional analysis to liberate our minds to be like the Free Child exploring new ideas. Berne has identified three personality ego states: parent, Adult, and child. For Humour to work, the Critical Parent ego state must be suppressed and the Nurturing Parent and Free Child ego states enhanced. According to Osborn (1953), one becomes judgmental with age.

The young have not been conditioned to avoid asking foolish questions. They are not afraid to be a clown or to be humorous naturally.

The silliness of toying can allow trainees to be more perceptive about themselves, as they view the result of their Playdough models and be more bold to break away from traditional

approaches.

2. Present with Humour because humorous presentations are often more persuasive than non-humorous ones and trainees generally react more positively to humorous speakers.
3. Conduct imaginative role plays such as giving trainees scenarios like "you have made it in (name of business)" and then allow them to spend the rest of the session learning from the experiences of the other trainees in the business.
4. Deliver complex and difficult information in a playful way to liven up the presentation. For example, dry and highly technical information can be taught by creating a so called Dr Know All who can answer questions on the topic(s) by the touch of an icon.
5. Put up an entertaining show. Think of using props like in theatres and colorful decorated classrooms like those in childcare centers. Why should adults be deprived of this lively environment? Use also giant boards to display useful quotes and at the end of the presentation give trainees presents which can be small clipboards with the same quotes to remind them of what they have learned.
6. Make use of sounds which need not be just music. It can be the sound of roaring crowds to cheer people on, laugh tracks to loosen up sessions, the din of a busy street to remind trainees of the realities of the business world, or animal noises to make nature come alive.

CONCLUSION

Used appropriately, Humour can deliver the best to the people who need it most in the business world. Used inappropriately, Humour can detract. For that reason, it is important to know the goal, the people involved, the culture of the organization, and other critical factors. What is important is not so much the cost of creating fun in the workplace and in businesses. What can cost more is the loss of employee loyalty and demoralization at the workplace. When an employee chooses to stay with the organization and cannot leave even if he or she wishes to because the family does not allow this, then the organization can be said to have been paid the dividends from those modest investments in employee fun that have made working in the organization a blessing. Only business Organisations that can use Humour to engage the minds of its employees will make it in the year 2000 and beyond because satisfied employees last longer in any organization and that organization in turn lasts longer too.

REFERENCES

"The Education of Marc Andreessen", Business Week, 13 Apr 1998, 38-44.

Berne, Eric. (1961). Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy. New York: Grove Press.

Caging, Christopher. (1997). Perks You Can Afford. Inc., Nov, 19(16), 107-108.

Cohen, Steve and Jurkovic, Joan. (1997). Learning From a Masterpiece. Training and Development, Nov, 51(11), 66-67.

Osborn, A. (1953). Applied Imagination, revised ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Eliot, Stuart. (1994). "Witty, Cool..." New York Times, 29 June, D17.

Feid, Herbert. (1991). Humour is our best tool.... Advertising Age, 8 April, 26.

"Funny, Sure, But Does It Sell?" Business Week, 20 December 1993, 8.

Holden, Robert. (1993). Enjoyment in Employment: How to Utilize the Power of Laughter, Humour and a Winning Smile at Work. Employee Counseling Today 5(4), 17-20.

Kaupins, Gundars E. (1991). Humour in University and Corporate Training: A Comparison of Trainer Perceptions. Journal of Management Development 10(1), 33-41.

Madden, Thomas J. and Marc G. Weinberger. (1984). Humour in Advertising: A Practitioner's View. Journal of Advertising Research, 23-26.

Mendleson, Jack; Golen, Steven; and Adams, Patricia. (1986). Humour in Managerial Communication. Industrial Management and Data Systems, Sept/Oct, 5-8.

Miller, Julia. (1992). Comedy With A Human Face. Advertising Age, 13 Jan, 12C.

Poltrack, David. (1983). Television Marketing. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Steward, David W. and David H. Furse. (1986). Effective Television Advertising: A Study of 1,000 Commercials. Lexington: D. C. Heath and Co.

Weinberger, Marc, & Gulos, Charles. (1992). The Impact of Humour in Advertising: A Review. Journal Of Advertising, Dec, 35.