

INTELLIGENT INSURER

It's no joke: five tips insurance execs should learn from comedians

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Sam Carrington

In an increasingly digitised age, the art of the presentation is becoming lost, which can be a problem in a people-oriented industry such as insurance. To rekindle this lost skill, some insurers are turning to a stand-up comedian to help them wow an audience.

The best companies have always been willing to explore what might be called unorthodox methods to gain a competitive edge. From quirky incentives programmes to working with the US Marines on team building and leadership exercises, there is not a lot that re/insurers and brokers have not tried at some point.

Hiring a comedian to help executives with their presenting skills must surely be a first. Yet that is exactly what a number of Lloyd's businesses including CNA Hardy have done—and their staff have reaped the rewards, they say.

The comedian in question is Sam Carrington, a regular on the London stand-up circuit and veteran of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. In 2017 he formed Smirk Experience, with the idea that he would offer the corporate world skills he has distilled from the realms of stand-up comedy.

Carrington is already working with some big brands including Google and Investec, but many of his family members have worked in the insurance industry and he has also found traction in this sector, training executives to speak better, present better—and even be funnier when required.

He believes that a skills gap is emerging in many corporations, especially when it comes to the younger generations who are starting to achieve more senior positions. He argues that as individuals—and companies more generally—have become increasingly reliant on technology, that some of the skills underpinning the art of presentation and the nuance of personal skills have been lost.

“Technology has taken over aspects of the decision-making progress in many areas of business but you cannot get away from the fact that people still buy people—in a sense the art of public speaking and presenting has become more important than ever, yet many people have never learned those skills,” Carrington tells Intelligent Insurer.

“Maybe this new generation is too digitised, too reliant on technology. They prefer to send an email than pick up the phone. That means they have lost—or never had in some cases—the personal touch that makes all the difference the more senior you get, whether you are presenting to clients or looking to motivate and lead internal staff.”

Doing a set

The sessions Carrington runs for insurers mainly take place on site in clients' offices but also include group work on away days which culminates in the attendees performing a stand-up act [live to each other](#). This is after a day-long workshop which helps them deal with everything from nerves, to content, to reading a room, mental preparation and gaining a better understanding of fear itself.

“We also teach memory techniques, how to handle interruptions and try and get to the root of exactly what people fear when it comes to public speaking. We help them understand where that comes from and to make it something they understand, can manage and even use positively.

“We tell them that the worst-case scenario might be dying on stage, but so what? You might feel an idiot but you still have a job and a family. The day culminates in a performance in that particular type of session and the feedback has been excellent,” he says.

Previous to Smirk, Carrington spent 10 years at ITV, during the last four of which he worked as one of the company's youngest sales controllers, responsible for monetising ITV Breakfast's digital offering. As such, he is no slouch when it comes to making a business work and Smirk Experience is gaining traction quickly as a result.

He believes his success has come because public speaking does hold such a real fear for so many— even apparently otherwise confident executives.

“Public speaking comes top in polls of peoples’ biggest fears (beating, incredibly, breakups of longterm relationships and the death of loved ones) but all is not lost. They say necessity is the mother of invention and it’s true—if you want to get better at something you will. With practice these tips will help you not only defeat your fears, but turn public speaking into something that can actually be enjoyed,” he says.

Here are Carrington’s five tips for insurance execs:

See yourself doing it

Professional performers have visualised themselves performing for as long as there have been performances. Where are you talking? What will you be wearing? Who’ll be listening? The better you mentally prepare the more relaxed you’ll be, and consequently your audience will be too.

Memorise subjects, not lines

We’ve all been at weddings where amateur speakers have written speeches in long-hand ANDTHEN-READ-EVERY-WORD-INDIVIDUALLY, which can be grating. Remember subject prompts and your style will be more conversational, and therefore will be more listenable.

Welcome your nerves

A massive error is to think professional speakers don’t get nervous: they do, but they use it. When your body feels threatened it releases adrenalin to help you in a perceived forthcoming fight. This causes your heart to pump faster to supply more blood to the body, your airways to open up to allow more oxygen in and your stomach to secrete glucose to increase energy levels. Think of the nerves as the cavalry coming over the hill.

React to surroundings

You aren’t talking AT an audience, you’re talking WITH them.

“I once did a gig at working men’s club in Luton, which was rough,” Carrington recalls. “In the toilet beforehand, a patron of the establishment said, I thought, ‘butterflies’ to me. I turned around to chat to him about my nerves, only to find he couldn’t do his trousers up. He hadn’t said ‘butterflies’ at all, but ‘button flies’ which he’d expressly asked his wife not to buy him on his new jeans.

“I changed my opener to that story and the gig couldn’t have gone better—they were lovely people.”

Assess what you've done

Record yourself (with the voice recorder on your phone; if you really want to improve quickly ask a friend to film you). At the start you'll feel like Malcolm McDowell with his eyes calipered open watching the film in A Clockwork Orange, but if you stick with it your learning will fly. After a while if you watch one back from a few months previously it'll feel as though you're watching a totally different speaker.

Sam Carrington is a professional comedian. He runs Smirk Experience which trains public speakers in workshops and individually. Visit www.smirkexperience.com for more information.