

Improv Is No Joke - Episode 41 - Rik Roberts

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Peter Margaritis: Welcome to Improv is no Joke podcast, where it's all about becoming a more effective communicator by embracing the principles of improvisation. I'm your host Peter Margaritis, the self-proclaimed chief edutainment officer of my business, [The Accidental Accountant](#). My goal is to provide you with thought-provoking interviews with business leaders so you can become an effective improviser, which will lead to building stronger relationships with clients, customers, colleagues and even your family, so let's start the show.

[Music]

Peter: Welcome to episode 42 of Improv is no Joke podcast. Thank you very much for downloading this episode. Today's guest is Rik Roberts, who is a clean comedian and does creative keynote speeches. Rik and I have a fun time discussing how the skills in performing stand-up and improv comedy has an application in today's business world. With stand-up comedy, it teaches brevity. I saw a quote that said "Brevity is the soul of lingerie: it should be long enough to cover the important parts but short enough to make it interesting." But brevity in stand-up is the writing of the joke. You want to eliminate unnecessary words that get in the way of a great joke. As Rik states, those who are artists can take 30 pounds of clay and chisel it down to a piece of art. That's what the professional comedian does. The business application is in writing. In today's fast-paced business world, we have to write emails, memos, and reports with the same concept that a comedian has in writing a joke. Get to the point and move on. People don't have time to read a dissertation anymore. Stand up also teaches us to be better at public speaking and presentations. When a comedian delivers a punchline, they need to pause and have the mental interaction with the audience before moving on to the next joke. Same thing when doing a speech or presentation. You need to have a pause; you need to have that mental interaction with your audience. If not, all you're doing is speaking at them and not to them or with them. When you're speaking at them, your audience will revert to the conference prayer. I explain what the conference prayer is in the interview. When Rik was discussing how improv applies in today's business world, he reinforced everything I've been saying and writing about. He referred to a client that hired him to work with his team, and the client described the group this way: they thought they were the best at everything; they were very competitive and would not listen to each other's ideas. Rik went in and demonstrated through improv exercises that the team needs to trust each other for the success of the group. I came up with a new way of describing what improv can do for your company. I was the closing keynote at the White Castle general managers leadership conference this year. The theme of the conference was "it starts with me." In thinking about their conference theme, and how to relate it to improv, I came up with this: "It starts with me, and it's not about me; it's about us." That's what Rik was demonstrating with his client. If you have been listening to my podcast for a while, you know one

of my goals with his podcast is to help you begin to make changes in your work and personal lives so you can better connect with others and create meaningful relationships. Many people have said it takes 21 days to start a habit, which I learned is incorrect from Dr. John B Molitor, PhD. John is a professor of psychiatry at Michigan State University. He said that the research shows that it takes 66 days to create a habit. So now we gotta put in some extra work to create that muscle memory. That's why I created the Yes, And challenge: to help keep these principles in front of you so you can build up your improvisational muscle. To sign up, please go to PeterMargaritis.com and scroll down to the Yes, And challenge call to action and click to register to begin building the productive habit of Yes, And and the principles of improvisation. And remember to show your experiences on twitter using the hashtag #yesandchallenge. If you're unsure of what the Yes, And challenge is all about, I discuss this in detail in episode 0. Go back and take a listen. Remember you can subscribe to my podcast on itunes, stitcher, and google play. If you'd like to purchase an autographed copy of my book *Improv is no Joke: Using Improvisation to Create Positive Results in Leadership and Life*, for \$14.99 with free shipping, please go to my website, PeterMargaritis.com, and you'll see the graphic on the homepage to purchase my book. Please allow 14 days for shipping. With that said, let's get to the interview with Rik Roberts.

[Music]

Peter: Hey, welcome everybody. I am with a friend of mine, Rik Roberts, and I just want Rik to know (because I can't see him and he can't see me through skype), but I know Rik is a big UK basketball / football aficionado and I'm wearing my UK hoodie today in honor of having Rik as my guest. So Rik, thank you so very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to spend some time with me on my podcast.

Rik: Excellent, and I'm actually wearing my UK sweatshirt inside out and turned backwards until we break this two-game losing streak.

Peter: Good point. Maybe I should do the same thing. They're on tonight. I believe it's at nine o'clock eastern time against Georgia, and it's Musburger's last game so... yeah, I will turn mine inside out once we're done with this podcast.

Rik: At least we can celebrate its musburger's last game.

Peter: Exactly. We have something to look forward to. Rik, can you give everybody a little bit of your background? They can go out on the internets, or whatever they call it these days, but I think you could do your background better justice than LinkedIn.

