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Humor: The good, the bad, and the lesson learned

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When it comes to business, nothing can be more of a double-edged sword more than the use of humor. I have used my sense of humor my whole life and have always tried to find the funny side of things. In my professional life, humor has given me a certain ease in making introductions, developing relationships, and has been a catalyst in helping me differentiate myself from my competition. Although my sense of humor has been a huge asset for me in these ways it has also been a hindrance to my growth as a professional.

We know that when using humor to relate to our clients or prospective clients it can both accelerate the relationship or derail it. Derail it, you ask? Here is an example: Earlier this year I attended an event and was letting the jokes fly. The jokes were not high brow, so to speak, but the table I was at was still laughing and seemed to be having a good time. The keyword there was "seemed" and we know what happens when we assume. There was one individual who wasn't laughing out loud, instead smiling politely and I never thought twice about that night again. Two or three months later I get a call about how I was being inappropriate and my jokes were insensitive. At first I got defensive, wondering how that person would know my intent with those jokes. I didn't seriously mean what I was saying, nor did I believe that I was being taken seriously, but because this individual thought I did. The more I thought about this the more I realized that the person is right. Perception is reality and in business there is no greater mantra. We've all made multiple mistakes along these lines. I did not take my audience into account when making jokes and I also gave the perception I am a joker and can't be taken seriously. Using cheap jokes gets surface laughs but can create a deep anger. I apologized to the respective party but it does not change the fact that I made a huge mistake.

When it comes to a sense of humor the good can allow you to go places you never imagined and more people will listen to your words than you could have dreamed. On the flip side it can label you as someone not to be taken seriously and can impede your growth as a professional. The lesson learned is that when it comes to the use of humor you need to find balance and to know that no matter how funny you find yourself, there is always someone who may not.

Eric Wilson is the director of social media at NEREJ, Norwell, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540