

006 – John Branyan

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Welcome to the Art and Business of Public Speaking with your host, who, for over 30 years has helped men and women build exciting careers, Ken Davis.

Brian: Hey, this is Brian Scheer, your cohost of the Art and Business of Public Speaking, where we peek behind the curtain to discover how to create, grow and maintain a successful career as a communicator.

Hey Ken, it's great to have you here with us.

Ken: I'm glad to be here. I was just behind the curtain. I was just peeking behind the curtain and guess who was there? A guy by the name of John Branyan. And we're going to do a guest interview with him today. John's expertise, in my mind I would say he's a great communicator, but his real expertise is humor. And he helps some of the finest comedians today to write material, to stimulate their minds on how to incorporate humor.

Brian: Including you.

Ken: Including me. I am one of his clients. He's written a lot of material for me and it helped me get outside my little box and see some of the extra things that can be made very funny about the experiences that I have in life.

I was trying to think of where I met John Branyan. If I'm not mistaken, a woman by the name of Shonda Pierce introduced me to John Branyan at a Christian Comedians Association event. CCA. And I was immediately taken with his unique wit. His unique ability not only to, I guess I'd put it this way, Brian. You can tell a funny story, a story that in and of itself is funny. And I guess that that's sort of my forte. Or you can take a funny story and then you can find these little elements in the story that make it even funnier. Or add pieces to it that make it even funnier. And that's kind of what John Branyan does.

Brian: He kind of turns up the volume a little bit.

Ken: Yea, he cranks it up. He cranks it way up. I can't wait to hear him.

Brian: Well, sit back, relax, enjoy this interview with John and we'll be right back with you.

Ken: Our guest today is John Branyan, one of my closest friends and a comedian that I have admired for a long, long time. He's not only a comedian, by the way. John Branyan is an excellent communicator and I'm glad that he's here today because I believe that he has something to say, whether you're just starting or whether you have built a career and want to take it further. And particularly, John can help us develop and use humor in our talks that will help us communicate with people. Good morning, John. Thank you for joining us at the Art and Business of Public Speaking.

John: Ken, it is my pleasure to be here. Always good to see you, even if it's through cruddy, online video.

Ken: You guys that are listening have to know that John is still back in the era of writing letters and sending smoke signals.

John: I was actually looking for a carrier pigeon.

Ken: Hey John, we want to jump right in and ask you some questions so we can learn from what you have experienced in building a very successful career. I'm wondering what was your biggest struggle when you first started out in your career?

John: Well, first starting out, I struggled with knowing whether or not I was funny. It's a thing where it seems kind of – almost like it would be intuitive, but it's not necessarily. If you're a person who's a funny person historically, then you have family members and people at church and friends who say you're so funny, you ought to be a comedian. You can't necessarily trust those people.

Ken: Did you have those kind of people in your life? Is that the kind of background you had?

John: Yeah. I was always funny. And so I had a lot of people telling me that I should be a comedian, or I ought to be on stage. You can do this. You can be a comedian. But those people don't know what they're talking about necessarily because they're not comedians. It's a much different thing making people who know you laugh versus people who have never seen you before.

Ken: I want those of you who are listening to understand that although John does not trust the people who are telling him that he is funny, he was funny from the beginning, he's funny today. He's one of those few people that really make me laugh. And so you overcame that. You began to have confidence in the fact that you were funny. What else was there that was kind of a struggle when you first started your career?

John: Well the challenge was always finding stage time early on. There's no short cut for just getting up and doing it. You can't get any idea of how to talk in front of people until you get up and start talking in front of people. And so just finding venues in which to perform was a challenge.

Ken: Well, I got a great question for you then. Finding venues was a challenge. Getting gigs was a challenge. What tiny baby steps, or whatever you did – what process did you follow that helped you end up where you are today where you have a fairly successful career and respond to a lot of requests for your appearances?

John: What I did was I just started taking advantage of every opportunity that I was in front of people. I taught Sunday school for a number of years. I would do communion meditations in church. I would talk to the Rotary club. Any time I got a chance to go and talk to people and ply my trade I would do it. And a lot of times it meant driving obscene distances for no money. But that's the only way that you can do it.

Ken: So what would you say to the people who somehow feel that, and I've been a lot of these kind of people, that feel like there's a place in your career where you go, "I'm a professional now. I'm going to go out." And they put their name up on a website or whatever and expect that the phone is just going to start to ring incessantly. I love what you said, John, because not only in doing what you did, which means going, not necessarily getting paid, but taking advantage of every opportunity helps you learn the craft, but at the same time it builds that impetus, that momentum where suddenly a phone call does come. Can you remember that moment, by any chance?