Rik: Yeah, I started a comedy about a year after I got out of college. Graduated in 1990 from a small school called Bethany College north of Wheeling, near Oglebay Park, in West Virginia. I moved to Columbus Ohio, worked a couple of jobs, Simon & Schuster was the longest job ahead and it was the last job I had before I started stand-up, and you know... joined an improv

troupe. I didn't have a big overhead back in those days. I think if I earned 450 a month I covered all my bills, including splitting rent with two other comedians and my car payments and all that stuff. And so I did improv exclusively for about six or seven years. I would do stand up a little bit on the side when things were slow at improv, but didn't really start focusing on the stand up until probably '96 or so, and ever since then it's been comedy pedal to the metal all the way. Full-time entertainer since 1991.

Peter: And that's the condensed version. Here I have a few other pieces to that. One, he bills himself as a clean comedian, so let's get that first and foremost. A lot of people think that could be an oxymoron, but you proved that it's completely not an oxymoron. And you're a creative keynote presenter. Now you said you did stand up in Columbus way back when in the mid-90s or so, and that's where we met many years ago when I was doing open mics, and I think you were getting paid or you were the feature on those nights. You've turned your open mic into a wonderful career and you've got an online comedy writing course... you're the one who probably helped push me over the "you need to start a podcast," because it was almost two years ago, and I believe it was in DC, when you interviewed me for your podcast and I had no real clue about what a podcast was. And your podcast is School of Laughs, and you can find your podcast on iTunes. He has 135 episodes in the can already out, with 91 reviews and 89 five-star ratings. I mean, come on. He's kicking it. And you don't have to be a comedian to listen to your podcast. If you want to get funnier, and I think we all do whether you're a speaker, a teacher a politician. We can all get funnier and I listen to your podcast a lot. I've also taken your online writing horse, and it is very very beneficial, both of them. And you've got how many albums out there Rik?

Rik: Nine.

Peter: [laughs] He's a professional by far.

Rik: Well thank you man. I appreciate that, and the podcast, as you know, takes a lot of time and a lot of focus, but I've had fun doing it. We're a little over 135-36 episodes, like you said, and this year, though, I did scale it back at the first of the year to every other week so I could write. I'm writing three books about comedy that I've been wanting to get out for years, and so I'm using the off week in between the podcast weeks to get that together.

Peter: Oh great! So what is your first book that you anticipate coming out?

Rik: It's hard to say because it's my first book and I'm sure there's gonna be a lot of snags. I would love to have it out before the fall, but we'll see. Right now I've got this and taxes are going to take up a big chunk of time, and then who knows what else, but at every monday and tuesday I'm spending a good four or five hours on the book right now.

Peter: That's good motivation for myself because I need to start my next book, and my plan was to start it on February 1st... and that's tomorrow.

Rik: It is.

Peter: I was going to start at least drafting the outline and moving forward on that so... I congratulate you on taking that adventure, as it may be. It's like building a house. You've got a due date, but you never make it. But I also look forward to reading your book. You've done so many things over your career – oh, I did forget. Now some of the audience may be too young to know this, but if you've ever watched The Andy Griffith Show... who was the deputy? What was that guy's name?

Rik: Bernard P5 Deputy, Mayberry County Sheriff.

Peter: [laughs] So, if you hadn't guessed by now Rik, also can do an outstanding, 100% nail it Barney Fife, on radio and live and in person.

Rik: Hey, thank you.

Peter: [laughs] So thinking about your time in comedy your time in improv... we reconnected about four or five years ago at the National Speakers Association Annual Conference in Philadelphia. What did stand-up teach you about public speaking? How did it help you move your career from comedy clubs into corporate America?

Rik: Well, when I was into my 20s I worked at the comedy clubs all the time until I had an hour of clean stand up. And at that point, I noticed a lot of comedy clubs were booking me in December to kind of facilitate all the corporate groups that were coming to the club to have their Christmas parties. And they were charging those corporate groups pretty big dollars to come in, and I wasn't seeing much of that, and a comedian friend of mine said "you just need to not book anything in December, unless you book at yourself directly with these corporate groups," and I found that I enjoyed it. They treated me better than comedy clubs would treat me, they put me in better hotels, they paid a deposit. All these great things that you don't have when you're doing comedy clubs. And then when I got married I thought, you know, I'll see if I can extend doing corporate speaking and comedy throughout the entire year. I left two weeks a month open to see if I could pursue corporate work, and pretty soon I realize I can. Then after we had our first kid 11 years ago I just said, hey, it's going to be entertaining corporate groups only. Maybe a comedy club once or twice a year, if it's close to some family or some friends, but besides that I just take the comedy to where the people need it – and that's corporate speaking. They don't have too many options when it comes to a clean performer.

Peter: No they don't, and the one thing about doing corporate events: the checks usually bigger, and it clears.

Rik: Yeah, and it's got a name on, and that name is still alive the next week when you try to cash it.

