

# VIRTUAL PRESENTATION MASTERY

TIPS FROM THE COACH TO  
SOME OF THE WORLD'S  
BEST SPEAKERS—AND ME



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## Adding Humour

One of the biggest failings of virtual presenters is they don't even try to use humour. The reasoning goes something like this: "It's too hard. I can't tell if they're laughing because I can't see or hear them. Therefore, I won't do it."

Result: dry, dry, dry presentations that kill the audience.

The same reasoning could be used in pretty much every single camera comedy show. The actors and writers can't hear the audience, so we won't commission.

Result: No "The Office," "Fleabag," "Modern Family," or pretty much any other modern TV comedy.

There are certainly plenty of good reasons not to add humour. Yep, it might go horrendously wrong. But to not try because you can't hear the audience reaction is a cop out. The fact you can't hear or see them laughing does not mean that they're not hee-hawing and enjoying it. The science suggests that when people watch a comedy programme by themselves, they laugh far less than when they're watching with a group of mates. However, and this is the important thing, they find the programme just as funny.

Crazy as it sounds, just because your audience isn't laughing doesn't mean your presentation isn't funny.

### *Advantages of adding humour.*

- It relaxes you and the audience. I've seen so many presentations in which the presenter instantly relaxes and grows in confidence after getting a laugh or a few smiles. The audience reaction is likely to be: "Ahhh, this is going to be a great day and a hell of a lot better than that last presenter who bored us rigid with PowerPoint."
- It creates impact and helps you influence and persuade your audience.
- It gives you a business advantage over businesses that don't use humour.
- The presentation that gets a laugh at a conference is always remembered ahead of the one that doesn't.

Humour is cheap to produce and more effective than any high-tech gizmo. As Jeremy Donovan points out in his brilliant book, *How to Deliver a TED Talk*, "The most viewed TED speakers deliver on average one joke per minute in their keynote speeches. The best deliver two jokes per minute."

Also, when it comes to managing change, or lifting a team, a little fun and humour can make the difference between success and failure.

For instance, having worked with AIG UK, their presentations to brokers have put them ahead of their competitors simply because, to the relief of their brokers, they add some humour.

### *How do we add humour to virtual presentations?*

According to a survey of businesspeople by thoughtexchange.com, the third most important quality rated as vital to successful online meetings was “have and maintain a sense of humour.”

So how do we find it when we’re not comfortable using it and when most presentation-skills books tell us to avoid it? How do we make them laugh and not lose our careers? And as regards this book, how do we make people laugh when we can’t hear or see or hear them?

### *Creating the humour mindset.*

Rather than think “funny,” think “play.” You are not a comedian. You don’t have to be hilarious. Most laughs in everyday conversation come from a collegiate getting-on-with-each-other burble of chuckles and smiles. They all count. If you think “play,” you can start to garner easy laughs.

The comedy muscle can be developed like any other. The more you do it, the easier it gets. It’s no different when it comes to adding humour to a business presentation.

Once you’ve created your bits of humour, run them past someone you respect and who also crucially shares your sense of humour

If you’re wary of using humour, aim for gently amusing, enough to raise a titter. You’ll probably surprise yourself, and you won’t kill off your ambition to add humour before you’ve even started. If you get a few gentle smiles, you’re already ahead of the competition.

Your early successes will build confidence, and gradually, you’ll move on to those bigger laughs. And if you get those big laughs early on? Congratulations, an alternative career in comedy awaits (but be aware it will probably be less well-paying than your current job.)

### *Making the funnies.*

For the purposes of this section, I’m going to call anything that makes another human being laugh a “joke”—whether that’s a fart, a visual like Phil Dunphy from “Modern Family” repeatedly tripping on the stairs, or a verbal cue, like a play on words. This is not about selling your services as a comedian. It’s about selling your presentation and making it land so it has meaning, resonance, relevance, and memorability for your audience.

### *Creating comedy works in these three stages.*

**Stage 1.** Imagining funny ideas around a subject matter. Or alternatively just your observations on the truth of everyday life. This is one from the Welsh comedian Rhod Gilbert, “A spa hotel? It’s like a normal hotel, only in reception there’s a picture of a pebble.”