John: Yeah, the first paid gig I got was \$25 to do a rehearsal dinner for some people that I knew at church. They wanted me to come and entertain the wedding party after the wedding rehearsal. It was during dinner. If you know anything about comedy, those are really sweet gigs. Any time you can get less than 20 people together in a room immediately after dinner when they're assembled for some other function is just a comedy-rich environment.

Ken: That comes real close to an outdoor environment with about 20,000 people throwing Frisbees and buying hotdogs. Hey, what are you most proud of? I think back, because I watch your career and I want to know from you first. I'm going to tell you later what I'm proud of about you. But what are you most proud of when it comes to your speaking career.

John: I don't know. I think probably when I'm asked that question my knee-jerk reaction is to say I'm not really proud of anything because I'm not that different from a lot of performers. I still watch myself on tape. It still makes me cringe. It's the hardest thing that I do.

Ken: By the way, let me just interject there. I think that's true to all of us. We are our own worst critics. And you know how you can solve that, John? Don't want yourself on tape. Go ahead. You still have left the question unanswered.

John: I watch myself but I put a bag over my head. But I think the thing that makes me the happiest, I guess, is that I have a lot of peers who are, themselves, very funny people and very talented people. And when they value my input that makes me happy. I like it when I get calls from Ken Davis or get a call from Tim Hawkins or Mark Lauer will call me. Whenever somebody who's in the business and is a quintessential professional in their own right calls me and says, hey, can you help me punch up this bit? That makes me happy.

Ken: Wow. And I have used your expertise on several occasions. And it always fascinates me how you can take something that is – what most people would look at and say, this is just a normal, everyday experience. And then you take it and look at it from a different perspective and make it funny. So for the people who are out there John, who are communicators – let's start with this. They're communicators. They speak. They get a good response from folks. But in their own hearts they would like to incorporate more humor. The fact that you are a writer of humor and that you have the amazing ability that I don't have, by the way. I do not sit down and write humor. Now maybe you'd like

to respond to that in your answer. But what I do is let life happen to me. And then I tell that story, and of course, as you tell it, little pieces started to attach themselves to it.

So for the person out there who is saying, I'm a communicator but I would really like to know how do you find humor? What does this writing look like? Is there a little formula or something that you can give them that would help them to begin to write little pieces that they can try in their performances and see what happens?

John: Yeah, I'm actually working on a little – I don't know if it's a class or program or method or whatever. I've been working on this for a couple of years, but my goal is to be able to write on any topic, any time. So I play this little game with myself sometimes where I'll wake up in the morning and I'll go, the first thing that I see, the first thing that I look at, that's what I'm going to write comedy about.

Because sometimes I see the floor, or sometimes I see an alarm clock, or a comb, or whatever. So it doesn't give me a whole lot of subject matter to mine. And so the game is to see how much material I can come up with and whether or not it's any good. But in order to do that I took an art class a little while back. And one of the things that struck me as I was taking this art class is that when you look at a piece of finished artwork, in this case it was comics, when you look at a finished comic, it doesn't go onto paper in that finished format. Every single artist that I have heard talk about how they do what they do, they start with a pencil sketch or a rough sketch. Which is something that's really gross, very basic shapes.

And then from there they start to flesh out the detail. And it occurred to me that that is exactly how comedy writing works. If you come at it from the idea of, I'm going to write a ten minute polished bit on grapefruit, well that's the most terrifying thing in the world. So what you do – what I've started doing – is starting with more of a pencil sketch and saying, okay, here's some things I know about grapefruit. Nothing especially funny. I'm just fleshing it out. I'm just trying to find some sort of a shape one which to build the rest of the jokes. And when I start really simple like that, when I say I'm just going to write about grapefruits, I'm not going to worry about being funny. Everything that comes out of my mind, everything that drops off the end of the pencil is not going to be this bit of comedy gold. There's no way it's going to be because we're just pencil sketching.

And then from there you can start building it. And I build it with questions. I just ask questions.

Ken: That is such great advice. You know, writers have to follow that advice. Anne Lamotte wrote a book *Bird by Bird* – it has a whole chapter on starting with that ugly, don't try to correct it right away, just write about it. And the same thing with the grapefruit. You think of the texture of the grapefruit, anything that comes to your mind. I need to be reminded of that all the time. And in fact, as we were preparing to do this interview I did not think of that as being one of the responses of just allowing yourself the privilege and the discipline of writing about something and trying to find what might be funny about it. And don't worry about it being perfect in the beginning. Work on it.