Peter: [laughs] Yeah, and I take my hat off to you spending all those years in comedy clubs, schlepping across the U.S., and honing your act. It takes a very dedicated and deliberate individual to be able to do that, and unfortunately I was not that deliberate, even though I still have the love for it; even though I still like to write. I think I've been able to blend my humor into the stories that I deliver and what I do, but I can't tell you how many times I still have that urge and I still want to go back into a comedy club. And I do every now and then up here in Columbus, and unfortunately I haven't seen you perform comedy live in a number of years, and every time lately... because you were here in Columbus, in December, to do the charity event that Dino Tripods and Dan Swartwout were part of, and I just missed you by the day.

Rik: Yeah, it was just unfortunate. To liken it back to the UK conversation we were having a minute ago: doing the comedy clubs was like going through all four years of college, and you get an education and you get that experience level from having faced every type of audience and tough crowd. Then, when you move into corporate... I wouldn't say it's actually much easier, but you're way more focused you can handle. The toughest corporate crowd ever isn't going to be scratching the surface of a wild night at a comedy club.

Peter: [laughs]

Rik: So just like UK's freshmen this year are very talented, they're all gonna play in the NBA but they're not NBA players now, and I hate when they say "Hey, they've got five NBA players on their team." No, they have five freshmen who are trying to figure it out, and the comedy club was kind of like college for me. Comedy College: just go out there and experience it, and take those lessons to the corporate speaking world.

Peter: If you remember when you first started out doing comedy, what was the hardest thing about being that open mic'er and getting up there and trying to entertain a crowd? What was the biggest hurdle that you had to overcome?

Rik: Well the biggest thing, and I laugh about it now, is that, at least seven or eight years into it, I really didn't know why people laughed at some jokes and didn't laugh at the others. It wasn't until I moved from Columbus to down here in Nashville, Tennessee, that I found out. Because the guy that ran a comedy club asked me to teach a comedy class and I said "man. I wish I could... I wish I could take a comedy class! I'm not sure why my jokes hit some nights and don't the others," and he challenged me said, "Why don't you look at your show, write out your jokes word for word, and figure out why they get a laugh or why they don't?" And that was kind of the beginnings of this comedy course that I teach now. I isolated about seventeen techniques that, if my punchlines had one of those techniques in there, it was a joke and it should get a laugh. If it had two or three of those techniques, it almost was guaranteed to get a laugh (as long as the setup and premise was really clear). So early on I literally would just keep doing jokes that people laughed at, even though I didn't like the joke sometimes or I didn't understand why they were laughing, and then the jokes didn't work I would just try to keep beefing him up and figure

out a way to tell them. Or the trickiest thing, I guess, was that I had some jokes that destroyed on some nights and did nothing other nights, and I could not find out why they were inconsistent. And looking back now I know that those jokes had zero techniques in them. It was all based on attitude or sarcasm, and sometimes the crowd's with you and sometimes they're not.

Peter: Interesting, and would you also say that one of the first things you learned about doing a stand-up comedy, as you start moving up the ranks, is LPM, laughs per minute?

Rik: Yeah. You know, having a high laughs per minute... a professional comic's gonna have a minimum of six to upwards of ten, sometimes more or less per minute depending on how they tell their jokes, and when you are new and you don't have that you really stick out in a club. They think you're kind of funny, but I'm not sure if you have what it takes. Then, as you get stronger and you write more material, you start cutting out what you don't need. So I think one of the things is that, when people start comedy, they have to fill five minutes. So they kind of belabor the point or stall the punchline, and once you get to the feature spot you're doing 30 minutes at a club and you're still not in a big hurry to get through your material, because you want to make sure you have enough to finish the show. If they bump you up to the headliner, now you're doing an hour... but it's got to be a higher laughs per minute than what the crowd has seen before. So every comedian out there, who has gone through all the ranks of the comedy club, will tell you the the middle spot, the feature spot where you're doing 30 minutes, is the best spot in the world because there's no pressure to win the crowd over (the MC did that for you), there's no pressure to close the show because the headliners can't do that, most of the crowd has had their drinks and their meals served to them... so for 30 minutes they're totally focused on you, and that's where you really start to develop your confidence. But it's tricky to to grow out of that spot because a lot of comedians will do the same 30 minutes because they want to be so funny that the headliner can't follow them; can't be as funny as them, and then they get bumped up to headlining. But I'll tell you, when I got bumped up the headlining I had a really killer 30 minutes... and then I was stretching for 25 or 30 more.

Peter: [laughs]

Rik: And if I could go back I would say, during that 30 minute stretch, I would have done that for three more years and just developed way more material and taken more chances, because there was really no pressure. So you learn you learn as you go through it, but the key is those laughs per minute. If you have more than the guy before you, you're gonna come off as funnier.

Peter: So a mutual friend of ours, Dan Swartwout, when we were talking in an earlier episode about comedy, and then I did a thing up in Detroit and he was helping me with some writing, and he liked to use these two words with me: "word economy." Because that's what stand-up is a lot about. Throw out the words that you don't need and try to just be as precise as you can and make sure that you had the premise and the setup, which helps in increasing those laughs per minute.