**Stage 2.** Taking the best of those funny ideas and looking for funny riffs, gags, and bits of humour.

**Stage 3.** Taking the best of those funny riffs, gags, and bits of humour and pushing them. See if you can take the joke a bit further. Is there another level to this gag? That's where you find the really funny. That's where you find the comedy gold. You may discover that you have some funny-enough ideas around stage one. However, if you're prepared to go to stage two, then you'll have some gold. Beyond stage two is where the diamonds lie, but—and I'm stretching the analogy—to mine those diamonds requires work.

### *Creating your own humour.*

This is a book about virtual presenting. For more tips on creating your own humour for business, I've got a whole host of tools and techniques coming out on the [freeyourfunny.com](http://freeyourfunny.com) website in the summer of 2022.

So, the big question from a lot of presenters is: Yes, I'd like to add some humour, but no, I don't want any of that horrible blowing up in your face David Brent "The Office" sort of thing. I just want to create engagement and connection.

### *How to add humour safely.*

As I said, first start with play. But if you want to push your humour a bit more, but also want to keep it risk-free, then this is what you do.

Most of us operate in a world in which rocking the boat, rattling a few bones, and potentially losing your job is not really an option. So, how do we add humour and do so safely?

First, if we create distance between us and the joke, we are absolved of blame if it doesn't get a laugh. The golden rule is avoid saying, "This is hilarious" before you share the safe humour. Those three words will instantly make the humour dangerous. As long as you don't say it's funny, because no one sees you as a comedian, then it doesn't matter if you don't get a laugh.

I sometimes use a quote at the beginning of a speech when sharing a couple of minutes about myself. I will say, "I'm going to share a little of my background, so you can see how it relates to my talk. But in doing so, I'm aware of the words of Godfrey Smith, who said, "One should never stand up and talk in public for longer than one is prepared to lie down in private and make love."

This almost always gets a big laugh. But occasionally it doesn't. Now as long as there's not a snare drum doing a "boom-boom" at the end of the punchline, I'll be fine. I didn't say it was funny. If I don't get a laugh, then I carry on as if nothing's wrong, and the audience is none the wiser.

At the very worst, the presentation will still be more interesting with the quote than without. What's more, I feel safe delivering it because I didn't write it. I'm just quoting. So, in a way, if there is fault, it's with the quote.

*Here are my magnificent seven tips on adding humour safely.*

The easiest and most used method of getting an easy, safe laugh is to use a visual joke. There are four main types of visual laughs.

**The photo with words, known today as a meme.** Choose one that has no more than seven words. If it has more, it will take too long to read, and you'll lose much of the humour.

### **ADD ONE OF ADEL'S DRAWINGS**

**Add BP bees peeing drawing from Adele**

**The visual as a punchline.** Ideally for these, you don't want any words at all. Here's one I use. It comes at the end of a sequence of slides riffing on Death by PowerPoint. I show a series of awful slides before finishing with the words, "That leaves your audience feeling like this..." I then click on my clicker, and up comes the visual: A photo of myself, snoozing.

It gets a laugh every time and just requires one tap of my forward button. The key is to press your clicker at the end of your set up line, not the beginning.

**The funny photo.** The photo in and of itself is funny.

Just please make sure that you have created a bridge between the picture and the point you are trying to make in your presentation. It has to be relevant to the presentation—not just a random funny.

*Exaggeration can be so incredibly funny.*

Exaggeration can be the key to ruling the world or at least ensuring you will be seen as the funniest person on your team; perhaps the two are the same thing. Most modern comedians use hyperbole all the time to add laughs during their set. You can do the same. It just needs to be an obvious exaggeration, not a slight increase/decrease.

Describing a hot day in the office. "The air-con was down, and it felt like it was thirty-five degrees." If, in reality it was thirty-two degrees, then you're in danger of just lying. Better as, "The air-con was down. It was an oven. It was like two hundred degrees, fan assisted."

Exaggeration can also come in the way you perform it. Try the passion exercise and see how that immediately makes everything funnier as you exaggerate your reactions.