John: Right. And don't worry about it even being good when you're done with it. I mean, I've thrown away way more material than I've performed.

Ken: I know, I've picked up a lot of that and made a career out of it.

John: You don't know. You don't know how it's going to look, and a lot of times I've sat down to write something thinking it's going to go one direction and it goes a completely different direction. You just don't know until you go into it where it's going to go.

Ken: So those of you who are into writing speeches and doing those speeches and public speaking, the same applies here. I want you take what John has said and apply it to the reality of just speaking, even beyond humor. Don't worry about getting it perfect the first time. And I am the worst offender when it comes to this. I back up and change words. Get it out there. Get it out there in the ugly form and then come back and work on it. What a great piece of advice.

Is that it? I almost – I came this close, and nobody can see me doing this, but I've got my fingers so that they're almost touching in a little teeny pinchy thing – I came this close to saying, okay John, I'm going to throw out a word. Be funny. Isn't that like the worst nightmare a comedian can possibly have? Because what's going to come out is like that beginning stuff. You haven't refined it yet.

John: Right. That's what all radio guys do when you go on. You go on to a radio station and they go, okay, you've got 30 seconds. Go. Be funny.

Ken: I had a doctor once – I was introduced to a doctor on a plane and I asked him what he did and he said, well, I'm a physician. And he asked me what I did and I said, well, I'm kind of a speaker/comedian. And he said, be funny. I said, take out my spleen. Neither one of us can do it on that short notice.

Let me ask you another question. Let's move on to a little bit different question. Is there any aspect of your speaking that you would be courageous enough to say, this is something I can still improve?

John: Oh good. I thought you were going to ask me if I had my spleen out. Yeah, I still need to work on discipline. I have a fairly regular writing schedule. But I don't write consistently like I should. Because it's a muscle. And if you don't work that muscle it atrophies. And so I need to be more disciplined. And I also need to be when it comes to the speaking part of it – the performing part of it – I need to be more bold, I think. Because I have a tendencies to go toward the things that are tried and true and proven rather than venture out onto the limb and try newer things and more recent things.

Ken: See now, that's interest. I've got to interrupt you here, because you're one of the boldest people I know. You're always out there on the end of the limb. At my age, and at this point in my career, I don't even want to climb the tree. I just want to hear that resounding laughter. I don't want to take the risk.

Let me ask you this. It's almost like I have to find a different place to work out new material, because if someone has paid me an enormous amount of money to come,

they deserve something other than me experimenting on them. How do you feel about that?

John: How do I feel about workshoping at paid gigs?

Ken: Yes.

John: I don't have a problem with that, because it's hard for me to do gigs other than that any more. I've actually gone back to open mic. I've been doing some open mic recently.

Ken: Wait just a second. There may be some people out there – that means you go to a place where they do comedy and you're like the beginner. You go up for how many minutes?

John: Six minutes.

Ken: Six minutes, and you're just trying out new stuff.

John: Right. But even there when I try new material, it doesn't always work. It's not always really solid. And you just – you don't get honest feedback necessarily at most open mics either. Because most open mics, the audience is made up of other performers or people who have got their backs to you looking at the TV over the bar. And so it's not really reliable feedback always. So I have to do material at paid gigs. That's where the audience is.

You never open with new material. You always open with something that's solid because the audience is going to decide whether or not you're any good in the first 30 seconds on stage. And so if you are trying out something that you never tried before in the first 30 seconds, it's like Russian roulette. Because if it doesn't work you're not going to get them back, maybe ever.

New material I will do after I have established that I know what I'm doing. I'll be up on stage for ten or fifteen minutes doing material that I know works and is solid. And when they've laughed a while, then I can kind of venture out and explore uncharted territory.

Ken: If we take one step back just from doing humor and talk about just speaking period, one of the artful parts of speaking is to know, very surely, what those first words you're going to say. You're not tapping the mic going "is this on?" You're not being frivolous about, well, glad to be here. But you know exactly what you're going to say, so it applies across the board.

Now, in our show, we always want to leave people with a traveling tip, or some kind of tip that will help them. You're on the road a lot. You're gone a lot. Do you have any tips for those who suddenly find themselves successful and are traveling all the time? What would be your biggest tip?

John: Well, I would say, if you're flying, just stick with one airline. That was actually passed on to me by a veteran comic a few years ago. Because I was a guy who always looked for the cheapest airfare. It's much better to stick with one airline and amass the miles and amass the loyalty points with that airline. And also get TSA pre-checked because I was

almost an axe murderer every time I traveled until I got TSA. And now that I'm TSA-pre, I'm...