Rik: Yeah, the economy of words is super important and I found a way to describe it to my students, and I think they get it a little bit quicker: comedy is an art and sculpting is an art. So in comedy, if they gave us 30 pounds of words, we would try to use all 30 pounds. A sculpture would take those 30 pounds of clay and chisel away what doesn't need to be there. Amateur comics don't. They try to use all 30 pounds of words, but a professional will try to get that down to the bare minimum. So not only can you focus on what they're trying to say, you're also not distracted by all the excess. And that's really the key. An artist removes things so that you can see the beauty of the art, whereas a laborious person would just use everything to show you that they can do it.

Peter: Wow, I like that analogy a lot. As a corporate keynoter, and you're funny, is there a little bit of a different technique there? I mean, you may not use... well, let me ask the question this way: as you've transitioned out of stand-up and into corporate keynoting, and you're telling stories around the point that you're trying to make, are you using those same techniques of sculpting, as you would in stand up, or are you allowing a little bit more that weight to stay on there? Instead of 30 pounds, maybe you've got it whittled down to 20 pounds, where in stand up you may have it down to 15 pounds?

Rik: Yeah, I mean the one thing I'll say when I deliver speeches... even though there's plenty of humorous points in there and lots of funny stories and jokes, when I'm delivering the contents of the material (and it's taken me awhile to learn this) I need to slow down and hear it as I'm saying it, as if it's the first time I'm saying it, because that's how the audience is receiving it. As a stand-up, I would have a quick delivery, a pace (kind of like a rhythm, once I start the stand-up show), and I try to do speaking like that and in some ways that's good, but I was going too fast past the takeaways. So the one thing I would say I do differently is allow them time to process the thought and not being afraid of silence when you speak. I see speakers say "think about this for a moment," and then they say what to think about and they keep on moving. They do not have a minute to think about it.

Peter: [laughs] Right.

Rik: Until you slow down and leave some of those pockets for mental interaction, you're just talking at people instead of speaking with them.

Peter: Having that mental interaction, in any type of presentation, allows for the audience to stay awake... because they're mentally stimulated versus you're talking through them, you're talking over them, you're flooding them with all of these words at a pace that they can't process it, or you're not allowing in the process it, and in this day and age, when we've got these very short attention spans, then they begin the conference prayer (as I like to call it). That's when they pull out their cell phone and look down at it and the glow from cell phone comes on their face [Angelic sound]. They've just tuned you completely out.

Rik: I love it. That's hilarious.

Peter: They're sitting there going "oh my god this guy is boring the hell out of me," and you the speaker are looking out to this audience and they all have their heads down, and you're going I hope your battery dies.

Rik: [laughs] right

Peter: But I think the challenge of any corporate event is to keep the audience engaged, to keep them mentally stimulated, and to make them laugh helps with that mental stimulation. When the laughter ends is a heightening of listening, and the more you make people laugh the more they're sitting on the edge of their seats wondering what you're going to say next. So they're listening more intently, which makes you a much more successful corporate speaker, as you are.

Rik: Yeah, that's right. And having that interaction and giving them credit for participating in the speech... a lot of a lot more groups are a lot younger, and Millennials want an experience. They don't want to sit there and be talked to, and so I think a lot of speakers are missing on making that transition right now. They're going to be left out if they don't find a way to engage, particularly that age group.

Peter: Right. Early on, before stand up, you were doing a lot of improv. Are you bringing a lot of those improv skills to the stage with you, and those improv exercises to the stage with you?

Rik: Yeah, I have one program called "Listen Up, Laugh It Up." A previous client of mine (who I've done three different programs for) wanted me back and asked if I had anything new. I asked about the struggles they were having with their company, and they basically had a bunch of people that thought they were the best at everything, and they were very competitive, and they never listened to each other's ideas. I said let's do a little improv with them and show them that they have to trust each other for the success of the group, and before we get to that part I'll do 15-20 minutes of stand-up to loosen them up, and I'll talk about the benefits of laughter in the workplace a little bit, but this is going to kind of grease the wheels for their listening. Depending on the size of the group and how much time I have, I do two to three different improv games with them to kind of get them on the same page. I did one last week in Memphis, and then afterwards the CEO talked to me in the hallway for probably 30 minutes. He was so amazed, I guess, that his group of salespeople stopped... and it took them a while, he knew it was going to be tough for them to do that, but he was amazed at the end they were able to finally come together and accomplish the goal of the scene and the exercise, and then he rattled off like 15 more applications I hadn't even thought about. So you teach improv and you know about it. There's a lot of little things – trust, team building, and listening – that every company and every organization needs, and sometimes all they need is a facilitator to show them how to do it.

