



Call Center  
Blues?

# Bring in the Humor!

EMILY BALLANCE

Here comes the call. Your agent takes it. An enthusiastic voice on the line says, “Hi, how are you today? Listen, I just tried your product/service, and I’m crazy about it! And by the way you’re doing a great job, too! In fact, I’m so pleased with everything—including your courteous response to my call—that I’d like to write a letter. Would you please give me the name and address of the corporation president and call center manager so I’ll know where to send it?”

That’s when you wake up from the dream and realize you’ve overslept. And that’s not so funny. It’s back to the reality that most of the time, agents at your center are taking call after call from frustrated customers wanting to talk about situations that the agents have already been over and over and over.

How can you help your agents combat the boredom, frustration, mental fatigue and stress that are inherent in the job? Bring in the humor! Positive, affirming humor is not only beneficial, it is essential for call center survival. Here’s why: humor helps agents deal with job stress—one of the main causes of illness, absenteeism and employee burnout. With two of the top corporate concerns these days being employee retention and healthcare costs, workplace humor is good for the bottom-line.

Dr. David Abramis, professor at the California State University, Long Beach College of Business Administration, is an expert on fun in the workplace. In one study of 341 workers, Abramis found that those who had the most fun in their jobs were also likely to be the most productive.<sup>1</sup> Abramis reports that “people who laugh more at work are



Don't be surprised if communication and productivity improve once you bring in the humor. The fun your agents will experience inside the call center will help them deal with the situations and people they can't change outside.

less anxious, less depressed and more satisfied with their jobs and with their lives in general.”<sup>2</sup> Many companies that have made a conscious effort to add humor and fun to the workplace have reduced healthcare costs, absenteeism and turnover. The lesson here is that employees who play together stay together.

Because of this and similar research, the corporate world's attitude has shifted away from the attitude that “Work's not supposed to be fun—that's why they call it work” and from the old-school view that humor at work is synonymous with “goofing off.” There is now substantial evidence that humor is actually an ally in fighting the stress that damages employee health and morale. In fact, research shows that humor:

- Reduces stress and anxiety
- Increases self-esteem
- Decreases anger
- Promotes a feeling of empowerment

And these are just some of the benefits!

Dr. Lee Berk, assistant research professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at Loma Linda University School of Medicine, studies the biochemical and physiological effects of positive emotions. His work has shown that laughter has a positive effect on major systems in the body, strengthening the immune system and decreasing stress hormone levels.<sup>3</sup> Other research on laughter has shown that it increases lung capacity, improves blood supply to organs, exercises facial, abdominal and chest muscles and decreases muscle tension.<sup>4</sup>

In short, humor can bring all kinds of physical, mental and emotional benefits to the agents in your call center. But just how do you go about incorporating humor?

## Five Tips for Incorporating Humor into the Call Center:

### TIP 1

#### Recruit Volunteers to Serve on a “Fun Committee.”

Successful companies are already leading the way. Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream has organized the Joy Gang, with the officer in charge called the “Grand Poobah of Joy.” Kwik Fit Financial Services has a “Minister of Fun” at its call center headquarters.<sup>5</sup>

These days, companies that want to retain productive, enthusiastic and energetic employees must provide a fun environment—thanks partly the influence of Gen-Xers in the workforce. More than any other group, Gen-Xers are motivated by informality and flexibility, and they're creative. So who better to head up your “fun committee” than an Xer?

Let the first item of business be deciding on the committee's name—the wackier, the better. The committee can best judge the general humor preferences of your group of agents. Plus, giving the committee this responsibility takes it off of you.

Do your agents like written humor? Give them call center stories, lists of funny sayings, quotations, bumper stickers, advertisements.

Do they like humorous contests?

How about visual humor? Bring out cartoons, funny hats, rubber chickens.

Outings? Try softball games, movies, classes.

Themed events? You can do International potluck, weird sunglasses day, Elvis day, disco day (And yes, you do need to get that disco ball and the spotlight to go with it!).

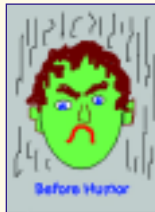
## 10 Ideas for Fun Contests

1. Finish the quotation. (Example: For the phrase “Change is inevitable,” one could respond: “except from a vending machine.”)
2. Funniest song lyrics you’ve “misheard.” (Example: Fleetwood Mac’s “Don’t Stop Thinking about Tomorrow” can be misheard as “Don’t stop thinking about your mama.”)
3. Funniest joke.
4. Fake poetry. Try reciting lyrics of a song as serious poetry.
5. Match the baby/sibling/parent pictures.
6. Questions to ponder. (Example: “If a turtle loses his shell, is he naked or homeless?”)
7. Funniest riddle you ever heard as a child. (Example: “What do you call a boomerang that doesn’t come back? A stick.”)
8. Best knock-knock joke. (Example: “Knock knock. Who’s there? Wah. Wah who? Hey, you don’t have to get so excited.”)
9. Worst country music song title. (Example: “She Made Toothpicks Out of the Timber of My Heart.”)
10. Funniest story about a specific topic. (Examples: Being late, bad food, car breakdown, etc.)

