



Comic Consultant

Claire Berger's mission is to stamp out boredom in the boardroom and doldrums at the desk.

Claire Berger is the rare person to take offense at being voted most likely to succeed in junior high. "I was in tears, because I wanted to be the class clown," she recalls. "I thought I'd win, because I always made people laugh. My family moved around a lot, and I knew I wouldn't make friends by being the prettiest or the most popular."

Today Berger, a veteran stand-up comedian, is getting the last laugh. At 42, she is succeeding as a corporate clown through FunnyWorks Inc., a humor-consulting firm that she founded in 1998 in Burbank, California.

In Berger's view, companies can retain star employees and enhance their bottom lines by incorporating productive humor into everything from their monthly in-house newsletters to their sales pitches. The engaging Berger teaches reserved CEOs how to lighten up their presentations, downsized managers how to tap their latent humor so they'll project more warmth on job interviews, and techno-speaking engineers how to use plain English to close a deal. She also injects wit into human-resource manu-

als, plans fun-filled retreats where employees experience the unexpected, organizes special events, designs contests, and leads humor workshops — all in the name of making the workplace more humane.

For Berger, humor consulting is the next step in a long-running comedy career. She got her start in the late 1970s at The Second City, Chicago's acclaimed improvisational troupe that launched such luminaries as Bill Murray and the late Gilda Radner. After relocating to California in the mid-1980s, Berger became a warm-up comic for television series. She has entertained audiences at tapings of more than 68 network sitcoms, including a nine-year stint with CBS' *Murphy Brown*. In addition to running FunnyWorks, Berger performs once a year in Las Vegas to keep her comedic muscles in top condition.

Berger recently spoke to *Spirit* about how she made the transition from comedian to consultant and how FunnyWorks is helping companies lighten up the way they do business.

Spirit: Where do you draw your inspiration as a comedian?

by Cynthia Hanson

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Claire Berger: From my friends, my family, my husband. ... I do storytelling comedy. The best comedy comes from truth. If you start with who you are, and the people who are important to you, you'll get the best material. That's why Paul Reiser [was successful with] *Mad About You* [his long-running NBC sitcom]. He was writing about what he knew.

Spirit: How does being a warm-up comic differ from doing stand-up?

C.B.: It takes two to six hours to shoot a half-hour sitcom, so the warm-up keeps the audience awake, entertained, and attached to what's happening on the set. When the director says, "Cut," I talk about the plot line, give away prizes, or take questions about the show or industry. ... I don't do a routine, per se.

Spirit: What was your most challenging warm-up job?

C.B.: In 1994, I kept 1,700 *Forrest Gump* extras entertained and in their seats while Tom Hanks ran up and down the football field. The job scared the hell out of me, but I thought, If I can do this, I can make anybody laugh, in any setting, anywhere.

Spirit: Why did you start FunnyWorks?

C.B.: I needed a new challenge. I got the idea from businesspeople who came up to me after TV tapings and asked me to help them be funnier. They wanted me to put some humor into their reports, speeches, and newsletters. Then, I started paying attention to [newspaper stories] about companies that embraced humor as a productive sales and human-resources tool. And I looked at the research that said that laughter is good for your health, because it increases the number of disease-fighting immune cells, activates the release of endorphins, lowers blood pressure, and combats depression.

That's when I thought, There's a business here.

Spirit: What distinguishes you from management consultants who preach the power of humor?

C.B.: They're psychologically based; I'm comedically based. My experience is in comedic timing, in working with large groups of people for endless lengths of time. That's what qualified me to make the transition into corporate America. [Though Berger is the founder of FunnyWorks and its self-described front man, a team of independent comedy writers, a marketing professional, and a computer expert help her execute assignments.]

Spirit: What stereotypes have you had to overcome?

C.B.: Some people are afraid to hire a comedian because they think we're going to turn their company into a comedy club. But we don't [encourage] people to crack jokes at the expense of others. We don't turn anybody into a buffoon. We're talking about mining a very important and viable aspect of your personality and developing it to be more successful. We coined the phrase "productive humor," because people are at their best and most productive when they are happy and working in an upbeat environment.

