

**Smiling For Dollars:
24 Ways To Make
Money With Humor**

by John Cantu

Contact Information

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197 New Market Center #115

Boone, NC 28607

828-265-0400 (phone)

828-265-1911 (fax)

Email: orders@wz.com

Web site: <http://www.wz.com/>

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Smiling For Dollars: 24 Ways To Make Money With Humor

By John Cantu

When you think of making money with humor you probably think ‘standup comedian.’

If you get stage fright, or can’t even keep a straight face when telling your kids knock-knock jokes, have no fear. There are over two dozen ways you can get paid for making people laugh without having to deliver snappy one-liners or take a pie in the face. They work in good times or bad.

There are two major sources of “funny money” that don’t require “confidential” printing operations: You can type it, or you can talk it.

Typing it is simple. You write, and you sell what you’ve written. (What do you think so far?)

Talking it doesn’t mean you go to comedy clubs and do stand-up. It just means you deliver the humor verbally.

“*To John Cantu,*”
the unsung guru
of comedy.

The dedication of
"A Funny Thing
Happened on the Way
to the Boardroom:
Using Humor in
Business Speaking"
by Michael Iapoce.

Writing Humor

Let’s start at the beginning. Writing. There are all sorts of ways to make money with the written word. We’ll tell you those, and follow up with more than a dozen ways to make money speaking and making people laugh without being a comedian. (And that doesn’t even include being a guest on the Jerry Springer show.)

1 One is simply writing the jokes that a comedian uses. I have sold jokes to Joan Rivers, Kevin Meany, Phyllis Diller, Rip Taylor and others.

Now, that one’s pretty obvious. You probably figured that out before you got this report. There are many other ways to earn money with the ability to write funny that I’ll bet you didn’t know existed.

2 F’r instance, some syndicated cartoonists will pay you for ideas, even if you can’t draw a straight line. I’ve sold gags to over a dozen syndicated panels, including “Bound and

Gagged,” “Frank and Ernest,” “The Lockhorns,” and “Marmaduke.”

3 There’s a wide open market for freelancers who can write humorous copy that sells. Whether it’s print, radio or TV commercials, humor can be a powerful way to get people’s attention. I’ve written funny commercials for a Toyota dealership, a carpet store, a yachting company, and even a series of public service announcements recorded by the Smothers Brothers.

4 Cartooning is also an open field. They can be web graphics or freelance caricatures; political, movie, or television cartoons. This takes a special skill, but there’s a lot of need if you have the artist’s eye and hand. Or, if you have a really good idea and can’t draw a straight line with a ruler, you could team up with one of the many artists who can’t write.

5 Try your hand at articles and essays. Just browse through the table of contents of a half dozen popular magazines. I’ve had dozens and dozens of humor essays published. It’s easy to sell a really funny “one-off” essay.

“*One of my former humor workshop students, Karen Warner, went on to write The San Francisco Trivia Book, The Bartender’s Joke Book, and What’s So Funny about Being Catholic? (A collection of interesting and amusing real world trivia.)*”

6 Or the ultimate writing experience — books. You can write original material or you can do compilations of existing humorous facts or jokes.

7 Got a weakness for one-liners? Can ya come up with zingers that really zing? Try mottos. You know — those funny things you read on bumper stickers, buttons, T-shirts, and coffee mugs.

Next time you’re in a mall, check them out. I’ll bet you can come up with funnier things than what you’ll find on those mugs!

8 I’m a former humor columnist for the *What’s Working On Line?* newsletter. Humor columns are very popular. And they’re a great way to write books without pressure. (Collect the whole set!)

9 Or comic books. No matter what mom said about their bad influence, they’re still thriving. And many of them are not written by the artist.

10 Enter contests. These pop up all over the place. In fact, in the middle of writing this article, a writer friend of mind called to tell me that *The New Yorker* is having a “Write The Caption” contest.

“The older you get, the tougher it is to lose weight because by then, your body and your fat are really good friends.”

11 Corporate entertainment is another little known field. All the various corporate departments — sales, marketing, human resources, etc, have annual meetings. Most large corporations have an annual convention. There is always a need for writers who can write funny, customized skits, sketches and specialty material, and can keep it clean to not offend corporate sensibilities.

I know of one company that even has a Corporate Jester on staff, to make sure their marketing and support material stays light and friendly. (Of course, they also have this really scary guy called the “Dark WZ-ard of Retribution” on staff. We won’t go there...)

12 You could be a humor magazine writer. I was a staff writer for *Laugh Factory Magazine* for six months. Now THAT is factory work that’s fun!

13 Sell “fillers.” In one year, I sold six fillers to *Reader’s Digest*. I have also sold fillers to *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Catholic Digest* and others. These can be puns, funny definitions, any sort of short humorous piece that can fill the space at the end of an article that makes people smile.

14 Come up with greeting card ideas. Paper Moon Graphics, Portal Publication, and Curtis-Swan are a few of the card companies that paid me good money for my ideas. No drawing skills required. (Good thing, too!)

15 Consider doing posters. My partner and I wrote the copy for the “All I Need To Know About Life I Learned From Star Trek” poster. We got paid big bucks for that. And we aren’t even Star Trek fans!

16 Continuity is another option. That’s just about anything a radio personality talks about that isn’t a part of the songs or commercials. Just listen to a radio personality for an hour or two and notice how much patter goes on between the songs.