*A funny quote, poem, letter, or email.*

There are literally millions of funny quotes out there. Three rules for adding them successfully:

**Keep it brief.** Quotes that you can remember are going to work best; short quotes are safer because they're easier to recall. You don't want to say, "As Dickens said, 'These are the best of um... and the umm... well, you know.'"

**Make them relevant.** Never ever, even if you're the boss, just add a joke for the sake of it. For example, Mrs. Noah is counting the animals entering the ark: "...two giraffes, two tigers, two shrews, two moles, twenty-six rabbits..." "What do you mean, twenty-six rabbits?" says Noah. "I told you to take in two of every animal." Mrs Noah replies, "That was yesterday." And then leave it either to either tumbleweed blowing across a silent Zoom call or a few polite titters before you move on to something completely different. If you have to use that joke—finish with something that relates to the presentation. If you were talking about your fast-moving industry, for instance, add, "And in our industry, it can feel like we move from ... This is quite easy, just a couple of clients... to overnight, "Oh my God, we've got twenty-six! So how do we deal with that?"

**Choose your source wisely.** The person you quote will affect the audience's view of you as the speaker. Einstein is every presenter's favourite. You quote Einstein, rather than David Beckham, and you come across as intelligent but a bit cliche. Choose David Beckham, and you come across as original and quirky. It's a choice.

*Emails, letters, and poems.*

Every organisation receives millions of emails and letters. Find a funny one, and then create a bridge across to the presentation to make it relevant.

Or choose a poem. It just needs to be short and funny. If they don't laugh, it doesn't matter. As I said before, it'll still be funnier than what the next guy comes out with.

*Here's a limerick (of unknown origin):*

There was a young man from Japan  
Whose limericks never would scan.  
And when they asked why,  
He said, "I do try.  
But when I get to the last line I try to fit in as many words as I can."

The bridge to the presentation? Could be something like, "And as that limerick teaches us—don't try and fit in as many words as possible in your slides. Less is more."

*When adding a joke safely, the usual rules apply.*

Make it short. Make it relevant to your presentation. Create distance between you and the joke.

You can create distance by doing one of two things:

Referencing it as a joke, as in, “This is an old joke: Two spies were having a chat. First spy: I think Claude has become a mole. Second spy: How do you know? First spy: Because he’s started eating worms and slugs.” If it doesn’t get a laugh, it’s much less painful because you said it was old.

Then second method is to turn the joke into your story.

The original joke goes like this:

Man on phone: Help, quickly, my house is on fire.  
Fireman: How do we get to your house?  
Man on phone: Don’t you still have those big red trucks?

Change it up to:

“I take things too literally sometimes. I had to call the fire brigade the other day because we had a kitchen fire, and the fireman said, ‘How do we get to your house?’

I said, ‘What, don’t you still have those big red trucks?’”

This way we’re sharing the joke as a story. If it gets a laugh, great; if not, it’s just a story.

Joke books are really not to be used if you’re a comedian. However, they’re great for speech writers. You don’t necessarily borrow the joke. You just adapt it to your speech.

For example, here’s the joke: “Whenever I go to a party, I go as Napoleon. That way I keep my hand on my wallet.”

Change it up to: “Our finance director always goes to parties dressed as Napoleon. That way, he can keep one hand on his wallet.”

*List joke or the Rule of Three gag.*

The list joke is so-called because the punchline comes at the end of a list. One of the rules of comedy is that you try and have the shortest distance possible between laughs. The shortest form of a list is two items, which sets up the idea that we’re creating a list. The third item is the funny. Hence its other name, The Rule of Three gag.

You will use this joke in every-day conversation, probably without realising it. For instance, someone might say, “We’re going to Turkey for a two-week holiday. It’s lovely weather, nice people, and bloody cheap.” Not the funniest punch line, but it gets a laugh.

You could say the above sentence like this, “We’re going to Turkey for two weeks. It’s lovely weather, nice people, and good value.” It has the same meaning, but it’s less funny. It’s really easy to populate your presentation with these sorts of easy-win jokes. The only caveat is that if the first two items in the list are important bits of information, then the third “funny” item will remove the gravitas from the first two.

