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Thirteen Ways to Kill a Comedian

By the Comedy Team of Mack and Jamie

The situation was ideal: a thousand members of a pharmacists association in theater seating, a high stage, world-class light and sound, and our video images projected ten times bigger than life on two huge screens. For two days, the attendees had wandered Nashville's famous Opryland Hotel and convention center, a sprawling, beautiful, incredibly confusing complex, consulting their little maps as they ambled, disoriented, from one event to the next. They were ready for some comedy. When we were introduced, we wandered onstage looking confused, then pulled out maps, consulted them and walked offstage in opposite directions, obviously lost. The ovation was deafening and we hadn't even said hello yet. We went to our mikes, and our first line kept the wave crashing: "We asked for rooms on the same floor. They couldn't even get us in the same area code."

As one of the most well-traveled and sure-fire comedy acts on the corporate and association meeting circuit for almost two decades, we're road-tested experts on how to present comedy to have the optimum chance of knockin' 'em dead and making the planner look like a hero. We also know what you can do or not do to virtually guarantee that your comedy act will fail miserably and make you look like a goofball for thinking such an inane thing might work.

The rules are slightly different for relatively unknown acts and celebrity comedians who are automatically adored as soon as they walk onstage. But take our word for it: the household names would *love* for you to follow our Do's and Don'ts for them so they don't have to work so hard after the initial love fest fades.

We love what we do, and at most events have a lot of fun making people fall off their chairs and spew iced tea through their noses. So we're not whining about the milk spilt at horror gigs, just trying to keep your glass half full. After all, you have both a financial investment and your reputation riding on your comedy act's success, so give him or her the best chance to succeed by following this list of "Do's":

The Do's

Match the audience with the act. Booking a raunchy comedian for an association of church counselors is asking for a tar and feather party to the tune of Kumbaya. Conversely, booking a squeaky-clean act for an all-male group of twenty-something party animals expecting a gutter comic can get your Boy Scout funnyman pelted with party favors.

Audience dark, comedian bright. There's a reason comedy clubs have bright stages and dark audiences. Audiences relax in the anonymity of a dark room, which gives them the freedom to be themselves and not have to watch the CEO for approval to laugh. Even the most dead-pan comedian depends on visuals for laughs, so light him or her up so nobody misses a single pucker or arched eyebrow. And if the venue is so huge that half the audience only sees a flesh-colored dot with hair, I-mag becomes essential.

Check what's going on in adjacent rooms. We once had to do our entire act separated from an Iranian wedding reception by a six-inch air wall. We got lots of laughs doing improvisational dances to their music, but we wouldn't care to do it again.



Give the comedian complete focus.

Unlike a rock band or a jazz trio providing dinner music, to be effective comedy requires the attention of 100% of the audience. Ask any comedian, and he or she will tell you that the quality of the *silences* are as good a judge of how you're going over as the laughs. If you can set up a joke, then pause thoughtfully before delivering the punch line to an audience hanging on your every word, you've got 'em. If during the pause you hear someone's cell phone conversation or a waiter calling for more coffee at Table Nine, you've broken the spell and the laugh will fizzle.



Give the comedian as fresh an audience as possible. Many a meeting planner has made the mistake of wanting to "cap" a long, boring session or awards presentation with a comedian "to leave 'em laughing." You can't expect a comedian to hold an audience that's already 45 minutes late for lunch and starving, or to revive one that's clapped for the winners from Regions 1 to 37, had three cocktails, and is ready to hit the sack. An excellent first step toward avoiding this pitfall is to *stay on schedule*, e.g., herd them in from cocktails to dinner with annoying bells.

Check sound and sight lines. Whenever possible, have the comedian do a microphone check and walk the stage to make sure a big portion of the audience isn't blocked by the potted palm trees or the fourteen-foot plywood sales projection chart.

Double check references for "special" material. Our comedy pals who do the same act for every audience don't have to worry about this one, but we pride ourselves on writing lots of custom comedy for every client. Nothing can dig a hole for a comedian like calling the new CEO "Bill" when her name is Lilly. Even worse, doing airplane jokes when the association president has just lost his wife in a plane crash can make a planner wish she were at 37,000 feet over Peru.

