

TEN TIPS FOR TRAVELLING STORYTELLERS

Alan Kennedy

TIP ONE: THE “EMAIL YOU MUST RECEIVE”

If, like me, you travel round the country with your stories, you probably do most if not all of your bookings and marketing by E-mail. Your customers will usually want to do all the contact by this method, but occasionally, they will phone you to check something or to change something. Mostly, when this happens, I'm in the car on the way to or back from a gig. Although it's useful to have a pen and paper ready at all times, it's ALWAYS a good idea to insist that the client sends you all the information which he or she has told you by email. It's really important to have a record of all the details, all the changes. Pieces of paper can get lost, in a couple of days, you can look at the paper and wonder what the cryptic message means.

TIP TWO: THE “GET IT OFF YOUR CHEST” EMAIL

Sometimes, a client will cancel a gig for a variety of reasons, lack of interest, closure of venue, pulling of funds, booking another act on the same day by mistake... Often, you'll have made arrangements, hotel, car hire, flight. Mostly, you'll also have turned down work on the same day or the same period. If I get a call from a possible client in an area that is far (8 – 12 hours driving), I usually get my marketing into overdrive to try and get other work in the same area or on the way, one to maximise the income and also to try and keep the cost to the client down. If however, you get a cancellation, it can put all your plans into disarray, making a profitable trip into and non-profitable one or even leaving a gap in your agenda difficult to fill. I usually need about 3-4 weeks to fill a gap once the season is on its way. Cancellations seldom give you that time frame. My first reaction is often anger and I want the customer feel guilty about the drag it is having to find other clients. What I usually find therapeutic is, writing them a really

“dirty” email, underlining all the effort I’ve put into the organisation, the travel arrangements I’ve made, the short notice they’ve given me, etc etc etc. After I’ve said everything I want to say, I erase the email and write them one saying how much I understand, how much I was looking forward to going and so on. It’s far more elegant and leaves the way open to future gigs with that person at the same time as getting it off your chest.

IMPORTANT: - always have your connexion to internet off when you write this email.

TIP THREE: MAP IT OUT

If you don’t have a GPS to find the place, print out a detailed map to allow you to arrive in time and unruffled.

TIP FOUR: CREATE YOUR SPACE

Before a storytelling session, I like to create my space energetically speaking, by mentally walking through the show (quickly) and deciding from which part of the space I will tell which section. Even if it’s a small space, I often find it useful to decide on a square yard (or meter) where I will tell factual information, where I will get laughs from etc and mentally imagine situations where I have successfully given information and bring that memory back to mind, standing in the “information” square, I do the same with situations in which I made people laugh, sing, cry (if necessary), whatever the quality I want to give to this space and then imagine the situation multiplied by 10. This “enhanced memory” I then leave in this space by consciously shedding it as a snake does. Nobody else knows you’ve done this, but it does help you feel more empowered in what is a lonely place (on stage, alone with people who have to be entertained waiting for to entertain them).

TIP FIVE: MEMORISE THE FIRST FIVE MINUTES

As a means of helping stage fright, I also have the exact same first five minutes no matter what story is. In my case, it’s a quick tune on the bagpipes to get the audience clapping then a stock introduction of my self. I then go and mix with the crowd, shaking hands. All this takes five minutes. Then I start the story itself.

TIP SIX: BE UNIQUE

With the ever increasing interest in storytelling, it's important to create your own style. According to the standard thinking, there is a difference between a traditional storyteller and a "performance" storyteller. This distinction I find a bit misleading as it presupposes a difference between what you should and shouldn't do. Make your own style, let it come out of you. Be brave! It will be to your professional benefit later.

TIP SEVEN: DON'T PROP OUT

If, as I do, you work with little props (I use bird and animal noises in little toy boxes, fans, masks, amongst other things, buy 5 or 6 of each little piece you use. I have left a trail of small objects all over the country and have constantly had to adapt the show. Always have a decent supply of these small but important props.

TIP EIGHT: BEING UPSTAGED BY HECKLERS

Often, in my storytelling sessions, some clever clog in the audience wants to try and be the funny man/woman and tries to upstage me by talking constantly or disrupting the show. As the flow of the story is important, to maintain the atmosphere and, not wanting to alienate the public by resorting to sarcasm like a typical stand up comedian (with which the storytelling sessions have a lot in common) I prefer a gentler technique called "matching and leading" which entails following one of the physical rhythms of the would-be star and copying that rhythm with a different part of your own body. It could be his/her breathing, blinking, nervous tic, rate of speaking. Unconsciously (to them) you enter into his/her world and once you're in their rhythm, all you do is slow your rhythm down. They will automatically follow and calm down. This needs practice so as not to appear merely mimicking.

TIP NINE: DIFFERENT ENDINGS

I usually have two or three versions of each story. I am usually on the clock with a specific time to finish my performance. Usually my "slot" is 55

minutes but sometimes they ask me to finish in 45 minutes. Also, on occasions the audience, especially an adolescent group, will make it difficult to continue in a smooth way and in these cases, I jump to either an alternative ending or the normal ending but omit one or more intermediate scenes. For that reason, I devised the concept in my work of “flexitale”, which is just this, having various versions of the same story.

TIP TEN: KEEP READING

If you manage to get repeat bookings, (if you don't, reconsider all that you did and see where you can improve in this one skill), it's essential that you don't repeat the same stories. My area of speciality is adapting Scottish stories, myths, legends and history to a non English – speaking (but English learning) audience and find myself updating older stories, finding new stories, and combining stories from history with more modern interests of adolescents.

ABOUT ALAN KENNEDY

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