Peter: Exactly, and the one thing I'm finding is that the message of improv seems to be resonating more and more out there, that I'm seeing, and I did a conference this fall, in Nebraska, with 400 CPAs. I based it around around the book, but I had them doing these improv exercises, and one of them (which you may be familiar with) is the last word spoken. You say a sentence and the last word in that sentence is the first word of my sentence, and we try to build this dialogue. Well, one of the participants was as a CEO of a manufacturing plant in Nebraska. I mean he just gravitated on that. He just absolutely loved that exercise, to the point that he brought me out a couple weeks ago to work with his sales team for two hours on it. I said I'd love to do that, but the one thing we're not going to tell them is I'm a CPA because they're going to just completely tune me out. And we did the whole thing and they loved it, and then when I told them I was a CPA their mouths hit the floor.

Rik: [laughs] If you'd told them upfront, they would have been auditing you the whole time.

Peter: [laughs] And when I do speak to groups that aren't CPAs, I don't want them to get an idea before I even begin and put me in that stereotype of being a CPA, and begin to tune me out almost immediately. So it was a lot of fun when we told me that I was... but I think the art of listening is something that really is resonating out in the corporate market because there's so little of it, where we're truly listening versus listening and then responding without understanding what the person is saying.

Rik: Yeah, I think we both understand it as listening to hear, not just to respond, and that's really key. I tell you it helps me with my children. I listen to hear the words behind the words, the question behind the question, with the kids.

Peter: yeah

Rik: With my wife, I make sure that... well, I have no choice.

Peter: [laughs]

Rik: But I listen, because she has to put up with me, so when she opens her mouth I just take a break. But it's really key in any relationship you have, whether it's business, friendship, spousal, whatever. Kind of leaving that pocket of silence for them to continue the conversation, sometimes, is a big difference. If you cut them off, then they're not going to go there, so you have to let them speak their mind all the way out.

Peter: Exactly, but then after they're finished speaking, if you're listening, or active listening (as we used to call it back of the day), your next response may be a question or statement or something, versus bringing your agenda, what was originally on your mind, to allow to really understand what that person... because you said the words behind the words in trying to peel that onion back five or six times and find out where the real issue is.

Rik: Right. A lot of the time it boils down to they feel like they're not being listened to.

Peter: Exactly. Exactly. I don't know if you sell the Stephen Colbert interview with Keegan Michael Key back in August. If you haven't, look it up on youtube. It's wonderful and they make a lot of references to improv and Yes, And and Keegan Michael Key said improv is the exact opposite of show business. He was out promoting the movie that he did with Mike Birbiglia, and the name is escaping me right now.

Rik: Yeah, I need to see that one still.

Peter: Yeah, I saw it. I'm just drawing a blank on it. But I'm hearing more and more references out there to improv, but I want to take that improv piece and bring it back to when you're delivering to an audience. Those improv skills that you're using that you learned for becoming better at what you do. I think some of those who will be listening to this are those who have that fear of public speaking. How did you get past that fear? Was it comedy skills? Was it improv skills? What helped you get over that hurdle that most people would never think about standing up in front of an audience and even having any type of conversation?

Rik: I was never shy off stage, but any time I had an opportunity to get in front of people, even in grade school, I remember going way back to third grade we were talking about presidents and Jimmy Carter was coming into office and the teacher said something like does anybody know anything about Jimmy Carter, and I remember standing up in front of 20 other kids and going "yeah he's a peanut farmer from Georgia," I said it just like that and she just busted out laughing and she's like do more do more. That was the only thing I knew how to say, so I said it like six more times and she just kept laughing. And then every year there's a couple of spots where I could pick in class to kind of speak up, so I had the natural ham thing down. But, to maybe make it more relevant, when it came to speaking not in a comedy club, but in front of a group, all that improv definitely helped me out because I knew that if I was truly engaged with the group there would be opportunities to explore things. I think a lot of speakers have their three points, they want to get it done in 45 minutes, and then maybe 10 minutes of Q&A and then they're out of there. So it's really formatted. I have my points that I want to make, but I also have things I want to learn from the group so that I can decide where to finish up the speech. It can go a lot of different directions. I feel confident in the silence. When there's a lot of silence and everybody's afraid to speak up then there's also an issue of control somewhere in the room. Maybe the boss has yelled at people for speaking up before. There's a lot of things you can learn by asking a couple questions and sitting back and waiting for the answers.

Peter: So if I could translate that, it sounds to me like you're not presenting – you are having a conversation with the audience.

Rik: Yeah, exactly, and that's really key. Especially when I'm doing this "Listen Up, Laugh It Up." keynote, in the comedy part of it up front I leave lots of pockets for interaction, and I had an experience with this guy in Memphis. We were talking about the person who's been longest

married in the room. I always ask that question with groups, and this guy says that he's been married for 30 years. I said "that's pretty good, man. Do you remember when you proposed to her?" He said "yeah, I had the ring in my pocket for two years." I said "oh really, when did you pop the question?" He goes "oh it was a real spur of the moment thing." I said "yeah, for two years it was a spur of the moment thing." And he just started laughing. I just repeated back what I heard, but I listened to hear, and he came up to me after the show he's like "you know what? That thing you said about the spur of the moment. I'm gonna remember that from the rest of my life. That was really cool that you took that and ran with it."

