

SPEAKER



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IMPOSTER OR
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AUDIENCE INTERACTION:
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ROCK YOUR PLATFORM

Impersonator or **IMPOSTER?**



How to Use Characters to Bond with Your Audience

**Hewlett's repertoire includes (left to right):
Elton John, Jim Carrey as a Subway Sandwich Artist, Clean-Shaven Jason, Steve Wonder, Bono of U2, Alvin & The Chipmunks.**



BY JASON HEWLETT, CSP

A

t the beginning of my career, I insisted that the person introducing me to the stage would use the words “impersonator and entertainer.” So, the accountant, who forgot how to read that day, introduced me as follows: “Please welcome tonight’s entertainment, The Imposter, Jason Howlit!”

Of course, he got my name wrong, as everyone still does (tough to get a name right that’s probably on your printer or laptop), but the fact that he mistook “impersonator” for “impostor” was very telling to me. Imagine going on

stage questioning everything you’re about to do in your over-prepared show because of the botched intro? Welcome to corporate show biz, baby! I am a Q-Level celebrity! Bring out the lighters, folks.

So, was I an imposter? There is something uncanny about watching someone do a spot-on impression, stunningly morphing into a famous person, singer or character. It brings an immediate smile or laugh that is explosive when done correctly. For definition’s sake, impressions are when you change your voice or face instantly to mimic someone else, and can jump from one character to another rapidly. For impersonation, you dress in a costume, usually wear heavy make-up, and do one character. Most impersonators have a great gift of channeling the person they’re doing, which sounds kooky, but it works for a select few (exceptions being the 1 million “Elvi” in Vegas working the Strip. Remember, “Elvi” is the plural of Elvis, not a typo).

Why is the connection and immediate engagement between performer and audience so real when seeing a master impressionist? I believe it’s the same illusion as magic, the power of perfectly polished poetry, the wonder of ballet, the smooth of jazz. It takes you to a place in your mind of familiarity first, especially when the performer breaks into a legend of stage, such as Michael Jackson’s moon-

walk (which we’ve all tried and botched), or a Jim Carrey re-creation, which anyone under 40 has tried to whip their head around and sarcastically quip, “All-righty then!”

Fast Track to CHARACTERS & IMPRESSIONS

1. Costume. Pack accessories (wig, boa, hat, glasses, gloves) in your carry-on to add a fun element to your character visual and story.

2. Music. Whether singing or not, a backing track is helpful if you're going for Rocky (play *Eye of the Tiger*), or doing a mobster story (play *The Godfather* soundtrack). Just be careful when going for *Flashdance*—you may not be invited back if the stage gets too wet.

3. Mimic. When you see real characters—the store clerk with attitude, the grandma complaining about the lottery too loudly in line at the store—view them as potential pieces for your story, show or next routine. Write down what was said, how it was said, and immediately attempt to do the voice and mannerisms even while sitting alone in the car.

4. Try it out. Just step on stage and do it. Bookend it with stories or jokes that work already, so if it flops, you can save it. The more you fail at this, the closer you get to success.



It catches audiences off guard that one person can capture the essence of another, and then bring it to life. As if you are watching the untouchable entertainer all of a sudden in front of you, it is unlike most experiences you can have. To some it is creepy, and rightly so. I have seen impersonators who were so good, I was in shock and horrified, as then I saw them off stage and they stayed in character! Imposter is right! It's all part of the shtick, and it is how many make a lucrative living. But then you see the person who can move from one character to another and they are not only offered their own

TV shows or Las Vegas headlining gig, but hugely famous, such as Sammy Davis Jr. in the 1960's, Andy Kaufman in the 1970's, Robin Williams, Billy Crystal, Roy Firestone in the 1980's, Jim Carrey, Dana Carvey, Richard Jeni, and Danny Gans in the 1990's, and today's Jimmy Fallon, Terry Fator, Gordie Brown, and Kevin Spacey.

Impressions mesmerize, tell a story, are nostalgic, hilarious, and mastery all at once. There is great power in being able to do an impression, and it can be used within a story, any performance, or even everyday interactions to up your fee, as well as "Win Friends and Influence People."



The power of costuming and getting facial expressions and voices just right are critical for believable impressions.



How to Get into Character

1 Let it go. Stop taking yourself so serious. The stupider you're willing to look, the better this character will be. In your mind, go back to second grade, back row of the classroom, your teacher at the front with her annoying cadence, skirt pulled up around her upper chest, glasses hanging from her nose, and you're doing the same impression of her for your buddies who are laughing and about to get in big trouble. This is where impressions and characters begin. Be willing to look idiotic and you're halfway home.

