

Why Brands Need to Get in on the Joke

In both B2C and B2B, the more humorous the advertising, the sharper the recall for customers and prospects

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By **Michele Meyer**



A growing number of brands are using humor to get the message out and separate themselves from the pack. Among them is Liberty Mutual, which is running a series of humorous ads featuring Doug and “LiMu” (an emu), cops on the beat who espouse the insurer’s message in comedic fashion. Liberty Mutual/YouTube

Humor is serious business. Brands and organizations have long used humor to grab consumers’ attention, bolster corporate reputation, and bestow warm-and-fuzzy feelings for even the most staid business sectors, the insurance industry being Exhibit A. However, as

displayed by the growing number of lighthearted ads created by both B2C and B2B companies, humor seems an increasingly effective way for brands to cut through the constant noise and better distinguish themselves from the pack.

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Why adding humor to advertising is nothing to laugh at.



"Humor is especially important in today's world, where it's harder to capture consumers' attention," says Jenna Lebel, CMO at Liberty Mutual Insurance. "Humor is the No. 1 driver of message recall, and we've found the funnier the ad, the more people will remember its message and the brand."

Liberty Mutual tries to cover all of its bases by developing more than a dozen campaigns with longtime ad partner Goodby Silverstein & Partners (GS&P) and sharing them with 18,000 consumers in quantitative testing to determine which is the most memorable, likable, and effective.

"Visual-based humor worked best, at least for us," Lebel says. "We're marketing an intangible product so branded characters help. We ended up with **LiMu (an emu) and Doug (a cop)** because consumer reaction was very, very positive."

The insurer prevents the ads from getting stale by placing the dynamic duo in different scenarios. "Our viewers wonder what LiMu and Doug are going to do next," Lebel says.

People who won't be surprised? Liberty Mutual's stakeholders; as part of the process, legal, public relations, product, social, and diversity and inclusion teams all sign off on the scripts. "That way, we know potential red flags before we create the final piece," she says.



Doug and "LiMu" (an emu) are featured in a series of ads for Liberty Mutual. In this 30-second spot, the duo stake out a newly sold house to meet the homeowners and tell them that Liberty Mutual customizes home insurance. Branded characters like Doug and LiMu can help convey the value of intangible products, like insurance. Liberty Mutual/YouTube

For brands crafting humorous ads, characterization cannot be overemphasized. Viewers not only recognize Liberty Mutual's LiMu, but Geico's Gecko, Allstate's Mayhem, and Progressive's Flo and Jamie.

"People look forward to what these characters do and say," says Reuben Webb, chief creative officer at B2B marketing agency Stein IAS, whose clients include Google, HSBC, and Ingredion. He adds that a dramatic device used to propel humorous ads is pairing a protagonist looking to do the right thing with a foil who has the opposite character traits. "The foil can be someone who's not doing what the brand recommends, allowing the protagonist to sell him on the product's benefits," Webb says.



In an ad designed to appeal to the funny bone, Flo and Jamie hit the ice on behalf Progressive. Progressive Insurance/YouTube

A fresh setting and over-the-top spectacle, such as "Progressive on Ice," is another effective way to infuse humor into ad campaigns and keep viewers engaged.

Brand of Humor

Sure, a lot of brand managers try to find the funny for their marketing campaigns. But mirth can be a minefield. Ask Snap Inc., which appeared to make light of domestic abuse when it promoted a Snapchat "Would You Rather" mobile game by asking whether viewers would rather slap singer Rihanna or punch singer Chris Brown.

A Twitterstorm ensued — Rihanna chimed in, as well — with objections to the tone-deaf campaign, considering that nearly a decade earlier Brown pleaded guilty to attacking Rihanna, his then-girlfriend. The ad was pulled, but the damage was done. Shares in Snapchat fell almost 5 percent overnight, **wiping out almost \$1 billion from its market value**. So if deploying humor goes awry, consumers could get the last laugh, using their social platforms to vent.

"There's no doubt: Going to market with humor involves much more bravery than anything with zero personality," Webb says. "Zero personality offends no one — and gets noticed by no one."

On the other hand, most B2B marketers target a particular audience, which makes using humor in ads easier. "As long as you're confident the joke will be received well by the audience at which it's aimed, it's OK if others don't get it," Webb adds.

