

Nailz hammers away at structure of big business



Stolnack

LAUGH LINES

Lisa Ferguson

Stolnack isn't some big-business bigwig; he just plays one behind the podium as "The Executive Impostor."

Armed with a mock job title, "I come in as a serious speaker, and then make it obvious there's no chance I know what I'm talking about," he explains.

To prepare for his quasi-lectures he reads tons of literature about the companies that hire him to speak, studying technical terms, marketing strategies and such. "My pre-production work is expensive," he says.

His scripted bits generally last about 10 minutes. "The first five are real serious, with legitimate jargon that they would hear from the person I'm supposed to be."

Stolnack recalls the time he served as the featured speaker during a company meeting for Anheuser-Busch, where he had audience members "convinced that beer is liquid bread," and that its brew should share shelf space with Wonder Bread at supermarkets. "When they hear that, dollar signs are floating around in their heads and they're like, 'Yes, you're right,' and are gung-ho."

He's even had attentive audience members go so far as to take notes on his presentations. To play the part convincingly,

he creates full-blown powerpoint presentations and uses a laptop computer as a prop.

Stolnack even tackles questions from eager employees. After mastering his improvisational skills over the years, deflecting bombs lobbed by hecklers, he says, "This is nothing, to answer a guy in a three-piece suit."

The second half of his speeches are when "I start going out even further on the limb, until I just completely fall off."

Last month he spoke to a crowd of Mercedes Benz conventioners in San Francisco. The company is focused on luring young, hip consumers into its high-end, luxury-vehicle-filled showrooms. Stolnack ran with the information, telling employees the auto maker would soon begin referring to its cars as "Mizzle Bizzle" and using street-gang-like hand signals to describe its models:

"M-Class is three fingers down; E-Class is straight to the side. Let's all try that.' I had about half the crowd giving me the M-Class sign," he recalls.

When meeting-goers finally figure out Stolnack is a phony, "They just crack up," and he wraps up with a sampling from his comedy-club act.

Insider-trading scandals. Shady accounting practices. Disappearing pension funds. Looming layoffs. Is it any wonder why American workers aren't smiling much these days?

Russ Stolnack understands their frustration. His job: Do whatever it takes to make burned-out laborers laugh again.

That's not such a tall order for the funny man to fill. A professional comic for nearly two decades, he uses his catchy nickname, Russ T. Nailz, when performing at comedy clubs in Las Vegas, Lake Tahoe and Atlantic City.

It's by using his birth name, Russ Stolnack, that he butters his bread, working as an emcee at various events, an auctioneer and a professional speaker. He appears at meetings and conventions performing his shtick (a sort of stand-up act for the corporate set) for employees of some of the biggest companies in the world. The catch: Audiences don't know he's kidding — at least, not at first.