No, they don’t write that all themselves. But you’ll never get them to admit that.

17 Or how about movie scripts? This is the big time. Selling a script is like winning the lottery. And new movies are released every year.

18 Scripts for plays are also big money.

- 19** TV scripts can bring a huge payoff. And with every new channel or network, there is a new need for material.
- 20** Short stories are fun, and they come in all shapes and sizes. Well, all shapes, anyway.
- 21** Another good place, if you like clean humor, is writing speeches. I have co-written material with a partner for use by various venture capitalists giving graduation speeches at Big Ten business schools. Let me tell you... If you can make venture capital funny to a bunch of MBAs, you need to stock up on melted butter, 'cause the world is your oyster.

That is an overview of some of the ways you can make money being funny with your word processor. If you think about it, you can come up with others. (Sure you can.) Every time you see something funny that's printed, anywhere, on anything at all, you can bet someone got paid for writing it.

Could have been you, right?

“The other way ”
to make money with humor is speaking or performing. And speaking to make people laugh doesn't mean you have to try to tell jokes in a smoky comedy club to a bunch of inebriated people.

Speaking and Performing

Here are a dozen ways to get in front of people and make them laugh without being a comedian.

- 22** Become a comedic actor. You actually have several options. You can look for work in commercials, film, television, or on the stage. And of course, don't forget the possibility of being a voice actor for cartoons. Think Mark Hamill as the Joker.
- 23** And the other obvious choice: Clown. Everyday someone is having a birthday party and clowns are often the entertainment of choice.
- 24** Join (or start) a comedy troupe. A comedy troupe is a group of four or more members who do prepared sketches. This can be a lot easier and less scary than standing on stage by yourself as a comedian. If your material is clean, you can also get booked in the corporate market.
- 25** Double talk artist is a fun shtick. This is a ringer most often brought in by a corporation for comedic relief. You are introduced as an expert and you start out seeming knowledgeable at first, but as you continue your talk, you use double talk — i.e., you insert made-up words for comedic effect, building the tension until the audience finally catches on that they've been had.

“ Norm Crosby ”
*was the master
of double talk.
If you’ve ever
seen him
perform,
you’ll know
immediately
just how much
fun this can be.*

- 26** Or become an improv actor. Second City, of Chicago, is arguably the most famous, but there are improv groups in virtually every major city around the country. With the popularity of “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” improv is fast becoming a popular alternative laughstyle.
- 27** Become an imposter, something like a reverse double talk artist. You’re introduced as an expert, and then you simply talk in circles. Sometimes you are introduced as one of the facility’s workers, perhaps a sound person or waiter. You’re forced to speak because of unexpected circumstances (i.e. you’re told in a stage whisper to stall because the speaker has been unavoidably delayed). And then you astound the audience by segueing into a knowledgeable talk about them or their company.
- 28** Try out being an instructor, seminar leader, trainer, or workshop leader. If you have a knack for combining humor and teaching, there are many organizations that will welcome you. The best known are the comedy traffic schools. Very few of them use real comedians, you know. (Not many “real” comedians are gonna be up at 9 am to teach!)
- 29** Juggler: Another act you can take to the corporate market. Requires some physical dexterity. If you lack that, make that part of the gag!
- 30** Magician: Ditto
- 31** Mime: Double ditto. (Being a mime is a great choice if you have trouble remembering lines.)
- 32** Sing for your supper! You can write and perform song parodies like Weird Al Yankovic, or you can do part-time and weekend work delivering singing telegrams. There’s even a service now called “The Monkey Phone Call.” The victim gets a phone call in which they hear nothing but what sounds like a screaming monkey for two full minutes.
- 33** And of course, the most highly paid of speaking humorists: The Speaker.

There are two types.

The first is the non-professional humorist.

This category includes professionals who use speaking prima-

rily as a marketing tool and who use humor to enhance their desirability as a speaker. I know an accountant who told me he could attribute over \$1,000,000 of income over a five year period specifically to clients he had generated through free speeches.

The other speaker is the humorist.

The humorist is the closest you can come to being a comedian. You tell stories and anecdotes from your life and you add either personal life lessons or business wisdom you've learned. Sometime these speakers refer to themselves as motivational humorists.

If you've ever listened to Garrison Keillor, from "A Prairie Home Companion," you know how relaxed this kind of humor can be. Who could fail to have fun with "Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery," or "The Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility"?!

“ They say ”
always leave 'em
laughing so...
Sometimes if
you just leave a
problem alone
long enough it
solves itself. I
used to have
a garage with a
leaky roof. Now
on rainy days I
have a car
wash.

Well there you have it: More than two dozen ways to make money by being funny without being a comedian. (Truth be told, we "cheated" a bit with the title — since there are actually over thirty.)

Call it an encore.

So what's your next step? Do some research. Check out the resources on the Web or call your local library. There is a lot of info out there on all these moneymaking laughter opportunities.

Which one is the best? The one that best suits your personality the most.

But, in my professional opinion, I think speaking as a humorist is the best.

As a writer, when you sell something, you have to write something new to sell. But as a speaker, you don't have to write a new speech for a new audience. You adapt your speech slightly and then you give it. Adapt to a new audience and give it. And you simply do this over and over.

And getting started is easy. You already speak.

(Don't you?)