### *Your funny life.*

Most of us have hundreds of funny stories we’ve shared over the years with friends, family, loved ones, and indeed anyone who will give us the time of day. Some are self-deprecating, most contain an element of humiliation, but here, my friends, is your presentation gold.

It’s just a case of transferring this gold across to your business communication. The tricky bit is keeping it short and ensuring the bridge that connects it to your presentation is strong, bullet proof, and relevant.

Why is it safe? Because if no one laughs, you’re just telling a story—the most effective method for conveying information. If they laugh, it’s a bonus. The only danger is if, like my uncle Malcolm, you decide to start with, “This will make you laugh! A really funny thing happened to me the other day....”

### *So, how do you find relevant funny stories?*

First find the story, then make it relevant. Write a list of your funny stories. Here’s a list of mine:

- Meeting my wife
- Failing driving test
- Nearly missing plane

Then, add a bridge from the story to a point you can make in a presentation:

- Meeting my wife—I was on an awful job, but then this beautiful, funny woman walked into the room. There are opportunities often in the most difficult circumstances.
- Failing driving test because of breakdown in communication with examiner. (He had such a strong Shropshire accent I couldn’t understand him.) Listen, communicate clearly.
- Nearly missing plane. It’s not over till it’s over.

Choose the story that you feel you can use as an analogy.

Let's focus on this one for this example: Nearly missing plane. It's not over till it's over.

Write it up or create the bullet points to telling it. Then, see if you can get it down to five sentences, using the following format.

- Opening line to set up story.
- Two sentences to build story.
- Punch line.
- Final tagline—an additional funny line after the punch line—is optional.

Here's how my funny story and point work together:

Nearly missing plane. It's not over till it's over.

**Opening line.** On last hols, to get out of Stansted airport on a Ryanair was something like escaping from Saigon, with massive crowds of people, and eventually after two hours, I said to my wife and kids, “Look, you run for the plane, or we’ll miss it. I’ll follow with the hand luggage.”

**Two sentences to build story.** I raced to the departure gates to find that, although my wife and kids were on the flight, and the plane hadn’t taken off, the stewards wouldn’t let me by. Total despair—until this ground crew guy, who looked Harrison-Ford-like in a high-viz jacket, appeared at the gangway, pointed at my name, and said, “He’s on the plane.”

**One punchline.** As we walked across the tarmac to the plane, I didn’t want to break the spell but eventually I said to the Harrison Ford guy, “Am I really on?” And he just said, “Fuck ‘em.”

Now the bridge to the presentation:

“We’ve all had moments like this in our lives. So, don’t write off your clients. Have a look at some of the ones you’ve dismissed. Because it’s not over until it’s over... and you might still get on that plane.”

In less than a minute, you’ve made them laugh, you’ve revealed a little of your own humanity (without saying “I’m human,” which no one would listen to anyway,) and you’ve landed your point.

Additional bonus point: People who use stories always come across as more confident than those who don’t. Why? Because a story reveals; it’s vulnerable, and vulnerable is brave.

*Think like a stand up.*

Humour from life (or God’s gift that turns disasters into presentation diamonds.)

Your every day is packed with funny moments and incidents. You just don’t see them. Start making a note of funny stuff that happens at work or at home. You can use this stuff to add

loads of humour to your presentations.

For instance, I was working with a client the other day. She shared two moments, which she will add to a medical presentation.

- She was testing a patient's eye-movement. She held up a pencil and said, "Follow this with your eyes." The patient replied, "Do I follow it with one eye or both?" Comedy genius. She will use this for a serious presentation about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Using EFT.
- It was raining, and her four-year-old said, "This is because of global warming." My client had to correct him, "No, this isn't global warming." A very short, fifteen-second anecdote to be used for "when patients self-diagnose."

So next time someone says something funny, or your life goes a bit wrong, this is material for your speech.

It's also the truth, and the truth is funny. Most comedy has a basis in truth. We recognise unvarnished truth, for instance, when watching "Life in Pieces"—and go, "Yes, I know people like that" or "I've done that."

For instance, when I'm encouraging people to put on their cameras, I reflect back the audience's reluctance to be seen. "Oh my God, he wants us to put our cameras on. I was hoping to sit back and check out my emails. Now, I've got to listen to this guy."

