



The Customer Communicator Web Extra



Use humor to combat stress in the workplace

Humor and creativity are two very important tools that can help to lighten the load in the typically stressful customer service environment. Author and humor expert Michael Kerr explains why it's important to go ahead and laugh:

■ **The physical and the mental.** Having a sense of humor, says Kerr, can help you to physically cope with stress. "When we laugh, our blood pressure drops; we increase the amount of oxygen going into our brains, lungs, and blood system; and we reduce stress-inducing chemicals and hormones in our bodies."

When you're stressed, your brain power diminishes, says Kerr. "You can't think clearly or access your memory as well. You need to take a break if you want to be able to handle a problem."

Humor gives you that mental break. It can help you to clear your head by giving it what Kerr calls a "mental floss." Humor "cleans out the anxieties and debris that accumulate in your brain when you're stressed so you can tackle problems ahead with a clear head," he says.

In addition to the ability to clear your head and physical benefits, a sense of humor will allow you to take control of your emotions during (and after) a tense situation. You may be familiar with the stress-management concept that, while you can't always control what happens to you, you always have control over your reactions to situations.

■ **Getting started.** So you want to bring more humor into your workplace — where and how do you start? The good news is it doesn't cost a lot of money or take a lot of time, Kerr says. "Look for

very simple ways to add a little bit of fun. Often, the most powerful humor is spontaneous."

Kerr suggests starting with your physical environment, which can have a great impact on your mood, creativity, and stress level.

"Do whatever you can to lighten up your workstation and office space and promote some fun," he says. Hang funny posters, goofy pictures, cartoons, or signs that remind you to laugh. Create a humor bulletin board where everyone can tack up humorous sayings, favorite cartoons, etc.

■ **Moving beyond joke-telling.** Many people just cannot tell a joke — but that's OK. Having a sense of humor isn't about joke-telling or even stand-up comedy.

"That's not what I'm suggesting should go on in the workplace," says Kerr. "Having a sense of humor is having a sense of balance and perspective — it's your attitude; it's how you react to things."

Sure, there are times when you may feel humorless, but you can choose to change your outlook. "People can develop a sense of humor. They can practice it by doing simple things," he says. For instance, taking the time to read humorous books, the daily comic strips, and cartoon books. "If you tend to read only murder mysteries or gloomy novels, try to break out of that pattern," he says.

Contact: Michael Kerr is author of *You Can't Be Serious! Putting Humor to Work*.

