

Presenting Shows The Right Way

Little Things Can Make A Difference

by Del Suggs

For years I just accepted and played any situation a college wanted. Middle of the cafeteria? I can do that. Outside on the lawn? No problem! Lobby of the Student Center? Sure thing! See, I'm a Nice Guy-- and nice guys always try to get along with everybody. I didn't want to cause trouble by objecting to a venue or presentation idea.

As you might imagine, I had some interesting experiences. How about this-- I actually played the "Half-time Show" at a football game! My sound system was set up on a flat bed truck, and when the teams ran off the field the driver pulled on the middle of the field with my "stage." When my twenty-minutes was up, the driver ran back out, unplugged the extension cord and drove off the field with me "surfing" the back of the truck.

I also had some lousy experiences. I played standing on the floor in the corner of a crowded campus cafeteria, while being completely ignored by three hundred students. It was a colossal waste of my time and their money.

Being a life-long learner, I started to keep track of the "problem situations," especially when I noticed trends. Soon, I began to see that simple changes could often create a much better performance situation. When I felt like I was knowledgeable enough, I began to offer suggestions to activities personnel at the school where I was performing.

For example, when another school wanted me to stand on the floor in the corner of their cafeteria, I suggested that we move some tables and put me up on the elevated sitting area. That show turned out great, and Student Activities Board was grateful to find a better way to present their performers.

Eventually I refined my advice into the various educational programs I offer at the Conferences and Workshops, and at the Student Activities Training Programs I present at colleges across the country. I thought that I would share a potpourri of those ideas with you.

Shake It Up

If you are using a room where students already go (like a cafeteria), or if you do all your shows in the same room (like a ballroom), then change the room around for your shows. It makes a difference, because it opens your students' eyes to the new experience (performance) that they are about to enjoy.

If you're in the tired old cafeteria, then move the tables around. Instead of putting the performer in the same old place, put them in the opposite end of the room. Remove all the chairs that face away from the stage, so that everyone sitting in the room is facing the performer. Put out tablecloths, even for a Noon show. Find a way to dim the lights.

Of course, you've brought in a stage-- because that gives your audience a focal point in the

room. But how about lights? You can nearly always find a portable stage lighting system on campus, but if your school doesn't have one then buy some clip-on lights and flood bulbs. I heard of a show once where they lit the stage with fifteen of those desk lamps that come standard in dorm rooms! Be creative, and do things differently.

I played a college coffeehouse that tried a new arrangement for my show. Instead of bringing in a stage platform for me to stand on, they brought in six or eight stages for the audience to sit on! I played on the floor, while the students sat at tables on stage risers. It was a "dinner theater" effect, and worked out great.

Stuck In Traffic

Respect the traffic patterns on your campus. No, I'm not talking about jaywalking-- I'm talking about the path that students take around your school and school buildings. If you are presenting a daytime show, then you have to pay special attention to the traffic patterns.

Students may go to different places on campus, but they tend to follow the same routes. If you find that students are filling the student center at 11 a.m. every Wednesday, then that may be the perfect time for your so-called "Noon" show. Move it up an hour to 11, and take advantage of that audience.

Keep your stage away from doorways and popular exits.

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Students are accustomed to using particular doors into and out of rooms and buildings. Don't try to do a show right in the midst of that traffic flow. Students will walk right by your event. That hurts the show disrupting the performance for the rest of the audience, because of people essentially walking in front of the stage.

But do take advantage of that traffic flow by noting where those students are going. Understand that you will not break those traffic patterns, especially for a daytime show. Make sure that any performance or event is either at the beginning or end of the traffic route, or somewhere along the way. Don't even attempt a daytime event that's not going to be walked past by all those students unless it's a really major program. Old habits are tough to break.

Picky Little Things

Take note of those petty little distractions that can reduce a great show into just a good show. Sometimes just the simplest little annoyances can add up to a big irritation with your audience.

Always be aware of lines and queues when you place your stage. I played an outdoor event where the food line and the beverage line were on opposite sides, and both ended at the foot of the stage. It made for a trainwreck of confusion right in front of the stage, a big distraction for the audience.

If you place a performer in front of a large door, window or glass

wall, make sure there is some kind of curtain, banner, or even just a blanket covering the glass. Without fail, some student will walk up to the outside of the glass and either try to open the door, or just start making funny faces and such things. And even if that doesn't happen, you don't need the distraction of having students walking around behind the performer.

Make sure there is somewhere for the audience to sit down. It can be discouraging for an audience to enter a room or an outdoor space to enjoy a show and have no where to sit. I've played beautiful shady patios and courtyards on college campuses where the audience stood around for a while, then left because there was no place to relax.

On the other hand, think about using performers when students can't sit down. We can be a great distraction for those waiting in long lines. I've performed specifically for students waiting in line for Drop/Add, to buy books, to vote in SGA elections, to give blood, and for students waiting in line for other attractions like wax hands and caricatures. If they're going to be in line for very long, use some music to distract them. It sure makes the time fly.

Natural Spaces

Consider the natural spaces on your campus. You may have a hillside that is just perfect for an outdoor event-- that gentle slope that creates a natural amphitheater. Take advantage

of it when the weather is amenable. Do a show someplace different. But pay attention to the climate and conditions!

One Fall semester I performed an afternoon concert in October at Three p.m. on a beautiful campus lawn. When I was booked, I suggested that the presenters do two things. First, provide a cover or awning for the stage in case of too much sun or rain; Second, that they make sure there was adequate shade for the audience. They ignored my suggestions. While there was no rain, I ended up performing in the full blazing sun for two hours. And the audience? Well, they sat about a hundred yards away underneath the shady trees that bordered the lawn. Still, it was a good show. The school booked me back for the next Fall. But, they moved the show to November instead of October, and to Five p.m. instead of Three p.m. It'll be much more comfortable for the audience, and for me!

If you have any questions about successful programs, please email. I'll do my best to advise and help you. And let me know about any thing new you've been using in your programs. Whether it's a new programming idea, or a sure-fire promotional technique, if you'll email me about it I'll spread the word.

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