

Kathy Klotz-Guest

[Keeping it Human™](#)



**What Can Comedy and Improvisation
Teach About Marketing?**

It Turns out...A Hell of a Lot!



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Everything I Learned About Marketing Came From Comedy and Improvisation



Well, almost. In addition to 20 years in marketing (yeah, that helped!), my many years in sketch, [stand-up and improvisation](#) have provided many invaluable lessons, especially in the “ballsy” department! Comedy and marketing have much in common. Well, comedy *is* marketing, and vice-versa.

After all, brilliant comics are fantastic marketers. Hey, Jerry Seinfeld sold us a successful show about the mundane! Many marketing “truisms” work in comedy, too.

Yes, improvisation and stand-up can hone your funny bone, and that is awesome. The true business lessons of comedy, however, are about so much more than just being funny. This ebook outlines a number of ways that comedy and improvisation can make us all better marketers. Comedy has changed my world for the better and I hope it does the same for you.

I would love to hear from you! Please leave comments on my [blog](#) or email me directly: [Kathy\(at\)keepingithuman\(dot\)com](mailto:Kathy(at)keepingithuman(dot)com). Be sure to check out other [ebooks](#) on the website!

Kathy

Taking risks. *Social engagement requires experimentation.* In a world of big data and analytics, marketing is still a hell of a lot of art. Improvisation involves creative risks and following our guts (not just our heads). There’s no way around it. Risk is a muscle; when you exercise, it grows. To evolve, marketing has to take similar risks. Sometimes things won’t work. The more you take experiment, the more you fail quickly and discover what works. As with improvisation, in marketing there is no way to know if something works except one: doing it. Safe is the new risky in marketing and in comedy.



Ask any great comic how many times they failed before they killed it. Chances are they stopped



counting after high double digits. The greats keep getting up because they know failure is about learning what works. If you are doing the same things over and over, they lose their novelty and ability to create a “pattern disruption” that grabs attention. Great marketers push the envelope by innovating new products and new markets. Forget what others are doing. Go make your own template! There is no formula. In social media, stop waiting for others to ‘figure it out.’ Experimentation is part of the deal.

Yes, and-ing to co-create something better. *Marketing means co-creating.* ‘Yes, and’ is the cornerstone of improvisation as it is the building block for great scenes. If your on-stage partner calls you “Mom,” you are a mom, and you must build onto the reality your partner creates.

When we ‘deny’ an offer (yes, but), the scene stalls. ‘Yes, but’ someone and watch the reaction. This happens every day at a subconscious level for most of us. You’ll notice ‘yes, but’ kills creativity. In cultures filled with people who ‘yes, but’ (it’s really a no), very little co-creating happens. Great marketing involves ‘Yes, and-ing’ your audience. Your customer defines your brand in a way that is meaningful for them. As marketers, we shape it, yet positioning is ultimately in the hands of customers. Great marketers recognize that successful *marketing is an act of co-creation* with others. Adding on to customers’ stories and ideas makes your brand better.

Making your partner look good. *Marketing is always about your customer.* In improvisation, your goal is to make your stage partners look good by accepting their ‘offers’ (choices). When you focus only on your choices, you compromise the continuity of the story you are creating together. Great marketing requires empathy because it is all about making your customers look good by making them more successful, delighted, and happy. It’s not about you. Drop the focus on your methodology, your jargon, and your baggage. Make your customer the hero of the story. Sometimes you are the Robin to your customer’s Batman. Sometimes you lead, and sometimes you follow, and skilled improvisers and marketers understand that difference.

Listen, damn it! *Marketing requires listening more than talking.* One of the hardest things about improvisation is clearing your head so you can listen to your on-stage partner rather than thinking about what you are going to say next. Being present in the moment allows you to see opportunity and to react spontaneously. After years of performing, I’ve gotten a ton better and

I'm still growing. Hey, it's a craft! So it is with marketing. When you listen more than you talk, you hear what your customers are saying about what they want and need. This allows marketers to react in real time as we evolve towards a new reality of 'in the moment' marketing. Those customer gifts will surprise you and allow you to go in new, better directions.

Telling stories. *Marketing – like improvisation – is all about storytelling.* Stories bring laughter, inspiration, and make us memorable. According to Jennifer Aaker at Stanford University, research shows that stories are remembered up to 22X more than facts alone.



Too many facts in improvisation (instead of reactions) can kill a scene. A scene is about people! The most important thing in improvisation is the relationship the players have with each other on stage and how they change. It is the same with marketing. Marketing has to connect with our hearts – not just our heads. Stories make those emotional connections so we care about the brand.

