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Make the Most of Your Roast

Celebrate the honoree by keeping your quips gentle and brief.

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM

As speeches go, delivering an effective roast may be one of the most difficult formats to master. Simply put, most roasts are not done well, and may leave their intended subject feeling fried or singed.

A roast is intended to honor and gently tease the recipient in front of his or her peers, family and friends. It's not done to punish the honoree, but rather to pay tribute. The best roasts celebrate the individual's work, style, personality and idiosyncrasies, and are delivered with love.

Don't Be Mean

Sadly, I've watched roasters make up stories about the recipient, with no basis in fact. I've also seen roasters disparage the recipient with raw language, taking a mean tone and omitting humor altogether. And I've

“Try to strike a balance between humor and praise.” — Arvind Nair, DTM

seen roasters get their facts wrong, undermining their own credibility and detracting from the quality of the occasion.

The best recipe for a roast is research. Start by setting aside time in advance to learn more about the honoree. Collect biographical facts such as where the person was born and grew up, where he went to school and what degrees or past positions he's attained. What awards has he received?



Past District 57 Governor Ashley Harkness (left) takes his turn speaking after being roasted by fellow district members, during a 2008 meeting of the LaughLovers Comedy Toastmasters club in Oakland, California. Sitting to Ashley's immediate left is the author of this article, Past D57 Governor Craig Harrison, and to his left Past D57 Governor Tyree Johnson. Below left, the roasters rib Ashley by holding up a photo of him in front of their faces.



How about hobbies, favorite teams or songs? What charities or projects is he involved with? Is the person known for any unique figures of speech or favorite phrases?

Map it Out

You may want to apply some sort of visual organization to the information you gather, such as a diagram. One method is mind-mapping. (Try the site www.mindmeister.com.) Put the honoree's name or picture in the middle of a blank page and draw lines outward to write what you already know about her. Then **ask others, like friends, co-workers and family, what they can share about the person.** Research her on the Internet. View her Facebook page or LinkedIn profile.

Then look for interesting connections between morsels. What items jump out at you in terms of contrasts or overall themes?

Is there a common thread? Are the contrasts stark? Each of these can lead to humor.

When I roasted an outgoing district governor, my research uncovered a lifelong fascination with photography, travels to foreign countries, a tendency to regularly wear bow ties and suspenders and an interest in storytelling. I was able to create humor around each of these topics.

If you're going to roast someone, **be original.** This means avoiding clichéd old jokes. Lazily attaching someone's name to generic humor is actually disrespectful. Customize your humor to the individual.

Unlike revenge—a dish best eaten cold—**roasts should be served warmly.** Use humor that is gentle, positive and has universal appeal. You can tease the recipient and make jokes about him, but be sure you end the roast with love.

“You should always end well,” says Denis Dawson, DTM. “Conclude with sincere appreciation.” A member of two clubs in San Ramon, California, Dawson offers another piece of advice: The best levity is found in brevity. “Know when you’re done, and stop,” he says. Remember, as a roaster it’s not about you. It’s about the honoree. You’re there to celebrate him, not draw attention to yourself.

Success is in the Balance

“Try to strike a balance between humor and praise,” suggests Arvind Nair, DTM, president of Bombay Toastmasters in Mumbai, India. He prefers using gentle humor, especially for those for whom humor doesn’t come naturally.

To deliver a virtuoso roast, practice is essential. That’s when you master the timing, pauses, emphasis on laugh lines and overall tone. Every word should carry weight so the roast can be delivered succinctly. “The more you rehearse before a small practice audience, the more fun you and the audience will have,” says speech coach Patricia Fripp.

If you intend to use props, rehearse using them as well.

Past International Director Bill Woolfolk, DTM, says he has roasted and been roasted over the years. An excellent resource for roasters, he says, is the book *We’re Roasting Harry Tuesday Night* by Ed McManus and Bill Nicholas.

WHEN YOU’RE THE RECIPIENT OF A ROAST

Sooner or later you may be the roastee. As the recipient of others’ roasts, you may be allowed or even expected to respond before the event ends. Whether you’re allowed rejoinders during each roast or are accorded a “last word” after the others have had their say about you, keep these suggestions in mind:

- **You’re always on stage.** While you’re being roasted, many eyes will be on you. Try to enjoy the experience, whether or not the roasters hit their mark with skill or taste. One roaster played a very long version of “It’s A Small World After All” to me on her accordion as her tribute. Use discipline, concentration and patience to smile and savor every second of the experience. Be gracious!
- **Take the high road.** Show your confidence by laughing at yourself and the barbs others throw your way. And when you get a chance to respond, be classy in your remarks. Dazzle the audience with your good taste and wit.
- **Thank everyone**—the roasters, their collaborators and the audience too. Successful roasts are the result of the collaborations of multiple chefs.

— Craig Harrison, DTM

And In Conclusion ...

When you give a roast, honor the event by delivering your best material and then sitting back down. Your goal isn’t to speak the longest, but to generate laughter and love in your brief moments in the spotlight. In this case, less is more! **T**

CRAIG HARRISON, DTM, has roasted and been roasted over his 22 years in Toastmasters. A member of Lakeview Toastmasters in Oakland, California, he is a professional keynoter and emcee. Visit www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com for his speaker and leader resources.