

# Humor Boosts Sales

Paul McGhee, PhD, [www.LaughterRemedy.com](http://www.LaughterRemedy.com)

*"Laughter is the shortest distance between two people."* (Victor Borge)

[Adapted from P. McGhee, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*. Call 800-228-0810 to order.]

Any experienced sales person can tell you about the power of humor in sales. Humor helps break down any initial objections the potential buyer has by creating a positive emotional disposition toward both you and the product or idea. It also holds the buyer's attention even when s/he may prefer to direct attention elsewhere. This is why radio and television commercials now use humor so often. When you think of frogs and lizards, chances are a particular beer comes into mind (along with a mental grin) from the commercials of the mid-1990s.

While you may not sell a product, you're often in the position of selling ideas. Just as humor breaks down barriers to acceptance of a product, it will do the same for acceptance of an idea about which others may be skeptical at first. It relaxes your listeners and helps open their minds to the possibilities you're expressing. Once you've made the effort to improve your humor skills, you'll come to rely more and more on the persuasive boost that a good laugh offers.

Humor can be just as persuasive in conflict situations. I grew up in Detroit, and at one point worked for Ford Motor Company. I learned that in the 1950s (before I worked for them!), Ford shut down several plants as a means of cutting costs. This was done on the advice of company accountants who were predicting continued reduced sales, and recommended yet another plant closing. Since the accountants held considerable power at the time, top management was afraid to disagree with them. Finally, someone said, "Why don't we close down all the plants, and then we'll really start to save money!" Once the tension-reducing uproarious laughter stopped, management felt confident enough to oppose the accountants and leave that plant open.<sup>1</sup>

## Creative Marketing

**A man is taking a tour of a factory that produces latex products. At the first stop, he's shown the machine that makes baby-bottle nipples. The machine makes a loud "hiss pop" noise. "The hiss is the rubber being injected into the mold," explains the guide. "The popping sound is a needle poking a hole in the end of the nipple."**

**He later comes to the area where condoms are produced. This machine makes a noise that goes "Hiss. Hiss. Hiss. Pop."**

**"Hey, wait a minute," he says. "I understand the 'Hiss. Hiss. Hiss.' But what's that 'pop' every so often?"**

**"Oh, it's the same as in the baby-bottle nipple machine. It pokes a hole in every fourth condom," says the guide.**

**"Well that can't be good for the condoms."**

**"No, but it's great for the baby-bottle nipple business."**

Terry Paulsen provides a wonderful example of how a bank used humor to overcome its stodgy image.<sup>2</sup> They painted an outside wall with an image of a flying saucer crashing into the bank. Each of the four vans owned by the bank had one of the following images painted on its back door: a) masked robbers cracking a vault, b) counterfeiters inspecting their new bills, c) a washing machine laundering money, and d) two convicts playing cards (with one cheating). People became much more aware of the bank, and developed a likable positive image of it.

In sales, there's often a period of bargaining about the price of a product or service before the sale is completed. One study specifically looked at the value of humor in getting your client to pay a higher price. They found that when the seller used jokes and other verbal humor, the buyer was willing to pay a higher price. And this approach was effective for both male and female salespersons, and with both male and female buyers.<sup>3</sup>

President Reagan knew the power of humor in communication, and in bargaining. Prior to his first meeting with Michael Gorbachev in the SALT talks with the Soviet Union, there was a great deal of tension. There was considerable coolness in the initial stages of their meeting. This was no surprise, since Reagan had often referred to the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire." Reagan melted the chilly atmosphere of the meeting by telling Gorbachev this joke:

**Moscow has been having a terrible problem with people speeding, so the Moscow police were given strict orders to give anyone caught speeding a ticket. One day Gorbachev is late getting to the Kremlin, so he says to his driver, "You get in the back and let me drive. We'll get there faster."**

**They speed by a couple of motorcycle cops, and one of them takes off after the car. He comes back ten minutes later, and his buddy asks, "Well, did you**

**give him a ticket?" "No, I didn't." "Why not? Who was it?" "I don't know, but his driver was Gorbachev."**

Gorbachev loved the joke, and from that point on, tensions were eased and considerable progress was made in the bargaining. The shared laughter facilitated the bargaining process by creating a more positive climate for debate.

### **References**

1. McCormack, M. *What They Don't Teach You at the Harvard Business School*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984, pp. 46-47.
2. Paulsen, T.L. *Making Humor Work*. Los Altos, CA.: Crisp Publications, 1989, p. 50.
3. O'quinn, K. & Aronoff, J. Humor as a technique of social influence. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 1981, 44, 349-357.