Letting go. *Follow the customer's lead.* In improvisation, players need to learn when to lead a scene, and when to follow someone else's great idea to move the story forward. When the scene naturally coalesces around someone else's idea



(read: not yours!), it's in the best interest of the scene to rally around it instead of 'driving' the scene your way. And, in marketing, you have to know when to let go and follow your customers' lead. Great marketing involves allowing our customers to shape those stories. Letting our advocates (our enthusiast customers) drive, allows us to learn what they need and

how we can make them look good. Improvisers learn to let go because the outcomes are usually far better when we build something together.

Crafting a ‘ditchable’ playbook. *Plan, and always be ready to ditch the playbook. Marketing requires adaptability.* Every day unforeseen stuff – both good and bad – happens. When stuff stops working, great marketers improvise. Failure is part of the improviser’s motto. Improvisation isn’t just winging it. It requires preparation, skill and big values such as trust. Once you know the rules, you can break them. The same is true of marketing. Marketers who prepare and are willing to adapt as needed will be the ones to succeed in a noisy world of rapid change where the rules are changing all the time. Solid brands adapt more easily precisely because they are prepared, yet also open to change.

Remember: Plans are roadmaps, not fiancés. Like them; don’t marry them!

Focusing on your tribe. *Choosing the right focus yields the greatest payoffs.* Comedy, like marketing, is about knowing and concentrating on your “tribe.” Chris Rock is an excellent comic with a penchant for edgy material. A number of years ago, he hosted the Academy Awards and received mixed reviews. Why? Rock’s brilliance is in the edgier stuff you can’t say on primetime television. When you have to water down your offerings for a wider audience, you dilute your differentiation and your chances of success. Know your audience and know their needs, desires, and human challenges inside and out. Start there and go deep. Social communities don’t exist to buy your stuff – they exist around a sense of purpose, a common goal. Find your tribe.

WHO YOU ARE.

Deciding who you are. Comics have to make hard choices of cutting out OK opportunities to focus on GREAT material.

When writing “funny,” we spend hours only to end up with minutes of kick-butt material. Paring down is hard, but it forces us to make strategic choices about who we want to be. Not all marketing opportunities make sense with our limited resources and we have to choose strategies that reinforce our brand. In his book, *Born Standing Up*, Steve Martin wrote that he was at a crossroads with his act until he cut out all “safe” gimmicks. That’s when his act took off! So, be novel; be *you*. Be consistently you. In social media marketing, the way to attract people who believe what you believe is to live your brand in every way.

Telling the truth because the truth is all you got. *Truth makes compelling comedy because it's funny!* Great comics talk about what they know – the good, bad, and ugly. Hacks try to sell what's popular rather than generate authentic material that is based on who they are. Martin axed all “borrowed” material from his routine, and then became a truly authentic act that resonated with people. Bring who you are to your work, and your work will be better for it. Comedienne Ellen DeGeneres is a great example of authenticity. Truth also means having a definitive, unapologetic point of view. Marketing, too, must be purposeful, human and offer an authentic voice. Using hack material on the stage is akin to BS-speak in marketing. Audiences know when marketers and comedians are full of it!



Great marketing also requires honest storytelling and transparency with customers. Audiences worth reaching are smart; respect them and tell them the truth. What happens when we are open about our successes and failures? Being human builds trust with your tribe. And, hey, studies show that 92.3% of audiences are human!

Always be adapting. Comics spend years honing material into jokes that work with the right set-up, punch line, and delivery (timing). It is a craft that requires constant re-work. Marketers, too, must adapt their material. They must know their audience, prepare their materials painstakingly, and adapt to the unexpected. Message and timing are critical. Commitment is being fully bought in to your offering. If you're not buying it, your audience isn't either. Comics are masterful marketers – when they kill it's because they “sold” it. Confidence *shows*.

Make sure you're exuding passion and fun. Great marketing like great comic material requires passion, and a love of the game no matter how hard it gets. And, most importantly – have fun! If you aren't, neither are your customers. Fun isn't just for you – it's a powerful, contagious customer service element and word of mouth accelerator. And, in the end, customer delight and word of mouth are what marketing and comedy are all about.

Improvisation and Comedy Require Leadership and Mastery

Improvisation does not mean “winging it.” Improvising requires preparation, fluency, and knowledge – the oxymoronic “art” is in knowing *when* to deviate from the plan.

Marketing – and business in general – is undergoing tremendous change. Because of social media, the rapidly evolving social enterprise, increasing amounts and complexity of information (the rise of “big data”), marketers are inundated with choices, “facts,” the promise of greater insight, and a constantly changing set of “rules” for connecting better with customers. Successful entrepreneurs and companies prepare, fail, learn quickly, improvise, and “pivot.”