2 The bigger the character, the easier to conceptualize. The wilder and more eccentric the character, the easier to nail. Thinking back, I was blessed to have in my youth such bizarre examples as Pee Wee Herman, Max Headroom, and Sloth from *Goonies*. Even prior to the 80's, legendary characters, The Lollipop Guild (and everyone else else from *The Wizard of Oz*), Alvin & The Chipmunks' "Christmas Song", Mickey, Donald and Goofy, Looney Tunes, The Muppets, and Tiny Tim singing with a ukulele. They were all there. Huge characters just waiting to be mimicked, and the more outlandish, the better.

3 Discover the essence. Now that you have the big pieces—the boisterous voice, bulging eyes, hand gestures and body movement—now focus on the little things that complete the painting, such as the tiniest of facial expressions; the extra vibrato in the voice, not at the front of the note but trailing off at the end; the phrasing of the words are way more important than nailing the voice, although more power to you if you can.

4 Record yourself, use a mirror, and try it out in front of people. This is the scary part, but can be done in normal everyday conversation, singing at a karaoke bar, or as part of a school assembly. If you get laughs from little kids seated on their butts for 45 minutes, you're on to something. Oddly, it translates directly to the corporate convention and stiffs in suits, since an impression takes us right back to our childlike joy that explodes out of us when we see someone do it well, or from our very own willingness to be so courageous. So, go for it!

How Much Practice Is Required?

Have you seen Steph Curry shoot a basketball lately? Even if you're not a basketball fan, you must have seen him hitting shots from near half-court to win games like it's the simplest thing in the world. Well, to him it is, because he's lived with a basketball in his hand his whole life. Practice to him isn't the same as practice was to Allen Iverson, practice is what makes him seem effortless.

How effortless do you want to be on stage, with your story, with your points, with a microphone in hand, or with a character you've created or someone you are mimicking? It must be automatic, literally on autopilot. Practice is in doing it all the time as a passion, coupled with crazy work ethic, next thing you know, you're known for, and paid for, doing what you've always done because you're just that amazing at it. This is a principle that anyone can build a successful business around their talents, as I've helped many speakers, performers, and professionals do it. Doing the characters at the right time and place could even land you a job.

To illustrate, I was hoping to get a job in 2001 with the world-famous impersonator group, the Las Vegas "Legends in Concert" as their Ricky



Martin impersonator. I went to dinner with my manager, a few business associates, the owner of the show, and his wife. Seated next to her as a 22-year old boy trying to break into showbiz, I sat and wowed her with every impression I could do at a swanky restaurant. By the time I was done singing "I'm Wishing" by Snow White, the lady looked at her husband, laughing and in shock, and said, "This guy can do any character, you need to hire him now!" And he did, before he ever saw me do the impersonation I was auditioning for!

What Inspires Material?

My reason for doing impressions or characters is to entertain in order to educate and inspire. Those are the only reasons. Gone are the days of entertaining to simply entertain, at least for me. My hope is to move someone to action by getting into their head and heart at the same time through a story, character or entertainment. I am inspired by what others have created, or what I can do with someone's greatness when adding my twist to it.

For example, why would I do an impression of a Raptor from Jurassic Park and potentially scare the audience? Mostly because I can. But also because it tells the story in "Show & Tell" form, which is often more effective than simply the details. If I'm speaking about The Promise I've made to being a 100 percent committed employee or manager, doing my best to live the mission of the company, it is a perfect tie-in and relatable to now bring this home, literally, to my house, with my kids, as a 100 percent committed father. Daddy Dinosaur time is either me doing a tired, pathetic version of Barney, or a full-on powerhouse, freak them out, jump over couches, running, screaming, yelling, shrieking, biting, throwing in the air, joyous re-enactment of a dinosaur chasing the kids up to bed.

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If we live committed solely for the audience on stage, and come home too tired to engage the ones we love, then what's the point of what we're doing in life? So, the material is inspired by true events that become teachable moments that apply to business, cross-sectioned with life, that are relatable and drive home the message through entertainment.

Cementing the Bond with the Audience

To cement a bond with any audience, make it about the audience and always ask, "What's in it for them?" Or is the performance just for me? Is what you're doing a way to serve, lift, inspire? Or are you just collecting a check? And in this way, whether you are creating characters from your past or recreating the taxi driver who just freaked you out on the early morning drive to the airport, or if you're going for broke and perfecting your Christopher Walken impression, maybe you shoot for the stars and break out into a Bob Marley song to end your speech, within this willingness to be ultimately authentic you are now a master of mimicry of the highest order, and literally only an Imposter when you aren't delivering the Impressions you've so richly captured to teach and inspire.

Award-winning speaker, emcee and entertainer Jason Hewlett, CSP, combines hilarious impressions, music, comedy and stories into a powerful corporate message of commitment, connection and engagement. Contact him at info@jasonhewlett.com and laugh at jasonhewlett.com.