FedEx, which has long deployed humor in its marketing and advertising campaigns, ensures a diverse perspective by having a wide array of employees create the ads. Consumer panels also provide feedback, says Monica Skipper, VP of brand experience marketing at FedEx.

For instance, **a recent spot featuring the tale of a maple syrup entrepreneur**, accompanied by the theme song of the classic TV sitcom, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. "The old adage 'Any PR is good PR' no longer is true," she says. "Humor only is funny if nobody gets hurt."

"If you know what frustrates your audience and can alleviate it, they'll feel in on the joke and closer to your brand."

— Tim Washer, former creative director at Cisco Systems

FedEx, of course, deploys humor to appeal to both B2B and B2C audiences. But what about hardcore B2B brands selling so many widgets? "To find good humor in B2B is a huge feat because it's so uncommon," says Judy Begehr, SVP of strategy at B2B ad agency gyro.

gyro, along with Dynata (née Research Now) and SSI, decided to explore if B2B companies' reluctance to use humor in advertising is justified, or if B2B brands are missing the boat by not using comedy to make their messaging more memorable.

"The Business Case for Humor In B2B," which took the pulse of 400 B2B professionals, was released early last year. According to the study, 91 percent of the respondents said humorous ads can attract attention; 86 percent said humorous ads can reinforce brand recognition; and 81 percent said such ads raise awareness. What's more, humorous ads were more effective in driving brand website visits (75 percent) and online search (more than a 400 percent lift).

"Predispositions that humor doesn't work or is inappropriate are unfounded," Begehr says. "What's the greater risk: using humor in B2B or investing a lot of money in a campaign that fewer see and has less impact?"

Tim Washer, a keynote speaker and former creative director at Cisco Systems, who has written for both David Letterman and *Saturday Night Live*, says: "People will stop and listen if you make them laugh. There's so little humanity in technology that we forget the purchasing committee is made of people, and there's no better way to build immediate rapport than with humor."

The argument that a brand isn't funny misses the point, Washer adds. "A lot of comedy comes from pain," he says. "If you know what frustrates your audience and can alleviate it, they'll feel in on the joke and closer to your brand."

The Toughest Audience

So how do B2B marketers leverage humor for their advertising efforts? "Just looking funny isn't enough," Washer says. "Throwing in a unicorn might get you a billion views, but ultimately, clever humor focused on your message delivers customer conversions."

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But B2B marketers can't embrace humor just for the sake of it. They need to think innovatively if they want to make people laugh. Cisco, for instance, created "**mockumentaries**" showing how the company's modern-day technology would have made a difference for people who lived during antiquity.

"We showed how if Helen of Troy had our technology, a thousand ships would've come to her aid," Washer says. "By using the existing technology of her times, she'd only have gotten a raft." Not only does that spark laughter, but it doesn't cost licensing fees. "You're probably not going to hear from the estate of Helen of Troy," Washer says.

The toughest sell for humorous advertising is the C-suite. At Cisco, for example, Washer prepared executives for blowback from running humorous ads by presenting online criticism of some of the most successful commercials, proving that no brand is immune.

Nevertheless, too much corporate oversight can be counterproductive, Washer says. "I cannot tell you how many times someone says, 'I don't know — it's a little edgy.' If someone doesn't have a sense of humor, there's temptation to accommodate him by watering it down," he says. "But you'll never make him happy. All you're doing is making your video less funny."

That's why Washer urges companies to leave writing, editing, and producing to those who take humor seriously. "Humor involves more than timing," he says. "You have to frame the shot the right way. If you show too much, you telegraph the punch line too early, and if you show too little, you lose context."

Such skills aren't necessarily found in business school graduates, so the agency GS&P scouts talent elsewhere. "We try to keep things fresh by hiring from improv groups such as San Francisco sketch comedy troupe Killing My Lobster," says Margaret Johnson, chief creative officer and partner at GS&P. "Some of our writers have gone on to write for *Saturday Night Live* or perform on Broadway."

Marketers eager to develop more humorous-type campaigns should also consider taking improv classes, Washer says. "You'll get more comfortable with risk-taking in all areas of your life," he says. "It's so good for mental health."

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