

## The Argument For Humor At Law Firm Events

In the last ten years I have entertained thousands of lawyers. When I undertook to make lawyers laugh, I didn't expect to uncover a void. I didn't hear piteous cries. But I was picking up something. Something in the public image of lawyers expressed in scapegoat jokes. Something in the rising tide of legislation which has made lawyers indispensable if not welcome. Something in the way law firms have grown into enormous intractable organisms. (There was a time when group photos of law firms could be taken without aerial photography.) This profession clearly needed to have some fun.



I knew, however, that lawyers would be a tough audience. In a roomful of lawyers I would have to get traction immediately. I would have to make it smart, make them laugh, and keep them thinking. This was acceptable. Smart humor ... subtlety and nuance ... is a more satisfying challenge than easy humor, shock humor. The more daunting prospect for me was how to introduce the bizarre idea of a humorist for lawyers. I knew I would have to make my case.

Here is the argument which launched my unusual career:

Law firms and associations have social events in the first place because they recognize they need to be more than a collection. As common ground the practice of law may be a broad landscape but lawyers need to enjoy each other as people, too, not just as professionals. It's true, members of a firm cannot all be close as musketeers. But they can be more than just colleagues.

So the problem is:

**How to create an occasion that stimulates people to open up a little to each other?**

This is harder with lawyers than with most groups. Any suggestion at an executive-committee meeting that the firm try one of the touchy-feely exercises accepted by the corporate world is likely to cause acid rain clouds to form. So, no love fest.

But how then does a law firm have some ...forgive me ...*fun*? Do catalysts exist for it?

Music? A band? These can feel like a kind of fun (if not ignored) but stimulate no exchange between the lawyers and are forgotten the minute they leave the ballroom.

Golf? Golf becomes very expensive when you consider it's not exactly everybody together enjoying the same thing. It's foursomes. And not everyone plays.

A dinner then? That's a start. But conversation at a dinner is limited to a maximum of ten people at a round table. Usually it's only between four. (Like golf.) And what is unifying about the conversation?

A dinner with an engaging speaker is better. But what kind of speaker? A jurist? No, that's about the *professional* relationship. Politics? Sports? Not for everyone. Personal tastes among this sophisticated audience ... books, movies, art, or family matters ... are going to be all over the map. No speaker from any single area will work.

Humor is the answer, and not only for obvious reasons.

Laughter shakes you loose. It requires a lot of breath, it makes the body move. It's physical. The notion of lawyers acting in concert physically is perhaps alarming but it shouldn't be. It's just shared excitement. (Storming a castle might be even better than laughing for lawyers in a large group but this is unavailable at the preferred hotels.) Laughter is unifying. There's something about having seen a hard-headed colleague laugh at the same thing you thought was funny; it makes his opinions more tolerable. It's as if you've touched without the possibility of stickiness. No fatuous declarations, no fragrances exchanged, no cooties. **Shared humor is safe touching.**

At events where I entertain, as soon as I leave the lectern every lawyer has plenty with which to start a conversation throughout the weekend. Even with the IP associate from the Chicago office. Or with that expensive lateral hire. Comedy is a homeopathic miracle, a stimulant and mood-enhancer with no side effects.

But a lot of comics are cheesy. And they know little about the lives of lawyers outside the courtrooms they see on TV.

- The humor has to be intelligent.
- It has to be in good taste.
- Best of all is if it is relevant to the practice of law.

Skits prepared by the associates can do some of this. They certainly get everyone breathing hard, they can be very funny. But skits frequently trample one of the above requirements, the one about good taste. Egos are not just bruised but barbecued. Embarrassment lingers long after, like smoke damage. Skits are also a tremendous amount of work, as any associate will tell you who measures a

good night's sleep in tenths of an hour. No, the humor has to meet not only all of the above requirements but also somehow soften the daily struggles shared by the audience.

To put it another way, humor for lawyers is perfect...if it is taken seriously.

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