### NEGATIVE HUMOR

Remind agents that these topics can be sensitive, controversial or painful:

- Politics
- Sex
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Physical disabilities
- Death
- Weight/height



Creating a humor room may not be feasible in your location, but you can at least designate a specific area dedicated to humor and fun.

Among other items, that area could include different-colored paper with only an oval shape printed on each piece so that agents can draw different faces.

### TIP 2

#### Set Aside a Specific Area for Fun.

Eastman Kodak has humor and creativity rooms for its employees—places where they can laugh, relax and explore their creativity. There’s even a toy store with “boss dolls.” The possibilities here are endless (if not scary).

Creating a humor room may not be feasible in your location, but you can at least designate a specific area dedicated to humor and fun. That area could include:

- A bulletin board where agents can post cartoons, the doodle of the week, funny drawings, sayings, etc.
- Coloring books and crayons. Coloring is a right brain

activity, so it’s a great break from the computer.

- Different-colored paper with only an oval shape printed on each piece so that agents can draw different faces. No doubt there will be some hilarious captions. And why not have an art exhibit. Encourage agents to vote for their favorite piece of art and give out prizes.

### TIP 3

#### Discuss with Your Agents the Difference between Positive and Negative Humor.

Positive, affirming humor is loving, healing, inclusive and uplifting. Negative humor is offensive and degrading. Negative humor includes sexual, religious and racial humor—

or any humor that demeans a particular person or group.

Remind agents not to use humor to communicate things that they would not say directly. Indirect communication often includes sarcasm, followed by comments such as, “I was only kidding. What’s your problem?” More often than not, people on the receiving end of practical jokes don’t find them particularly funny, either. And using humor with customers can be tricky, since many of them are already in a heightened state of frustration. Acknowledging and responding to the customer’s feelings should always come before levity.

### Some Items for Your Humor Survival Kit:

- Kazoo
- Slinky
- Crown
- Kaleidoscope
- Balloons
- Prism
- Tiara
- Clown nose
- Games
- Yo-yo
- Silly putty
- Puppet
- Coloring book
- Crayons

#### TIP 4

### Model Positive, Affirming Humor for Your Agents

Support humor as part of the corporate culture. Bring humor and fun to your meetings. That doesn’t mean that every meeting is going to be knee-slappingly funny or that work should be like an episode of “Friends.” However, you might start a meeting with a funny story, video clip, quotation or quick game. Get ideas from books on teambuilding. The humor doesn’t need to be elaborate. It just needs to encourage your employees to work together, by creating a lighter atmosphere.

#### TIP 5

### Create a Humor Survival Kit for Your Agents.

OK, to be honest, this is very similar to a toy box. It’s for fun stuff—magic wands, bubbles, joke books, puzzles. You can include humorous books, such as *Letters from a Nut* by Ted Nancy. It’s also fun to create a notebook of funny pictures, quotations, etc. Invite agents to add to the book. And be sure to include pictures from theme days and other department events.

Keep looking for new sources of humor and for creative ways to share these with your agents. And don’t be surprised if communication and productivity improve. The fun your agents will experience inside the call center will help them deal with the situations and people they can’t change

outside. Sure, there will still be the irritated callers, but somehow those are easier to deal with when you’re dressed like John Travolta sitting under a disco ball. ■

#### Notes

1. Mary Rau-Foster, “Humor and Fun in the Workplace,” *Williamson Business Magazine* (June/July 2000), <http://www.workplaceissues.com/arhumor.htm>.
2. David Abramis, “Humor in Healthy Organizations,” *HR Magazine* (1992): 37, 72-75.
3. Lee Berk, et. al., “Neuroendocrine Influences of Mirthful Laughter,” *American Journal of Medical Sciences* 298 (1989): 390-396.
4. Bill Strubbe, “Getting Serious About Laughter,” *The World and I Online* (March 2003), <http://www.worldandi.com/newhome/public/2003/march/nspub.asp>.
5. Andy Moore, “He’s Having a Laugh,” *Personnel Today* (September 28, 2004): 29.

#### Other References:

- Morreall, John. *Humor Works*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, Inc. 1997.
- Paulson, Terry. *Making Humor Work*. Los Altos, CA: Crisp Publishing. 1989.
- Zemke, R., Raines, C. and Filipeczak, B. *Generations at Work*. New York: American Management Association, 2000.



Emily Ballance is a professional speaker and Licensed Professional Counselor with 20 years experience in both fields. She speaks on humor in the workplace, wellness and communication to associations and corporations across the country. Previously, Ballance helped implement the “StayWell” program, a highly successful and innovative employee wellness program at Control Data Corporation in Los Angeles. Ballance holds a bachelors degree in Journalism and a masters degree in Education from UNC-Chapel Hill.