Peter: Oh, that's cool!

Rik: It floored me. I'm like this is awesome. This guy really is gonna remember that. He came up and told me and now it's in his memory bank, but now I'm gonna remember that and use that as an example when I talk to other groups because making that one connection with him is paramount. So the audience can feel when you make a connection with one, and it becomes a connection with everybody.

Peter: Exactly, and I am a big believer that any time you are on stage, whether you're doing a keynote for an hour or you're doing an all day training session, it should be a conversation with the audience versus a figurehead speaking to or at the audience.

Rik: Yeah, there's probably a handful of speakers where they're there with a message and everybody came there to see that, and that's fine and I probably even have a speech like that, but when I go to present two different groups the presentation is about them. It's not about me. I might use examples from my life to help them resonate with similar examples in there's, but having that idea going in that this is all about them so I'm going to make a justified effort to bring them in as often as possible, so they get something out of it. If I just tell them about my experiences only, then they'll have to apply that. But if I bring them in during the speech with stuff they can relate to and can immediately latch onto, then they're engaged right there.

Peter: And you said it it's about them, it's not about you, and I think a lot of those who begin developing the public speaking chops have that inverted at times. It's about them. I'm here to deliver this message to you versus "no, this is about you and I need to find out what message I need to deliver to you," even whoever called you up and booked you... you should ask the questions to get behind the scenes to figure out where's the real issue there, or do you think you have the ultimate message.

Rik: Yeah, it's all important. I have this pretty extensive pre-show questionnaire, or pre-event questionnaire, to help pinpoint some other major issues. Or, the biggest question you can ask as a speaker, I use this question at the very top of the questionnaire, is "how will you define if this event is a success?" And then I look at those words they use and make sure that happens.

Peter: So what have been some of the words people have used to define if this event is a success?

Rik: Sometimes it's as simple as we just want to relax and have fun for an hour... we want to take a break from our our job. Other times, they're like we have an issue integrating two companies into one, and we have a lot of people trying to figure out where they fit and so we want an experience that will unite them and do some team building. So that's key. Then I can use my "Listen Up, Laugh It Up," and that's the best one for that because we're gonna be on our feet interacting with people, and we'll make sure that we mix up the groups. The responses vary. So that's the first question. After the event, when I follow up with that before I ask for a recommendation, I say that leading up to the event these were the details that you described that you wanted to take place so that this might be a success, and then one by one I'll go through and say, you know, team building. Well did you feel that, during that improv exercise, when everybody was laughing and then applauding each other for pulling off the event, did that feel like a success to you? And basically they can go right down the list to go "yeah, you knocked out what we wanted to do and we're more than happy to give you a recommendation." And maybe I thought that I accomplished something and I didn't, and that gives them a chance to point it out so I can correct my speech to make it more clear the next time.

Peter: Yeah, that's key because that feedback is critical in getting it right the next time. Yeah, I'm always asking for that type of feedback, and a lot of times you won't get them to really tell you. But if you kind of tee it up to the point, like I really enjoy constructive criticism and I want to know what you guys like, how it worked, and then if there's something I didn't do just please point it out to me so I can work on getting that better. Maybe something that I'm not even seeing that I'm doing that I might see in an evaluation, or if I'm lucky enough to record the session. Yeah, and another great thing, too, is inviting other speakers out to see your program because they can give you some straight to the bone information that you need to hear to get better that maybe somebody who hired you wouldn't feel comfortable saying. About 15 years ago, I did an event with another speaker. We both were doing humorous stuff. I was securing the area as Barney Fife and then did my stand-up, and then he was a Bill Clinton impersonator. But during that event we had an afternoon AV check, and actually we're out in the hallway and he said "can I talk to you for a minute?" I'm like yeah, what's up? "Are you gonna do this professionally for the rest of your life, or are you just goofing around?" What do you mean? He's like, "You're dressed in camouflage, converse, high tops, and an old sweatshirt. I know it's the afternoon and we're doing AV check, but you were in front of client there. You missed out on an opportunity to make a strong first impression." And I was like, man, you nailed it. I never thought of that. In my mind, I was like I'm gonna show them how good I clean up, later on at eight o'clock when I come through the door.

Peter: [laughs]

Rik: But he's right. I should have changed and cleaned up, and then came down.

Peter: [in Bill Clinton voice] “Rik, I remember that day very clearly. I remember talking to you about that day, and I'm glad you took me up on that advice because it obviously has worked on your behalf.”

Rik: [laughs] [in Barney Fife voice] “Well, I got advice from a peanut farmer down in Georgia.

Peter: [in Bill Clinton voice] “I told that peanut farmer don't use email. I tell you, just ask Hillary about email. Don't ever use it.”

