

Wow Any Audience: Strategies for Being an Effective Emcee

By Jeff Civillico

If you think being a corporate emcee is no different from a regular performance (or that any “funny guy” at work can do it), think again. Being an effective emcee requires a distinct skill set. Think about it...as the emcee, you set the tone for the entire event. You have to be able to cut or expand your planned material on the fly, often based on circumstances you have no control over, such as a last minute agenda change or technical problems. All in all, it’s a stressful role, and you have to pull it off with ease.

Unfortunately, many people believe that anyone can emcee an event – that the funny guy at the office can handle the role or that any entertainer can jump in and do it. Such a mindset does not give the role of emcee the respect it deserves. No wonder so many emcees do an average job at best.

When it comes to effectively emceeing an event, you need to do your homework. You can’t be so confident in your regular material that you blow off the emcee role as “easy” or “a cake walk.” Being an emcee really is a big deal, and you need to approach the role as such.

The following guidelines will help you emcee any event so you appear professional, confident, and in control of the agenda.

- **Prepare for the show.**

As the emcee, one of your main roles is to introduce the performers or other people who will be on stage. Therefore, contact the people you will be introducing ahead of time and learn at least three key things about them: 1) an accomplishment, such as an award or book, 2) a personal fact, such as where they live, and 3) something that appeals to the emotional side of the audience, such as mention of a son or daughter or a personal anecdote. The idea is to get some personality behind the person so every introduction doesn’t sound the same.

Even though many people claim that they don’t care what you say for their intro, the truth is that everyone cares. So if someone says to you, “Oh, just say whatever. I’m easygoing,” do not take this for an answer. Dig deeper. Keep asking questions. Go to the person’s website and see what information you can find (although be aware that many people have outdated websites).

Additionally, meet the person you’re introducing before the event, even if it’s just 10 minutes before you go on. You can gauge a lot from someone just by meeting them. For example, if you meet the person and realize that he’s very straight-laced and does not joke around, you have a clear indication that it’s not okay to crack jokes during his intro. If possible, take a couple of minutes to tell the person what you plan on saying for his or her intro. Most people

don't like surprises, so this little investment of time can yield great dividends later.

- **Don't do what everybody else does.**

You've seen "that guy" before. You know the one...he starts emceeing the event by coming out on stage and saying, "How's everybody doing tonight? Boy...I just flew in from Chicago, and man are my arms tired!"

Whatever you do, don't be "that guy." Think of all the common entertainment situations you will have to address as an emcee, such as people coming late and leaving early; announcements for intermission, lunch, and merchandise; explaining the rules of cell phone use, picture taking, and video recording; etc. Prepare clever ways to handle all the situations you need to address.

For example, if your specialty is magic, you can have a disappearing cell phone or threaten to make any late comers or early leavers become invisible forever. If you're a guitar comic, you can write a silly song about turning off your cell phone and what the boss will do if you don't. If you're a ventriloquist you can have a dialog about the house rules with your puppet. Remember that you're getting paid to emcee the event; therefore, the more you can tailor it to your specific audience, the better. At the end of the show, you will stand out as a polished emcee. The audience may not know why, but they will know you were different... and better!

- **Create specific emcee material.**

You may have tons of material to draw upon, but if it's not flexible, adaptable, and audience appropriate, you may be in trouble. As the emcee, you are responsible for the pace of the event, making sure everything runs smoothly and swiftly. That means being able to continue onstage if extra time between acts is needed (technical issue, previous program ran short, etc) and being able to wrap up immediately when the stage is set. If you don't already have an assortment of 30-second gags or 2-minute bits to draw from, you need to take the time to prepare these now. Then you'll be confident, relaxed, and ready when your event producer/director says, "I need two minutes here."

Additionally, you want your material to appear customized for the event you're emceeing, even if it is your "stock" emcee material. Remember that the corporate market can sniff out fluff material. So if you do your cruise ship material during a corporate event, you're going to bomb big time. Therefore, use the jargon and acronyms your audience uses. Name drop (the CEO, the VP of Sales, the receptionist, etc.). Mention experiences or industry trends. Make the audience know that you "get" them and are one of them. Show them that you put some work into this. You want people to think you did the show just for them.

- **Know the etiquette of being an emcee.**

Just like any role, the emcee role has certain do's and don'ts. Here are a few to be aware of:

- The stage is your domain when you're an emcee. It looks bad when you leave the stage before the next guest or act comes on, or if you're not there to take the person off stage.
- Dress the part. If you're doing a corporate show, look like one of them with a suit and tie, or skirt and blouse. If it's a casual event, dress accordingly.
- Don't be a jerk. Be nice to everyone – not just to the person who hired you, but also to the tech people, the wait staff...everyone. If you get the reputation of being a jerk, you won't get called back.
- Arrive the night before if possible. Don't cut it close time-wise. Have your props shipped ahead of time.
- Force yourself to play the part. As the emcee, you're the "fun one" – you're the glue holding the event together. If that's not your natural style, fake it until you make it.

Go Forth and Host!

Being an emcee is a lot of fun...and a lot of work. But with some good old fashioned preparation and healthy dose of creativity, you can be the emcee everyone remembers – and the one who gets asked again and again.

About the Author

Jeff Civillico's highly engaging program, "Comedy in Action," blends comedy, juggling and audience participation both as a featured entertainer and a Master of Ceremonies at corporate events. An honors graduate of Georgetown University, he explores themes of communication, goal setting and teamwork during his workshops. Working with companies of all sizes, Jeff's clients include Disney, Wachovia, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Verizon, and The American Heart Association. For more information, visit www.jeffonstage.com.