

Open Mouth, Insert Foot: What George Carlin Taught Me About Knowing Your Audience

By Deborah Grayson Riegel

When I met my husband Michael thirteen years ago, we knew within the first two weeks that this was *it*. (I like to tease him that *he* knew within the first two weeks, and that I'm still thinking about it, but we both know that's a bunch of bologna.) So it didn't feel like we were rushing things when he asked me to meet his parents after one month of dating.

Despite an excellent track record of wooing and winning over my boyfriends' parents through the years, I was nervous this time. The stakes felt higher – especially if we might become family. As we drove the three hours to Michael's parents' summer home on Long Island's North Fork during heavy Friday traffic, I coped with my nerves the best way I could: by telling jokes. Three hours of smiling and laughing had to be better than three hours of mindless chitchat and small talk, right? I pulled out all the stops: favorite bits from my college stand-up comedy routine, painful groaners, witty loaners, and one positively filthy and universally offensive joke from George Carlin. What can I say? I was in love and I had three hours to fill.

By the time we were halfway through dinner that night, Michael's parents (and the red wine) had helped me feel much more relaxed. Michael and I shared a secret victory smile and played a quick game of footsie under the table. When we came to a natural lull in the conversation, Michael piped up: "*Deb, why don't you tell my parents that joke you told me on the car ride?*"

All told, I had probably shared fifty jokes on the ride. Which one did he mean? "*Could you give me a hint about which one without blowing the punchline?*" I requested with a sly smile.

"*You know,*" Michael pressed, with a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. "*THAT one!*"

I could only think of one joke that would qualify for that level of naughty nuance. So, emboldened by romance and red wine, I proceeded to recount one of George Carlin's dirtiest lines to my new boyfriend's unexpectedly hip parents.

It wasn't until the last words were exiting my mouth that I made eye contact with Michael again – and when I did, I saw that his face had drained of all color and his mouth had gone slack. The room was silent, save for the crickets chirping their evening song. As I sat there in stony silence, looking at Michael's horrified parents who were looking anywhere but at me, Michael recovered his power of speech long enough to croak: "*I didn't mean that one.*"

Too little, too late – and at a big cost. How big? Let's put it this way: By the end of the weekend, Michael's dad had pulled aside his **single, 30 year old son and recommended that he not rush into settling down** – the first and last conversation of this kind in history.

Fast forward thirteen years: The good news is, we've all recovered from my debacle. The better news is my in-laws don't even remember it. The best news is that I learned a valuable lesson about knowing your audience before you say a word.

Knowing your audience is a critical competency for anyone who presents ideas – and that's every single one of us. Whether your goal is to close a deal, solicit a donation, sell a concept, overcome an objection, teach a new behavior, secure a client, or win a heart, you need to be aware that your listeners come with their own set of assumptions, expectations, hopes and fears about 1) you and 2) the topic you're discussing.

Chances are, you do this already without even thinking about it. When you know that you must include a cost-benefit analysis in order for your boss to really consider your proposal, you're showing that you've considered your audience's needs. When you send your organization's CEO to pitch a new client who only wants to meet with the top dog, you're doing it. And when my kids ask their Grandma if they can stay up late to watch another episode of Sponge Bob while they gobble their tureens of ice cream – a request that would never, ever fly with the home audience – they're doing it too.

But when you have a new audience, you can't simply rely on what's worked in the past. Every single time I prepare to facilitate a workshop, deliver a keynote speech, or even have a one-on-one with a new client, I think about (and where possible, ask ahead of time) what this particular audience wants and needs to hear and how they want to hear it. Yes, even if I have spoken about this exact topic before, and yes, even if I have coached someone with this same issue before. New person + new approach = custom-fit results. And as you now know, I learned this lesson the hard way.

Here are ten questions to help you get to know your audience:

1. What do I know about them personally and professionally that will impact how I present my ideas (age, gender, cultural background, education, job responsibility and status, civic and religious affiliation, etc.)?
2. What do they already assume about this topic? About me?
3. What do they already know about this topic? About me?
4. What previous experiences have they already had with this topic? With me?
5. What values do they hold about this topic? About me?
6. What do they want or hope for?

7. What are they worried about?
8. What are their hot-buttons or sensitivities?
9. What do they really need to take away from this conversation or presentation?
10. What is going on in their life and work that I need to take into consideration?