Rik: [laughs]

Peter: but that is good advice, and you got me thinking. Yeah, I have to go back into my memory and think about what I have worn for an AV check, or even before. When I do travel, I do try to dress business casual, or as a one friend of mine said “I always wear a sport coat on an airplane,” because so many times so many people aren't wearing sport coats and flight attendants just love it when they see someone dressed business casual was a sport coat. He goes, “Sometimes I get extra perks. I've been upgraded just because I wore a sport coat.”

Rik: Oh yeah. We could do a whole hour on how airlines treat you based on how you look, that's for sure.

Peter: Yeah. Really, that's the truth. So, as we begin the wrap up, I have to ask a couple of questions here because you've got a lot of war stories over your years of doing stand-up comedy and clubs. What's your best story? When I say best, probably the most uncomfortable thing that ever happened to you.

Rik: Most painful?

Peter: Most painfully, yeah.

Rik: Well, there's two or three things that stick out. I'll let you pick. I can give you a story about when I worked at the improv group, a story that's much more recent (less than a year old).

Peter: Okay, let's take the most recent.

Rik: Alright. So, about a year ago, I was going to do my stand-up comedy at a golf course for members. It was one of those big neighborhoods that were built around a golf course, and just rode their golf cart over to the to the big community center, club house, and I told her it's only clean comedy. I'm not going to vary from that, and the earlier in the evening the better the show for me, and for you since you're spending money on it. I recommend starting right after dinner, and then if they want to party afterwards that's fine. She says, “Sure, no problem. So we booked that and it sells out. And, on the way down to the event, she calls me and says “Hey, we sold out the early show and people are just there so mad that they can't get to the comedy show.

Can we add a nine o'clock show?" And I said, you know, I'm not the guy for a nine o'clock show when everybody's been drinking on the golf course all day. It's not gonna work. She goes "Ohh... I've already started taking reservations. I thought for sure you'd be up for. You know, it'd be another paycheck." I said I can tell you from experience that the first crowd will be fine and it'll be my kind of crowd. The second crowd is just gonna be combative. I can tell you right now. She says, "can we just try it?" I said I know you're you're not listening to what I'm saying. It's not gonna work. And she says "I think I'll lose my job if I cancel it because I've already taken money." I said listen: if you really really want to do it, I've told you everything I've told you, then we'll start it at nine and after 10 minutes I'll look at you and go "see, I told you," and then you can refund all of their money. But it'll be my fault, it won't be your fault. And so she goes "it'll be fine." So we do the first show and it was just shy of a standing ovation. I mean they're couples in their 60s, 70s, 50s. Mostly retired. Just smart and love the clean, family-oriented humor.

Peter: yeah

Rik: Nine o'clock show rolls around and I mean it's people dropping f-bombs left and right. Every swear word you've ever heard just in casual conversation. As I'm sitting on the guitar, some guys are like going F bombs at me. if I go to the lady and I'm like "this might be something we call at the 5-minute mark instead of the 10." And so... sure enough, I tell my first joke and there's these two twenty-somethings that were drinking with their flip-flops up on top of the table.

Peter: Oh god.

Rik: After I do my first punchline he's like "ha-ha-ha-ha." I look at him like really buddy? And I go on to my next joke "oh-ho-ho-ho." And so I look at the planner and I said "it only took 50 seconds to prove my point." I said "here's what here's what's gonna happen guys. I can stand up here to do my show for an hour and we can listen to this guy with his sarcastic laugh, or we can ask him to leave and I can do my show and we can enjoy it. If he does that one more time I'm just gonna pack up and leave, and you guys can get your money back. I'll give you a couple minutes to think about it." I just sat on the stool and let them talk about it. So I go here's the next joke, could be the last. I told it, and of course the guy goes "ah-ha-ha." I'm like alright. It's been a nice night. I unplugged my microphone, took my basketball, and headed on home, basically.

Peter: [laughs]

Rik: The point of the whole story is I should have never said "let's try it anyway," because I knew ahead of time how it was gonna turn out. So there I was for an extra hour, hanging out at a place that I didn't need to be at, in front of a group that didn't want to pay respect. Stick to your guns, know what your audience is, and just don't waver on it. I was trying to be super nice to this lady who thought she was gonna get fired because she'd already sold tickets or whatever, but I should have kept, in that case, my best interest in mind.

Peter: Right, and gone with what your gut was telling you. I didn't think about when you started describing what a nine o'clock crowd at a golf course is gonna be like. Oh man, yeah... that's like a twelve o'clock crowd at a comedy club on a Saturday night.

Rik: Yeah, they have literally been drinking since nay 10 AM. They're all sunburned, they're dehydrated, they haven't eaten... they're halfway passing out, and that's who you want to entertain? Not me anymore.

Peter: No. Not one bit. I think I remember one time listening, and we won't have to go into this one, but I think I was listening to one of your podcasts and you were talking about the time that they put you in this fleabag hotel that there are gangs...

Rik: Oh.

Peter: Was that Detroit?

