

Jay Leno Does It... Do YOU?

Written by Darren LaCroix

The following happened when I was in Orlando a few days ago. It bugged me so much I had to write about it.

So there I was, along with Dave, standing in the front of an almost empty meeting room. Dave had heard me speak to a group of managerial accountants in Boston. It went over so well, he invited me to present to a group of 425 college accounting students. He knew my abilities and trusted my judgment.

So there we were, along with the AV guys, setting up the room for my motivational speech, "Want to be Good, Great, or a Champion?" I asked Dave how many students he expected? He told me "at best" 425, but we both surmised that the room had been set up for many more.

Now, it's a fact that people do not like to sit in the front rows. It is human nature for people to want to be comfortable. We tend to spread out, so that we are not too close to others if we don't have to be. That's why most people prefer to cluster in the back, leaving rows and rows of empty seats up front.

This is not fun for the presenter. Speaking is intimate; a speaker looks to connect with the audience. And rows of empty chairs become an invisible barrier, one that literally and emotionally creates distance between a speaker and the audience.

Did you know that when Jay Leno took over the Tonight Show he added rows of chairs and extended Johnny Carson's stage to allow him to get closer to the audience? Like Jay, it is our responsibility to do whatever we can to connect better with the audience.

Dave had given many presentations himself. So he understood the problem immediately. He and I agreed that we should either remove some chairs or tape off the back rows, forcing people to fill in the front first.

The event planner for the organization came into the room just then. We asked her if she could take care of doing just that. She replied, "We'll just have the room monitors at the doors ask everybody to sit up front." She then ran off to handle another issue.

Dave and I look at each other in shock. "WHAT? They'll never listen. It doesn't work that way!" Granted, she was trying to be helpful and thought she had solved the problem. And yes, she had about a million things to attend to. But the fact was, she just didn't get it. She never had to give a presentation before. She didn't understand the effect a row of empty chairs had on the speaker.

At almost every conference I've spoken, I've noticed that they put out way to many chairs: "Just in case." Just in case what? In case people walk in off the street to go to an accounting conference? Not very likely.

If you have a track record of 100 attendees, even with better promotion, you still have a good idea as to how many people are registered, and how many people might register at the door. So be reasonable. It looks better when tables and chairs have to be added. much better than having lots of empty seats.

In her defense, this was only the second conference so there was not as much of a track record. Yet, I still believe it is better to put out fewer chairs than you need. It lends an air of "excitement" when you need to set out more. Too many empty chairs gives the perception of "low turn out" or "this meeting can't be that good."

In the end, it turned out not too bad in Orlando. As people came in last minute, they did not go to the front. There were five rows on the left side of the room that only had 1 person. It could have been much worse.

Event planners: Yes, it is easier to have all the chairs set out ahead of time. But are you going for easier, or a better event? Speakers will do better when the setting is optimal. Attendees will have a more fruitful experience.

Speakers: It is our job to create the best atmosphere, to generate the best connection with the audience. Sometimes we may have to gently educate the event planners. If they are not opened to it, keep in mind that speakers are just one part of their event. Whether we are a big part or not, we must not let our egos ruin our reputations. They are the ones paying you. Do everything you can to optimize the setting for your speech.

Be like Jay: Take responsibility and make the room the best setting for you. If NBC had said "No," do you think Jay would have thrown a hissy fit? Do the best you can with what you have.



Darren LaCroix is a rare combination -- he's an author, keynote speaker, and a corporate comedian. Darren's unique talents also flow into films, commercials, and corporate training videos. He is the co-author of a *book Laugh & Get Rich* that teaches people how to find more joy in each day. Since becoming the 2001 World Champion of Public Speaking, Darren has enthusiastically inspired and entertained audiences around the world with his fantastic keynote speeches. Visit Darren's website at www.Humor411.com