

Pros & Cons of Entertainment Utilizing the CEO

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It is the opening night of your conference and the hired magician produces your CEO in a whirl of confetti, spotlights and mist. The crowd goes wild. Or perhaps jugglers are passing knives around the head honcho, asking him about any proposed departmental "cuts". The crowd goes wild. Or the band calls your boss to jump on stage and belt out Bachman Turner Overdrive's, "Taking Care of Business." The crowd...winces uncomfortably.

As a corporate entertainer for the past twenty years I've seen executives stuck in 70s disco-wear for skits, cut in half by illusionists, and even shot out of cannons. Some of these attempts to incorporate the CEO in the conference entertainment worked very well while others were embarrassing flops. Whether using the company's leader is the best or worst idea of your life depends on many factors, including the tone of the conference, experience of your performers, and most importantly, the personality and enthusiasm of the CEO.

Why Use a CEO at All?

Want to build enthusiasm, camaraderie, and a passion for corporate products, services and goals? The best way to invoke such emotional responses in your organization is to have them come from the top.

The CEO onstage, at play, is humanized and lets the company see him or her in a different light. A little fun can make the big boss seem more approachable, warm, and exciting. Here is a chance to build rapport by being one of the gang. Here is an opportunity to display a sense of fun and to show how passionate the CEO is about a new product, a new plan, or the organization in general.

CEOs appearing in a comedy skit, assisting a hypnotist, or moderating a parody of Jeopardy (with questions about the company's new product launch) can create a special bond with the conference attendees. These see the big boss as a regular person, which builds credibility.

Plato wrote "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation."

How to Use the CEO

A conference for Global Business Networks had a circus theme, and as part of the bill the company's CEO was to be shot from cannon into a waiting net. A comedy illusion was set up, so that the poor leader-turned-bullet apparently missed the net, slammed into a brick wall and fell behind a pile of hay bales. As the crowd gasped in surprise, the healthy, smiling CEO stood up and waved to the roaring crowd cheerfully.

This act worked terrifically because the CEO played along, already had a reputation as a fun guy, and the magician who

conducted the illusion made sure to make the CEO the unflappable hero of the skit.

If your boss has good presentation skills, a sense of humor, and is naturally extroverted, there's almost no limit to how they can be employed creatively in a conference. Corporate comedian Dan St. Paul writes comedy skits utilizing CEOs and whole executive teams of companies. John Murray Productions had a team building retreat set up like a boot camp. To kick it off, the CEO flew in on a helicopter wearing full fatigues and gave a Pattonesque pep talk before flying off into the wild blue yonder.

Sometimes it can be no more than clever use of theater craft and costume, such as when Rick Hems Productions created a huge remote control space ship to fly over a crowd and land on stage. The door opened and the CEO emerged in a full spacesuit.

And then there are the crooners.

"We love to get corporate heads on the stage," says Mikey Luv, of the popular band Bud E. Luv, known to make even the worst warblers look good. "If they can't sing, we'll back them up on a rap tune with custom lyrics that the audience can relate to, and their message gets all the way back to the office with a nasty backbeat that you can dance to!"

Singing with the band certainly requires a bold character (and perhaps a few drinks), but there are also entertainment options out there for the more reserved CEO. The Raspyni Brothers' comedy/juggling act knife passing routine needs little more than a warm body to riff around.

"We've met some very funny executives, but frankly it's more dangerous with the 'lives wires', says Dan Raspyni, who's been using audience "volunteers" for over twenty years from companies such as Eckerd Drugs, Merck, and many others. "The CEO doesn't have to be entertaining, that's our job, if you leave it in our hands they will shine!"

Keeping the CEO from looking bad or being humiliated is at the core of any professional performer's use of a volunteer. Not only is the executive writing the check, but he or she also acts as a representative of the audience. The rank and file may think they'd like to see their boss take a pie in the face, but inside they don't want to see the crowd's emissary taken down a notch.

It is imperative to make sure you book quality entertainers who understand corporate culture and know the show is not about the entertainers, as much as the company and making the CEO look like a star. Many times companies will book a name entertainer who might have TV or movie credits. These musicians or comedians are great for creating buzz but they sometimes do not understand or care what the company does. So often lesser known, but

professional acts that specialize in corporate entertainment are a better choice.

And no one says you have to put your exec up there under the lights. Companies and event planners have staged auctions with prizes such as formal dinner parties, using the executive team and CEO as waiters. Incentives to meet company goals have included pet-washing by the CFO, and one daring regional vice-president announced that if his team met their quarterly goals he'd shave his head at the annual meeting. (They did, and he did).

Warning Flags

So outside of employing careless or clueless entertainers, are there situations where using the CEO is a bad idea? Absolutely.

Inappropriateness: What's the tone of your conference? In a climate of business turmoil, you may be going with a more somber feel. No one wants to see a CEO take off a balloon animal hat to announcing lower profits or the possibility of future lay-offs

Lack of Preparation: In some cases, your CEO may like the attention, agree with the idea of being a star, but never commit to preparing for the event. Corporate entertainers know that an executive's time is precious and usually don't require much rehearsal of them, but if the CEO doesn't set aside even a little time to prepare there's the risk of botching the act. This is especially true with performances with comedians or improvisation groups. (Again, if you do go this way, it's important to use a seasoned troupe that can provide a teleprompter and a professional to run it.)

Unwillingness: I'm very careful in choosing which executive I use in an act. While the CEO is an ideal option, as the leader and most public face of the organization, some executives are determined to avoid the very humanizing I'm writing about. These men and women prefer to have their employees at arms-length, to keep an "untouchable" status. Perhaps they're extremely shy or just very fearful of being made to look silly.

In any case, this attitude can hamstring them from acting the part and undermine the intention of the performance. Often, switching to a VP of Marketing or some other well-known executive is the best idea.

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