Rik: Chattanooga.

Peter: Oh, Chattanooga... yeah, you've got some great war stories out there and those go a long way. They're painful when you're doing them, but they are great stories after the fact.

Rik: That was a life-threatening evening and I'm glad I lived past that one, but basically the comedy club put me up at a hotel that was so bad that I called the front desk to inform them that I'm looking out my window and there's two guys with handguns sitting on the hood of my car. Could you call the police? But the front desk said "Hey, I think they're staying in the room next to you. I can't afford to miss out on that rent for the night."

Peter: Sheesh...

Rik: So literally I was there wide awake until this one came up and those guys disappeared. I drove my car over to the parking lot of the comedy club and waited for the owner to get there to put me in a different place.

Peter: Wow. Man... maybe one of your books should be about all the war stories that you have.

Rik: Yeah, I think there'll be an element of that in a lot of these books. I probably should start collecting those stories and putting them together. I think some people don't realize just how crazy it is out there, and it might be a good eye opener.

Peter: To that point, I think a lot of people who maybe don't even do stand-up comedy, or they want to get into it, don't realize how much time and effort it takes to craft just a joke, and how many dead jokes that you've got in order to just get that one decent joke.

Rik: Oh yeah. Jokes will go through a lot of changes, and all those changes have to be in front of live audiences to figure out if you're doing them right. So when you see a comic like Jim Gaffigan run through a one-hour special on nail it, he's been working on that for 11 months doing four to five maybe six shows a week to get it tight.

Peter: Yeah, it's amazing. I think a lot of people have asked me about how Seinfeld talks about how long it takes to do a joke... because the perception is "oh you're just coming up with this stuff, writing it down, and then you're up on stage nailing it." No, it's like polishing a diamond.

Rik: Yeah, you've got to compress that sucker forever. It's the goal of the speaker to be eloquent and make it seem like it's flowing right off the tip your mind. Same thing with the comedian. You want to make make it appear as if you're thinking of it right on the spot, to bring some urgency and immediacy to what you're saying, and that takes practice. That takes skill.

Peter: It does take a whole lot of work. I don't want to take up too much more of your time. I know you've got to get ready for the big game tonight... but I want to take another detour real quick. Your oldest son is how old?

Rik: 11

Peter: 11, and he plays the guitar as well?

Rik: Yes, so it's funny. The day that we brought my daughter home three and a half years ago my son noticed that she was getting all the attention, and he started banging on one of my guitars. I said "hey hey hey, if you want to play that I'll get you a little one and I can teach you." So that was his way of making sure he got papa time every day, and after a year, after a single year, he knew everything I knew on the guitar and we had to start getting some lessons. Before you know it, he's with this little kids band that was organized by the guys that teach lessons. He's playing the Hard Rock Cafe, BB King's, doing gigs at the airport and some outside festivals. It's just amazing how fast he picked it up.

Peter: Wow, that is so cool. That's a great story, and obviously he got that from you. I didn't get any of those musical genes so I take my hat off to you and your son, and maybe someday we'll see that you guys sell out Carnegie Hall.

Rik: Hey, maybe Carnegie Mellon first.

Peter: [laughs] Rik, I'll put it in the show notes, but people can find you at your website at RikRoberts.com?

Rik: Yeah, and if they're interested in the comedy stuff then, on SchoolOfLaughs.com, there's info on the podcast and lots of blogs and stuff like that, if they want to learn a little bit more about adding humor to what they do.

Peter: And you're proficient on that and on social media: on Twitter, on Facebook. So there's many ways to connect with you. I would suggest everybody in the audience connect with Rik and follow him to learn more about the art of storytelling, the art of comedy, and the art of standing up public speaking. Because he's nailed it, but he didn't start yesterday. It takes a lot of time. So thank you Rik. It's always great to connect with you, and maybe we'll see each other this summer in Orlando at the NSA National Convention.

Rik: I'm planning on being there, so let's make sure we grab some lunch.

Peter: Sounds good. Thanks Rik!

Rik: Thanks buddy.

[Music]

Peter: I would like to thank Rik again for taking time out of his schedule to give us his thoughts and experiences on how stand-up and improv comedy apply in today's business world. You can find out more about Rik on his website at RikRoberts.com. And if you want to take his online comedy riding course, go to SchoolOfLaughs.com. In episode 43, I interview Cathy Fyock, who is the Biz Book Strategist. As she states on her website, "she is your possibility partner providing you with the intense support you need to get your book done." Remember, you can subscribe to my podcast on itunes, stitcher, and google play. If you'd like to purchase an autographed copy of my book *Improv is no Joke: Using Improvisation to Create Positive Results in Leadership and Life*, for \$14.99 with free shipping, please go to my website, PeterMargaritis.com, and you'll see the graphic on the homepage to purchase my book. Please allow 14 days for shipping. Thank you again for listening and remember to use the power of listening to understand and to better connect with those around you.

[Music]