

Leveraging Comedy for Social Change: [Strategic Recommendations & Tips]



www.CMSImpact.org/Comedy

Let the comedy be comedy. Don't make it do a heavier lift.

Comedy's persuasive power is diluted if audiences are aware they are being "messed to" or persuaded. At the same time, comedy's amplification impact is well-documented. The serious information—call to action, directives for more information—should be separate from the comedy.

Behavior change might not be the right objective for comedy in the context of social change.

Leverage comedy to capture attention, cut through the clutter, provide access to new information, offer a way into complicated social issues, encourage

sharing, and make memorable messages stick. In this way, comedy can serve a reinforcing, amplifying role alongside serious news and information about social issues. And attention leads to sharing, multiplying an original message. But behavior change may not be the most realistic objective for comedy when it comes to social issues; we need more research in many areas to understand this important element of social change and comedy.

Leverage comedy's attention-getting power with strategic timing.

Comedy's attention-getting power is most strategic when it is paired with key advocacy urgency—that is, a specific call to action that makes sense for the moment and the issue. Simply distributing a comedy piece—without the infrastructure for change (specific call to action) or an urgent moment—likely won't lead to influence that can make a difference.

Comedy is a powerful media tool. The audience is not just the public, but media.

Comedy's ability to actually set a media agenda is well-documented by research and in practice. The effect of one comedy piece can be magnified infinitely, increasing its ability to reach both target audiences and decision-makers who are able to directly impact the issue.

Use satire to mobilize a base of supporters, but don't count on it to change minds.

Using satirical comedy for social issues with well-established ideological or partisan polarization—like gun control, climate change—may do little to re-frame the issue for people who don't already agree with a particular stance. It may validate a perspective, but it won't work to turn naysayers into the choir. Satire can be used to open a door to more complicated new (or not ideologically polarized) information and to mobilize a base of supporters, particularly when the timing is strategic to coincide with a meaningful call to action.

Comedy is culturally specific. Representation matter in comedy's effectiveness for social issues.

Humor is culturally dependent on the ability of the audience to understand and identify. When using comedy or humor for public engagement around locally-specific issues, it won't work to create the humor without local voices and perspectives. Change-makers are right to strongly consider the audience—whether local, national, or international. Representation matters in the message creation and promotion.

Comedy and news sources can be powerful allies, working together to fuel social change.

Comedy does not have to *compete* with news—instead, it complements news coverage about social issues. In fact, comedy can open the cognitive doors for people to make sense of complex social issues, thus helping them to understand more serious news and information about them in the future. With partnerships between comedy game-changers and sources of serious news and information, this powerful connector role can be optimally synergistic in pursuit of social change.

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“Part of the magic of comedy is that you can force people who disagree with you—or even hate you—you can force them to listen.”

- JAMES ADOMIAN, STAND-UP COMIC