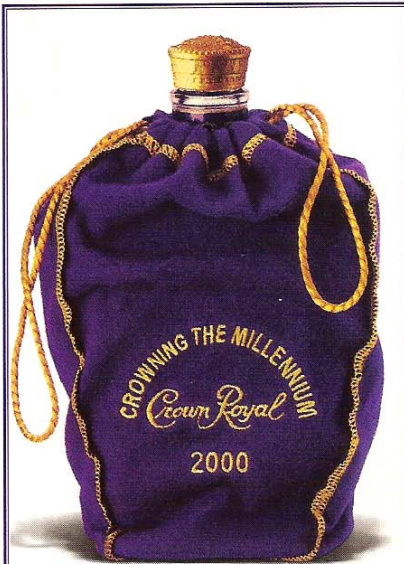
Spirit: Who are your target clients?

C.B.: Any forward-thinking company in any industry. Our clients have been in real estate, insurance, travel, health care, high-tech, entertainment, headhunting, and oil. My insurance clients are the first to admit that insurance isn't the mother lode of comedy. But they understand that to stay competitive and to retain their top employees, they must be cutting-edge, and one of the ways is to incorporate humor [into the corporate culture].

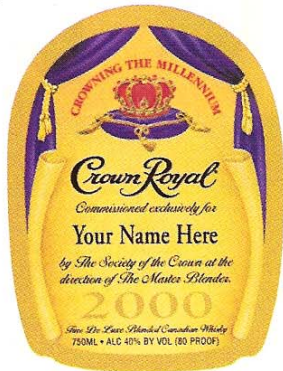
Spirit: Describe some of your assignments.

C.B.: For Pacific Marketing, a real-

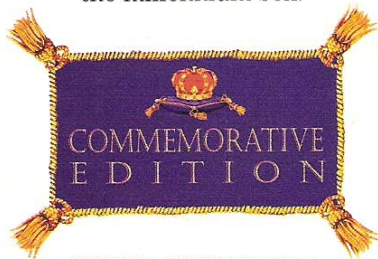
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estate marketing company in San Francisco, we created a Group Surprise Birthday Party, because the CEO felt bad that he wasn't able to attend all the internal birthday parties at the satellite offices. After a corporate meeting, he sent everybody on a scavenger hunt around the city to complete different tasks. The final thing they did was open a Ziploc bag that contained two pieces of bread; inside the bread was a pink disc [that looked like a piece of bologna] that told them the location of a restaurant. We decorated the restaurant like a child's birthday party, with balloons and a giant cake that had everybody's name on the candles.

For a technology firm, we taught engineers how to make a sale. Because they lacked sparkling personalities, every sales call required two human beings — the engineer to represent the product and the salesperson to close the deal. It wasn't cost effective. We taught [the engineers] how to humanize the product ... Instead of wow-ing the client with their electronic expertise, we showed them how to present the product in a way that it could be easily understood.

Last year, [a Chicago company] hired me to conduct workshops in stand-up and improvisational comedy for their employees. The idea was to help people reduce their inhibitions and get them to see each other in a way that they wouldn't have otherwise.

Spirit: What about speech consulting?

C.B.: That's our most covert activity. We don't take credit for it, because our clients want [their humor] to come across as being their own. Just like Jay Leno doesn't say, "This joke by so-and-so."

The biggest crime committed in a bad speech is the inclusion of too much data and too little humanity. People feel

like they must impart a lot of information. But the way to do that is through storytelling. The more personal you can make your speech, the more people are going to pay attention. We'll look at a draft and say, "This seems very impersonal. Is there a story in your life that really illustrates this point?" Or, "These sales figures moved in this direction. Is there a story behind it? Can you give credit to the person responsible for the improvement?"

Spirit: Has the climate of political correctness killed humor at work?

C.B.: Absolutely. It's put unnecessary fear in the heads of companies. They're so afraid of lawsuits for saying the wrong thing that they're afraid to laugh and have fun. There's politically correct and there's politically ridiculous.

Spirit: And the difference is?

C.B.: It's fine to compliment somebody if he or she looks great. If somebody is kidding about her own nationality or family situation, it's not politically incorrect. It's having a sense of humor about yourself.

Spirit: How can you cultivate a sense of humor, particularly if you don't think that you even have one?

C.B.: By keeping a humor journal. For a week, write down everything that happened that you thought was funny. A lot of people don't laugh out loud, but they do see irony — in things that happen with their family, in traffic, or in daily life. By the end of the week, your sense of humor will surface — and you'll recognize it.

You're not going to be the next Jerry Seinfeld or headline in Las Vegas. But you'll have the ability to infuse more humor into speeches, memos, and e-mails. I believe that humor is a gift everybody gets to open. It's truly an untapped source.



Cynthia Hanson, a contributing editor of Chicago Magazine, also writes for Ladies Home Journal and Redbook.