Ken: Well, we're getting a little crazy now with TSA-pre, because they're just handing them out like cookies in line.

John: Have you noticed that, too? What's the deal with that?

Ken: I don't know. Because there's people in the TSA-pre line taking out their computers and taking their shoes off. I saw a naked guy in TSA-pre because he didn't understand what was going on.

John: A guy starts hopping up and down taking his shoe off in the pre – I just push it down.

Ken: John, I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to talk to you like this. Of course, you'll be at my home and we'll be together in a lot of other situations, but to have this happen so that other can take advantage of what you're saying. And they actually got a little view of how comedy is written when we started talking about TSA-pre. Would you agree with this? If you see something and it makes you crazy, probably there's some good content there for either an illustration or comedy. Am I right about that?

John: Oh yeah. If you want to know what to write about, just what drives you insane. That's where comedy starts.

Ken: Well, I still admire you as one of the best comics on the road, and I certainly appreciate you as one of my closest friends. And that you for contributing to the Art and Business of Public Speaking today.

John: My please, Ken.

Brian: Ken, what a great interview with John. A wealth of information throughout that interview on everything about humor.

Ken: Right. And I want the listeners to our podcast today to not be quick to dismiss themselves from this. There's some people that say, well, I'm not humorous. There are all different levels of humor, and humor is a powerful means of helping people stay with you as you communicate. I think it was Zig Ziglar who said that every five or six minutes he wants to inject some humor into his talk. And he was a great communicator. Great sales trainer. But he injected every five or six humor into his talk just to bring people back.

No matter how good you are, their minds tend to wander, and of course, I've always said that humor is that element that – how someone defined it – as a gentle way to acknowledge human frailty. A way to look at how you can improve and it kind of kicks open the door to what people might not be otherwise willing to look at.

Brian: One of the things I see reoccurring in a lot of these interviews is that the audience comes first. It's so important to connect with that audience and bring them back to you. Get them back on board with your message. John even mentioned a book, and I think even you had a book that you had mentioned.

Ken: John mentioned *Killer Standup*. And if you're interested in humor – now that's a specific kind of humor. Standup is different than storytelling humor and whatever. But *Killer Standup*. And I had a book that was entitled *Comedy Writing Secrets* by Mel Helitzer. That's an amazing book that talks about little things that words that are funny and words that aren't funny. Some words are funny.

We're going to do another whole podcast just on humor, and I'm looking forward to that. Hey – there's one takeaway that I don't want us to forget. And this sort of is parallel to what we were talking about with stories. If you see something and it drives you crazy, that's probably something you can look at that will be humorous if you just give it that little twist, that little puff that'll allow it to be a major humor. So it's the same thing with stories as with humor. When you see something that moves you emotionally, jot it down and it probably will be good.

Brian: Well, I'm going to mention again, if you want to take these Show Notes and be able to review them on your own time, you can go to DynamicCommunicators.com and review those notes. There you also see where you can connect with John at his website at johnbrnryan.com. Ken, we were going to our segment called the Road Tip, and I think you have a great one for today.

Ken: Yeah, it's actually one that John actually gave us. He said stick with one airline. If you fly around the country, just don't go for cheapest. You'll end up paying more in the end. Stick with one airline. Amass the airline points, the status and the loyalty. Because we all know how loyal companies are to us. We've been flying one airline for 15 years and we just got an upgrade. That was great.

Brian: You got an upgrade. Well, at least one time you got upgraded. I can personally attest that's a great road tip and will pay off big time for you.

All right. John and you recorded a DVD along with some other comedian friends and it's actually called *Get 'Em While They're Hot* and it's a collection of not only you, but four other comedians.

Ken: Yes. And as old as we're getting, you probably should get it now because we're starting to cool off. We're starting to get luke warm. But it is John and David Pendleton and some other comedians that are just – Darren Strelbow. It is a fun, fun video. There's a four minute segment on that that is absolutely hilarious.

Brian: We actually have three different Ken Davis and Friends DVDs available with various comedians. Go to the Show Notes again at DynamicCommunicators.com. We'll have a link there that will show you how to get those DVDs, and just for saying thanks for being a podcast listener, you'll see, in those Show Notes, a 20% coupon code that you can use at checkout.

Ken: That's great. And we have a guarantee. If you don't like it, too bad. We'll see you next time.

Brian:

Hey, thanks for tuning in to another episode of the Art and Business of Public Speaking. Be sure to check out the full Show Notes at DynamicCommunicators.com where you can find the resources we discussed today and a downloadable transcript of the podcast.

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