

HOW TIRED IS YOUR METAPHOR?



BY TIM EMPRINGHAM

Stop me if you've heard this one before...

Many great joke tellers know to preface their jokes with this saying, to prevent themselves from losing their audience with a joke that their audience has heard before. So why is it so rare for corporate storytellers to give their audience that same common courtesy?

The power of metaphors as a way of communicating to our teams is indisputable. People connect personally to the stories and can identify patterns quickly from metaphors. When one is trying to communicate a new idea, a metaphor connects a familiar idea or pattern to something new and foreign to the audience.

But what too often happens once a leader has found a metaphor that resonates with their audience is that the metaphor becomes a "standard" in their repertoire becoming the go-to story to communicate new ideas. Unfortunately, this reuse has the opposite effect that the speaker hopes it will have—rather than connecting people to the new idea, they tune out at the start of the story because they have "heard this one before."

Changing the metaphor, even when the concepts you are presenting aren't completely new, forces your audience to think about the concepts in a new way. By forcing people to apply a new mental image to a concept, they are forced to look at things with a fresh mindset and are more likely to connect with what's new rather than tuning out the message.

So how do you know when your metaphor is in need of a refresh?

1. Observe Your Audience

Because public speaking and storytelling can be an uncomfortable practice for many people, it can be difficult to focus on "reading the audience" when in reality the speaker is just trying to "get through" their material. Take the time to improve your comfort as a speaker and you will become attuned to the reactions of your audience, and the deflating energy of your tired metaphor will become as obvious to you as it was to the rest of the room.

2. Proactively Test New Metaphors

I'm not suggesting rolling out a new untested metaphor at your next big presentation to the board, but rather to try out new stories with smaller audiences as part of your regular communications (and then refer to #1). As you introduce new ideas or ways of communicating an idea through a new metaphor, you may find another new metaphor that resonates as well or better than the original that you can add to your toolkit.

Metaphors can be an incredibly powerful storytelling technique. But if you don't keep your metaphors fresh, you risk the "heard this one before" reaction from your audience and not only will your metaphor lose its impact but your overall message will get lost in the yawns. If you have something new and impactful to communicate, you may want to consider a metaphor-phases rather than extending a tried and true story from your "standards" collection. **B**

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