Look for the truth and say it or push it a bit. Most modern comedy involves an element of exaggeration. For instance, Jo Brand talking about two types of biscuit eater. "There are those who open the packet of biscuits, take out one biscuit, put it on a plate then seal the packet carefully. Those people need executing. And then there's the rest of us who just eat the whole f\*\*\*\*\*g packet without even taking the wrapper off."

### *Interactive fun.*

To keep interactive humour safe, your aim should be being fun and playful, rather than funny. If you aim for the fun/playful moments, the laughs will naturally come.

Here are three interactive techniques of mine. The average laugh count is at least three per minute. And they're all easy.

**Warm up.** I play some music, and then, over one minute, ask the audience to dance in different styles—like a yoga teacher, dad, superhero, small child, geography teacher.

**Warm up.** I ask people to collect three random items from their house in one minute, one of which is a cuddly toy. I then ask people to wave their cuddly toys. This always creates laughter and fun. To keep it more relevant, I sometimes ask people to use one of their items in the Power of Random exercise in the chapter on Standing Out.

Other exercises you can use to interact with your audience:

**The show of hands.** Ask them something you think they would all agree with. “Who here is human?” There will always be a couple of people who don’t put up their hands or dither—probably because they weren’t listening. You can then gently ask again until you’ve got the room’s attention. You’ll get some laughs along the way and more importantly you’ll have everyone listening.

**Breakout rooms.** As an ice breaker, get participants to do something fun, relevant, and slightly cringey, such as say something flattering about their colleagues.

**Getting someone to join you for a moment as a co-host.** Warning: You need to have really thought this through and possibly rehearsed it with a colleague.

**Do not humiliate anyone.** Make participants the heroes. Any idiocy comes from you. If you do want to have some fun at their expense, then choose someone who is a good mate, or who the audience knows is in on the act, such as a member of your team.

In the virtual world, it’s often difficult to tell if your humour has landed.

*Here’s what you can do if you don’t get a laugh. (And it will happen. You will be okay.)*

**Carry on as if you were serious.** Act as if you were just making an interesting point. “The reason I told you that story....” This is why all humour should be relevant to the purpose of your presentation.

**Humour is a numbers game.** The closer together your moments of humour, the easier it is to build comedic momentum. If you’re averaging two laughs a minute, then the audience is already giggling before you deliver your next joke. You don’t want jokes to emerge like a ghost in the mist only to disappear before we’ve noticed, “Hang on. He just told a joke. Did he? I don’t know. Oh, too late.”

**Don’t get discouraged if your first joke doesn’t raise a laugh.** Often, the first laugh will be greeted in stony silence, simply because they weren’t expecting it. However, if you don’t wait too long, and then deliver your second joke, you’ll get this reaction: “I think that was a joke. Yes, it was. Right, I’m on my toes now. This guy is funny.” Sure enough, your third joke will get the laugh, then the proverbial floodwaters of comedy are opened, and you are away.

**Never explain the joke.** “The reason why this is funny...” If they didn’t laugh, it’s too late. Move on.

**Have a saver.** This is your sure-fire winner, so if the new joke doesn’t work, then you follow it with your guaranteed laugh line. Or have what’s called a bomb line. This is a deliberate line that you add to cover the fact that no one laughed. “That was hilarious when I practiced it,” or “My cat thought it was funny.”

**Re-connect.** If your best joke doesn't get a laugh, it's probably because you're losing connection with the audience, both literally and metaphorically. So, stop. Start chatting with them. "So, how are you all?" or "Who have we got in the audience?" Ask them to contribute through chat. Rebuild that rapport and start again.

**Never, ever blame the audience.** If you don't get a laugh, it is not their fault.

#### HERMAN'S ACTION PLAN:

- Look to add more humour to your next presentation—start by aiming for playful.
- Have a go at *safe* humour. If it doesn't get a laugh, it's not your fault.
- Look for humour in everyday life. The truth is funny.
- If you're not sure that a joke's appropriate, run it by a couple of colleagues first. If they're not sure, don't use it.