

Outsmarting the Sprites: How to Beat Presentation Disaster

By Lenn Millbower

In Medieval times people believed that when mischievous sprites heard you wish for something they would make the opposite happen. Many show biz professionals still believe in them. I can attest to their existence. I have seen them in action. One example comes from my early speaking career. As I began a discussion of the distractions cell phones cause during training programs, my computer began to auto-download a software update. Another time, an event I was to keynote had moved locations at the last-minute but no one told me. I spend a frantic hour driving from hotel to hotel trying to find the correct location. And more recently, a comedy routine I was performing fell flat. No one laughed. It was only later that I realized the room I was performing in had such a bad echo that no one could understand what I was saying.

All three examples are true. All put me on the spot. All inconvenienced the audience. All were avoidable. In this article, I hope to help you outsmart the sprites by examining the extensive preparations show biz professionals practice. The acronym for those preparations is P.R.E.P.A.R.E.

Plan

The *Plan* is the most critical part of any performance but the least noticed by the audience. To gain insight into the length Hollywood goes when planning a movie, listen to the commentary track on any DVD. You will discover that the movie makers spent the years planning; including concept development, scripting, storyboarding, scenic selection, character development, music creation and actor casting. All these details added to the success of the film. Any one of them handled poorly could have ruined it.

Meetings planning The first step in foiling the sprites is to capture it all before the event..

Rehearse

In entertainment you can spot the true professionals. They *Rehearse* so much that they look unrehearsed. They “flow.” Flow occurs when you know something so completely that concentration is no longer required (much like our daily commutes: we’ve rehearsed that drive for months).

Constant, repetitious, mind-numbing rehearsal beyond endurance is the price performers pay to achieve flow. They examine the script line by line to plot the logistics of the performance. They determine where the props should be placed, how each item and person will get from point “A” to point “B” and correct disconnects in the script. These run-throughs, although tedious and time consuming, eliminate many of the flaws that attract sprites. As a result the performer becomes one with the presentation.

Explore

With practice and repetition behind you and flow in front of you, the sprites must seek another opening. They look for the unexpected. Accordingly, you should take time to *Explore* all the potential unplanned challenges. Some people accuse me of being an “Eeyore” on this subject because I over-think potential calamities.

It is true that I spend a great deal of time exploring what could go wrong. I ask myself a number of questions:

What technology issues could pop up?
What questions might the audience ask?
What would a heckler say?

Are there any electrical wires to trip over?

What health problems could someone in the audience have during presentation?

I explore these potential dangers not because I am a pessimist, but because the more emergencies I envision, the less likely the sprites are to surprise me.

Protect

Once you have identified a potential challenge, you should *Protect* yourself from it by devising a solution. You should then protect yourself again by devising a solution for the solution. You should ask yourself, “What’s the backup plan?” Then ask yourself, “What’s the backup plan for the backup plan?” Finally, ask yourself, “What’s the backup plan for the backup backup plan?”

For example, consider technology issues and ask yourself, “What if the laptop crashed?” Then determine to bring backup overhead slides just in case. Next ask yourself, “What if the overhead projector light bulb blows?” Then resolve to bring an extra light bulb with you. Finally ask yourself, “What if that light doesn’t work?” Then learn to present without your slides just in case.

Here’s an example from my own experience. In *My Training With A Beat* presentation, I demonstrate the various uses for music in learning environments. Without music there can be no presentation. I have protected my clients (and myself) by integrating the music into the PowerPoint presentation. I then travel with the music on a backup CD-ROM and a back-up audiocassette. As an extra precaution, I have recorded the music onto a VHS tape so that, even if all the usual audio channels are unavailable to me, I can play the music on a TV. On the remote chance that all these mediums should become demagnetized, I also carry several emergency musical CDs.

Accept

In improv training, comedians are taught to welcome the unexpected, to treat sprite surprises as gifts. These gifts lead to new discoveries. I will never forget the time, as a magician performing the linking rings (eight rings link and unlink at will), a mike stand got in the way. Much to my surprise, the sprites linked a ring to the mike stand! Even more surprising was the audience reaction. They applauded! That bit immediately became a part of my act.

It is an axiom among magicians that the magician has greater power because the audience never knows what is coming. Chances are that when something unexpected happens, the audience will, as they did with my link to the mike stand, regard the occurrence as planned. This fact gives the performer a decided advantage. If you *Accept* whatever happens as a gift, the audience will likely never know the sprites struck.

React

Accepting is not the same as compliance. Even when something unexpected occurs, you should still take charge. *React* with an aura of confidence knowing that you are prepared. Ironically, the amount of preparation you have engaged in will rebound to your advantage. Your client will be impressed by the amount of preparation you went to the deliver for them. In this

perverse sense you should welcome the sprites. Your reaction to their mischief will only make you look more professional.

Enjoy

You've planned, rehearsed, explored, protected, accepted and reacted. The final step is to simply *Enjoy* whatever happens. You control the dynamic so relax and place your focus where it belongs, on your audience. This focus will drive the sprites crazy.

A Show Biz Tradition

So, remember to P.R.E.P.A.R.E. And as a wish for luck (and in case the sprites are listening), *break a leg!*

This article is based on material found in Lenn Millbower's book, Show Biz Training (AMACOM, 2003),
<<http://www.offbeattraining.com/products/products3/products3.html>>