

A COUPLE OF *characters*

BY LOIS McELRAVY & STEVE WEBER

A character performance is a powerful device speakers use to connect with their audiences. Characters break down resistance and have the ability to open hearts and minds. You can deliver your message uniquely when you present using a character, because that character enables a speaker to stand out, be different and provide a lasting memory.

So, what exactly is a character? One definition classifies a character as *a unique or extraordinary individual, a person with peculiar or notable traits*. Another definition is *an actor's portrayal of someone*.

At one time or another, you've said to someone, "*That so-and-so is a real character.*" And the other person knew exactly what you meant. Characters get your attention, don't they?

Yep, it's easy to recognize a character when you meet one. When describing someone as a character, there's usually a certain fondness and respect ... maybe even a little bewilderment thrown in for good measure. And maybe even a little envy?

So, what makes characters appealing?

The good ones are always unique. They're one of a kind. They can be goofballs or oddballs. In some ways, they're even misfits. Recall the many times incredulous folks would ask Forrest Gump bluntly, "Are you crazy or just plain stupid?" Characters don't let others' judgments stop them from attempting and accomplishing great things.

Characters are leaders who do things their own unique way. They're sassy and frequently say things that polite people *think* ... but would *never* say. That sense of daring gives characters a genuineness and authenticity most people admire.

The final thing to know about characters is that they break down barriers. Great characters allow people to be real, let down their guards and live life in the moment. They bestow courage and give audiences encouragement *and* permission to be adventurous and try new things.

We, Lois and Steve, are a couple of characters.

And, we'd like to give you a few ideas about how *you* can be a character. It's like *a box of chocolates: You just never know ...*

LOIS SAYS

Louis is an original character, created for a specific purpose—a one-time-only presentation at a brain-injury conference. After that first performance, however, Louis took on a life of his own and continued to charm his way into the speaker world. He's also wiggled into the hearts of many audiences across the United States and Canada.

How do you create an original character?

I'm not an authority on characterization; however, my reflections about Louis's evolution may help you develop your own character.

Pay attention to ideas that sprout at unusual times.

When an outlandish idea popped into my head about using a character to illustrate the silent epidemic of brain injury, I scoffed at the notion. My daughter convinced me I should explore this character idea.

Is your original character an extension of your authentic self?

Louis is classified as a *persona*, which is defined as *the voice or mask that an author, speaker or performer puts on for a particular purpose*. Louis is an extension of my authentic self. The complexity of Louis runs deeper than I consciously understand at this time.

Be clear about what your character symbolizes, and relate your character to your message.

My character's disheveled and misplaced look represents the shattered self-esteem and loss of self that accompanies brain injury. The ugly mask is a paradoxical metaphor for people living with a brain injury. They frequently hear, "You look good," but they feel ugly inside.

The transformation from Louis to Lois symbolizes stripping away the negative perceptions of living with a brain injury. It illustrates that a person can let go of who he or she *was* in order to discover a new self. Removing the mask of limitation is a call to action for survivors to take advantage of every resource available and ask for the help they need to build a new life.



Use your character to create a visual that leaves a lasting impression.

When the vice president of the Brain Injury Association of Montana approached me after my character program, he said, “I was shocked! I almost walked out once I realized what was happening. I’m so glad I stayed. That wasn’t a program—it was a show! You need to take it on the road.”

What factors influence what your audience deems appropriate for your character? Here’s why Louis’ striptease transformation to Lois works.

Lois sets the stage by saying, “When I listen to Shania Twain sing, I am transformed into an entirely different person. Let me show you what I

mean.” The music starts, the audience chuckles, and Louis uses the singer’s popularity to gain favor with the audience before his quirky dance turns into a striptease transformation. The visual is reinforced by the lyrics, “It’s ’bout as bad as it could be, seems everybody’s bugging me, like nothing wants to go my way... can only go up from here.”

Lois (the real me) opens her portion of the keynote by saying, “Louis represents a time when my life looked ugly.” During my closing, I adapt the symbolism of Louis to reinforce the message and my call to action.

The striptease shocks certain individuals because it goes against their beliefs of right and wrong; it delights others because it provokes a *breaking the rules* mindset and *getting away with it* type of pleasure.

Characters will experience limits imposed by the audience. Find your sweet spot.

If your character wears a mask, the audience can grow agitated if you don’t reveal yourself after a certain point. Twelve minutes after Louis takes the stage, he starts his unveiling.

Develop your character’s diversity. Strategically relate your character to each audience.