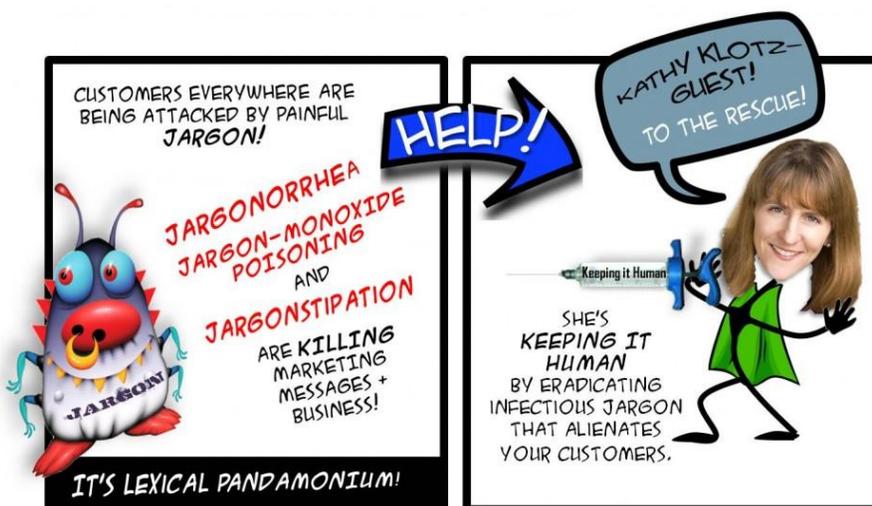
Marketing is like jazz. Its beauty isn't in the predictable notes; it's in the improvisation. So prepare, be open, let go, and adjust.

And yes, improvisation and stand-up comedy will make you funnier. Yet, the true long-lasting gifts are about so much more.

Cartoons Can Teach Us How to Be Better Content Marketers

I had the pleasure of chatting with *The New Yorker* cartoonist, author and TED speaker, [Liza Donnelly, about her craft on my podcast](#). Cartoons are content worth sharing and I believe that marketers can learn a hell of a lot about creating meaningful content by thinking like a cartoonist – that means thinking in big idea headlines that pack a lot of truth. What's more

shared today than humorous content?



Aim for the Gut. Cartoons aim for the emotional core. Great content makes audiences laugh, think or maybe even get angry. Making them think is good – making them *feel* is better. Feelings – not thoughts – move people to action such as sharing. The point is a cartoon packs a meaningful

emotional punch in a small footprint. That's the goal behind content marketing – connecting and inspiring action: whether it's word of mouth, sharing great content, or converting to a sale.

If you want your audience to open their wallets; you have to first open up a meaningful connection with them.

Content Must Go For Big Truth. Content that connects contains truth. Humor is about the truth – not facts, not data. Cartoons communicate a single a-ha in an economy of words. Just as cartoonists think through their ‘punch line,’ marketers need to convey one big, bold idea. The best content communicates a single, big human headline that’s contagious. And talking about products isn’t contagious. Start with a challenge or issue that your audience cares about. Imagine you only had one sentence to communicate; what would it be?

The truth is always simple and funny – that’s what connects. No content has ever been made better by making it more complex. Simplicity facilitates word of mouth.

Target Narrowly. Cartoonists don’t create for everyone. They know their audience well – their likes, dislikes, and challenges. Great content works because it’s focused. Choose your most important audience and focus on their world. What do they think about most? Your enthusiast customer is your best customer – this base cares enough to carry your message for you. If they don’t see themselves reflected in that message, you’ve aimed too wide.

Deliver ‘Personality.’ Cartoons have personality – funny, sarcastic, dry wit – whatever. Content reflects the beliefs and values of the creator and the audience being serenaded. Content without personality or a soul doesn’t work. There is just too much noise. Content with a voice speaks loudly and attracts your ideal audience – the people who believe what you believe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kathy Klotz-Guest, MA, MBA, founder of *Keeping it Human*, keepingithuman.com, helps companies and executives turn marketing-speak into compelling human stories. A comic improviser and storyteller, she runs [Jargonorrhea – A Viral Marketing show](#) podcast when she’s not eradicating jargon-monoxide poisoning. Her clients have included Yahoo!, Autodesk, Cisco, and United Way. Her favorite audience is still her little dude, Evan, who laughs himself silly. Trained at ComedySportz and at BATS, she plays every week with her stage partners-in-crime.

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