

Who Says Recession Is Nothing to Laugh at?

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PR Shop Peppercom Brings in Comedian to Help Execs Lighten up, Improve Presentations

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- While most agencies are calling for layoffs, cutbacks and hiring freezes to survive the recession, public-relations agency Peppercom is relying on the unconventional: stand-up comedy.

The agency, which has laid off only three people since the economy took a dive in September, brings in a professional comedian for a few hours at a time to teach employees of all ranks how they can integrate the craft in their everyday jobs -- to show that laughter's good for business, not to mention a way to boost happiness and motivation at work.

"It's probably the single smartest internal investment we've made in the agency," said Steve Cody, managing partner and co-founder of the Peppercom, who estimates that the agency has spent \$5,000 on the training with New York-based comedian Clayton Fletcher since starting the program in September. Mr. Cody said he saw the impact of the downturn on the worried faces of employees, and that he wanted to bring back what he calls the "F" word -- fun -- into the workplace.

Helping execs hone their craft

An Ad Age reporter recently attended one of these crash courses in comedy and saw firsthand the relevance of stand-up outside of the typical setting of a dimly lit nightclub where beers flow as readily as the laughs. Seated in the comparatively sterile conference room at Peppercom's New York offices -- along with a dozen or so young account executives and junior account executives -- it became clear how the vaudeville-rooted art can help PR professionals hone their craft by developing confidence and poise for public speaking and dealing with clients. Oh, and that Mr. Cody has a penchant for puns about short people. (Yes, even the boss, a comedy convert, participated in the session. You can find him performing stand-up three to four times a month at places such as the New York Comedy Club.)

"When you're funny, people pay attention," Mr. Fletcher explained to the group after he, Mr. Cody, and outside consultant Darryl Salerno had warmed up the audience with short routines.

Key to the training is a video camera stealthily positioned in the back corner of the room. Peppercom tapes the sessions, and Mr. Salerno uses the recordings to provide feedback to each individual on his or her presentation abilities.

The training cultivates real business skills. If you know how to tell a good joke, Mr. Fletcher said, you learn how to not only break the ice before a client meeting, but also read an audience with nonverbal cues, act quickly on your feet and connect with people in a new way. "Making people laugh causes people to like you," he said.

After Mr. Fletcher's brief rundown of the different forms of comedy -- improvisational, observational and so on -- he asked that each person try out an impromptu five-minute routine.

Fear of birds

Melissa Einfrank, an account executive at Peppercom since October 2007, was one of the brave early volunteers. She talked about her irrational fear of birds -- and nearly brought down the house. Mr. Fletcher shared praise (she had infectious enthusiasm in her storytelling) and constructive criticism (her ending could have been tighter.)

The back-and-forth of comedy delivery mirrors client presentations, Mr. Fletcher explained. And in such a situation, it's important to understand how effectively you are communicating with your audience. Are they nodding in approval? Checking their BlackBerrys? When presenters rely on devices like PowerPoint, they often forget that they are talking with someone, not at them. "I learned that in meetings, it's important that you don't read off a script, but be more conversational, and people will respond to that energy," Ms. Einfrank said.

The idea of leveraging comedy for business is catching on in the ad world. Miami Ad School offers a copywriting class called Improv/Stand-up Comedy where students can, according to a course description, "polish your presentation skills by delivering observational and improv comedy in front of a large group of people." And Peppercom's venture into comedy inspired the Council of Public Relations to ask Mr. Clayton to hold a half-day event at the New York Comedy Club for council members in March.

"This has been a huge morale and team builder," Mr. Cody said, adding that in the training he has uncovered some employees with natural stage presence -- and that these talented orators will now be more involved in client presentations.