Transitioning to general audiences required me to modify the symbolism of my character so Louis would be relevant to each specific audience. For example, in workplace audiences, Louis can symbolize stripping away the fear of measuring up or letting go of resistance to change. It also encourages workgroups to remove their masks of limitation, consider new perspectives, learn humor strategies to cope, and become confident in their abilities.

It takes courage to be a different kind of speaker.

After attending my first NSA conference in 2009, I questioned whether or not real speakers use a character. I considered ditching Louis and might have actually done so—except I continued to get referrals specifically for Louis!

After speaking in Toronto, Ontario, at MADD Canada's National Victims' Weekend last April, I evidenced the power of characters. In 12 short minutes, Louis opened the hearts and minds of a most resistant, sensitive and grieving audience to embrace a healing message titled, "*Humor helps and laughter heals.*" I'm keeping Louis. Real speakers use talents, devices and even characters to impart their messages and impact lives.

7 TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE CHARACTER USE

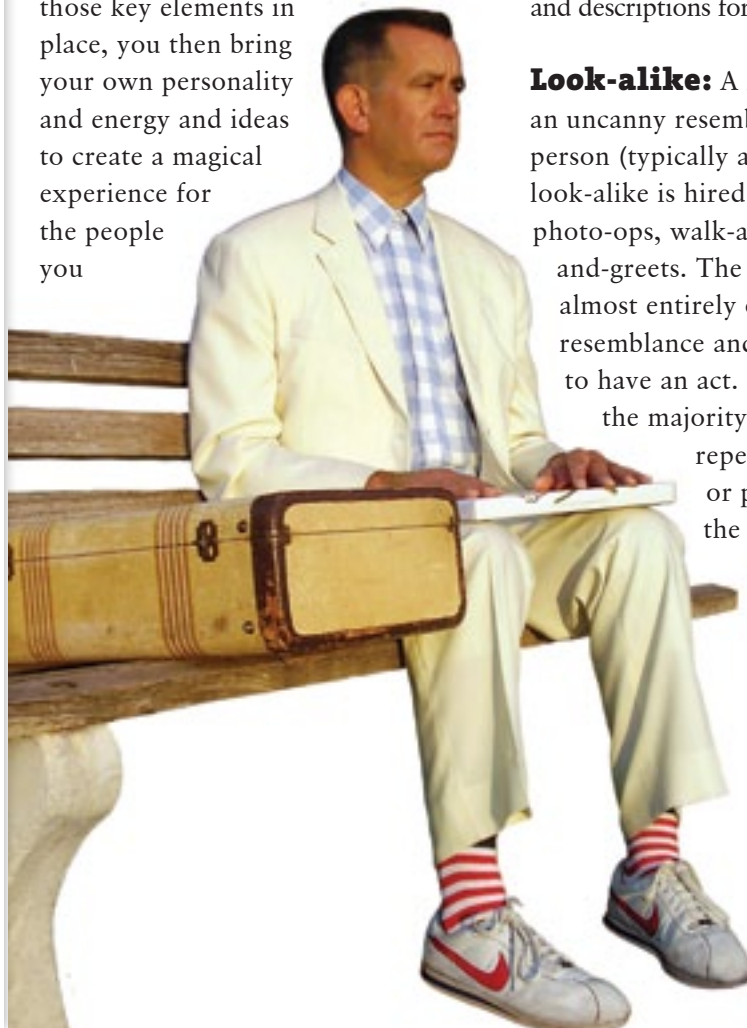
1. You must first love your character so your audience may love your character.
2. For your character to be real to your audience, you must step out of yourself and become the character.
3. A great character alone is not enough. You need a message that inspires change, influences, teaches and moves others to act.
4. The character must reinforce, strengthen and anchor your message.
5. The audience must be able to relate or identify with the character.
6. Fiercely protect the integrity of your character. Never compromise your character's character.
7. Acknowledge that not everyone will love your character. Accept that most will like it, a few won't, but all will remember the message.

STEVE SAYS

Not all characters are created equal. In fact, the best characters are created one at a time. The greatest characters have no mold. My character was created in the 1994 movie *Forrest Gump*. Of course, Academy Award-winning actor Tom Hanks portrayed Forrest, the slow-witted man from Greenbow, Alabama, who achieved remarkable success in life by following the simple wisdom of his mother and living by the philosophy, "A promise is a promise."

So, how does one improve on that? You don't. In fact, you don't even try.