The Don'ts

Naturally, for every Do there's an equal and opposite Don't, and the Doing of Don'ts is the number one cause of comedy train wrecks. Here are a few we'd rather never have to deal with again:

Don't introduce the comedian before the audience is paying attention. Okay, sometimes this isn't practically possible, but comedians are often unfairly thrown to the wolves by cowardly or ineffective introducers who won't take control of an unruly, unsettled or otherwise unready audience. "Oh, they'll sit down and be quiet as soon as you come on" is not a professional approach. Nor is, "They'll come in from the cocktail party as soon as they hear people laughing." It's the planner's job to arrange for the audience to be in their seats and attentive before the comedian is introduced. If we spend the first two minutes just trying to get the audience to look at the stage, we've blown our first impression and two or three killer ice-breakers that would have gotten them in exactly the right frame of mind for our unique fun-house ride.

Don't allow any other activity in the room. Ignoring this rule has spawned more horror stories than any other, in our experience. A comedian's success depends entirely on how many chuckles and guffaws come out of the audience's mouths, so said orifices should not be plugged with lunch, dinner, or dessert. Finish the meal and clear the wait staff before introducing the comedian.

Announce one more time for everyone to turn off their cell phones, and close the doors to keep outside light and noise from scattering focus.

Having an open bar at the back of the room is an invitation for the party animals in the group to gather and get progressively louder so they can be heard over the annoying comedian in the front of the room.

At one event a client set up a casino in the showroom—blackjack, roulette, craps tables—so in the pre-show meeting we asked when exactly they were going to close the casino before we went on. “Oh, no, we can’t close the tables, they’d go crazy.” We winced, then told them we couldn’t guarantee a successful show if they didn’t close the tables, and they accused us of being paranoid and insisted it would be fine. Then of course they watched in horror and embarrassment as the show was constantly disrupted by clusters of gamblers yelling, “YES! ALLL RIIIIIGHT! WAY TO GO, MARTY!” on top of our punch lines, ruining it for us as well as for the annoyed people who wanted to hear us. The newly-enlightened planners completely avoided us after the show because they knew they’d blown it.

Don’t wear them out with amateur comedy. For a new father, no words are more chilling than, “It’s a boy...sort of.” For a comedian, it’s, “But before we introduce our entertainment, we’ve got a little send-off for Dave, who’s retiring after 26 terrific years. Bob, Larry and Neal from accounting have put together a little presentation. Guys?”

The inevitable slideshow of Dave’s career features comedic commentary written by, yep, accountants, who can cram thirty hot seconds of comedy into only 25 interminable minutes. As professional entertainers, we beseech you: don’t.

Don’t Put A Dance Floor Between The Comedian And The Audience. This is sometimes unavoidable, but often a solution is possible with a little forethought and outside-the-box thinking, e.g., putting the D.J. and dance floor in another corner, or setting up risers for the comedian on the side and re-aiming the spotlights. A vast expanse of parquet makes comedians feel like they’re performing on a tarmac.

Discourage Parents From Bringing Kids To Shows For Grownups. And if they have to come, don’t let them sit in the front so everyone will be watching to see how they react to any material that’s even remotely suggestive. We’re a clean act, but that doesn’t mean we’re a good fit for kids, and it’s unfair to expect us to do a Sesame Street set just because the CEO wants to show off his tykes in their dress-up clothes. It’s like telling Conan and Jay they can’t do any Kobe Bryant or Monica Lewinsky jokes or allude to, say, Pamela Anderson’s trademark physical feature. Jokes that would pass network television standards get scowls and head-shaking from the parent whose two kids keep 300 adults from fully enjoying the performance.



Don’t Allow Comedians To Shamelessly Plug Themselves.

Unless they’ve contributed a helpful article, then simply follow the ultimate Do: Hire Mack & Jamie to ensure that your comedy show is a howling, stomping, clapping success. They’ll even provide helpful hints for your group:

“How about that five-dollar bottle of water they put in your hotel room for your convenience? Must be a hassle for the hotel to keep up with that, so for their convenience, I drank mine and filled it back up in the sink.”

Comedians Mack & Jamie are available for your next event – contact us today to get started!

www.corporateartists.com