Instead, all you can do is borrow some traits: style of dress, haircut, accent, memorable lines from the movie, and the chocolate box. With those key elements in place, you then bring your own personality and energy and ideas to create a magical experience for the people you



meet. If you're really good, you leave people walking away feeling like they just met the *real* Forrest Gump.

When I started portraying Forrest for the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company in 1996, I was inexperienced and confused about what I was actually doing. *Was I a look-alike? An impersonator? A tribute artist? Or was I just a guy with genetic luck and a bad haircut being mostly myself while having a great time?* The answers are all yes.

So, maybe you're wondering, *What's the difference between an impersonator, a look-alike, and a tribute artist? Don't the terms all mean the same thing?*

They all have similar meanings and are terms used interchangeably. It's been confusing for me to differentiate between them, so I invented my own definitions and descriptions for each term.

Look-alike: A look-alike bears an uncanny resemblance to another person (typically a celebrity). The look-alike is hired to conduct photo-ops, walk-arounds, and meet-and-greets. The look-alike relies almost entirely on the physical resemblance and isn't expected to have an act. He or she spends the majority of speaking time repeating famous lines or phrases that mimic the original celebrity and remind others of the character he or she resembles. The term *dead ringer* is often used to describe the best look-alikes.

Impersonator: An impersonator is similar to the character in physical resemblance but has more leeway in the look. Impersonators are more skilled in the use of dialogue, singing and/or character portrayal. The impersonator frequently brings his or her interpretation of the character into the act. The impersonator has studied and trained to the degree that the performance is definitely considered to be an act. Consequently, impersonators can command higher fees than simple look-alikes. To an audience, it's readily apparent that an impersonator isn't the real thing but a good imitation.

Tribute Artist: Tribute artists are the most skilled and highest paid performers. The term *tribute artist* derives from the original term *tribute band*. Tribute bands first became popular when groups began looking and sounding like The Beatles. It evolved into the term *tribute act* to include solo singers (e.g., Elvis impersonators) and bands or groups. Today, the term *tribute artist* has expanded again to include character or celebrity impersonators along with musical acts. Tribute artists are considered professionals and always conduct themselves in the highest ethical manner, so the industry and the brand to which they're paying tribute are represented in the best possible manner.

In more recent years, I preferred the term tribute artist to describe myself, because I felt I was more than just a dead ringer or a guy pretending to be someone else. The reality, however, is I'm a look-alike, an impersonator, and an artist paying tribute to one of the most popular movie characters of all time.

Today I call myself a speaker because my message of *Gumption* is independent of the character. While independent, *Gumption* is also 100 percent complimentary to both the

PRO VS CON

ADVANTAGES OF BEING A CHARACTER

1. Break down barriers
2. Create instant audience connection
3. Command and retain attention
4. Put people in a good mood
5. Easy to be both silly and sassy
6. Easy to be direct
7. Share sensitive messages without offending
8. Give encouragement *and* permission to do what's normally considered unacceptable
9. Keeps you humble

DISADVANTAGES OF BEING A CHARACTER

1. The character can be distracting. The visual appearance of the character can overpower an audience's ability to hear your message.
2. Credibility. Some will discount the message out of hand—they perceive it as entertainment and not serious.
3. Limits the type of message that can be delivered with authority.
4. Serious-minded individuals may be unreceptive.

You don't have to be perfect. In Steve's case, if he screws up, he just says, "*Stupid is as stupid does!*"

character and me, personally. Many years ago, the character and my individuality stopped being independent of each other—and they merged into one.

Has anyone ever said that you look like someone famous ... or someone else? Has anyone ever asked you the question, "Do you know who you look like?" If so, you might just become a character.

SPEAKERS deliver a message, inspire change and motivate others to act. Using a character is a tool that helps speakers do their job. For us, a character isn't just a tool—it's our toolbox. Being a character isn't a single chapter—it's our whole book. Being a character isn't simply fun—it's our business. "*And that's all we've got to say about that.*"



Lois McElravy is a keynote speaker, humor expert, and brain-injury thriver. She works with individuals and organizations who want to learn how to use humor and laughter to adjust to change, bounce back from disappointment, cope with the unpredictable, and feel happy in the midst of trying times. Learn more at www.LessonsfromLois.com.



Steve Weber is a speaker, *Forrest Gump* tribute artist, conference host, internal corporate spokesman, blogger and author. Weber's three principles of *Gumption* are designed to alter lives and urge organizations to Function with *Gumption*. The simple yet powerful truths contained in the movie *Forrest Gump* will transform your next meeting from ordinary to extraordinary. Learn more at www.SpeakingGump.com.