

supply side

# Brave New Workshop

John Sweeney and his crew take corporate comedy seriously. That's why it's actually funny.



Institutionalized: Brave New Workshop comedians train extensively for corporate gigs.

General Mills' acquisition of Pillsbury last year—which quadrupled the size of its business and created the third largest food manufacturer in the world—was no laughing matter. But when the longtime hometown rivals with separate corporate cultures needed to learn to work together, executives knew that any team-building events they initiated had to first tackle concerns of trust and support.

Turns out those two concerns make up the foundation for an increasingly popular method of team-building: improvisational

theatre. Better yet, the Brave New Workshop, the nation's oldest improvisational theatre, was just a few miles down the road from General Mills' Golden Valley headquarters, in Uptown Minneapolis. The Brave New Workshop's special training division created a series of work-for-fun sessions designed specifically to bridge the communication gaps between Pillsbury and General Mills employees. Throughout the sessions, notoriously introverted engineers and even stoic CFOs enthusiastically stormed the stage for humor's sake, coaxing others to

participate and ultimately reinforcing General Mills' main objective: cohesiveness.

"At the end of the session, people stood up to share what they had learned," said Ricardo Aparicio, manager of organizational effectiveness at General Mills. "I was pleasantly surprised to see that people had internalized the messages. Particularly because this was a very high-powered, focused and driven group, and people were talking about things that they were going to go and do differently when they got back to the office."

**Method Acting** | Learning how to adapt to constant change, accepting new ideas without judgment, feeling safe enough to get creative: The Brave New Workshop methodology reads more like a business school PowerPoint presentation than a skill set for improvisational theatre. But Brave New Workshop's co-owner and executive producer, John Sweeney, isn't your typical thespian suffering corporate gigs for cash. The Madison, Wis.-born entrepreneur has a lot of real-world experience under his belt. Though he later earned his place in the spotlight as a member of Chicago's renowned comedy troupe Second City, his early ambitions were much more practical.

"I spent six years in a hard-core corporate environment doing corporate real estate," said Sweeney. "Theater-based people take for

granted how unbelievably intelligent the corporate world is. And how cultured and into the arts corporate people are. A senior vice president might go and see Broadway shows four times a year. So he's going to know if we're phoning it in, or doing really good stuff."

When Sweeney and his wife, actress and business partner Jenni Lilledahl, bought the Brave New Workshop from founder Dudley Riggs in 1997, they devoted a lot of time and energy to developing the corporate side of their comedy business. The result has led to local training and entertainment workshops for 3M, BI Creative, Honeywell and Best Buy Corporation, to name a few. It's also earned them a national reputation for excellence and a busy schedule, with more than 60 out-of-state training workshops each year.

Prep-work for corporate gigs starts with an informational meeting to help the Brave New Workshop get a better feel for a company and its employees. "We've got a pretty formal interview process with our clients," said Sweeney.

Sweeney also formally developed a seven-point strategy for improvisation—and uses the sessions to show how embracing these seven points improves business skills and stage skills alike. So whether he and his troupe are summoned for leadership training, communication improvement, or to help employees rebuild trust in the midst of change, the points delivered to each audience vary only slightly. "Basically what we do is give an introduction to the philosophies of improvisation and what makes a good scene, and then bring people on stage or get them on their feet to go through improvisational exercises," Sweeney said.

**Keeping the Eye Rolls to a Minimum** | Attempting comedy under the cold, fluorescent light of the workplace usually prompts more squints than laughter. Face it: Any mandatory meeting with the premise of being "funny" is somewhat doomed from the start. How can a meeting planner cope? Sweeney suggests using the element of surprise, meaning that the planners keep the comedy troupe's involvement a secret from attendees, allowing their response to the humor to be more spontaneous.

Sydney Zech, CMP, a senior meeting planner for RBC Dain Rauscher in Minneapolis, set up a visit from the Brave New Workshop in this way. After a long day of wealth management training, Rauscher employees were treated to a half-hour comedy sketch featuring "Wealth Management Man," a broker superhero.

"The approach that the Brave New Workshop took was to take our program and sort of turn it on its head," said Zech. "Everything that had been learned during the day suddenly became a very funny sketch." The response? "You could tell that people were really having a good time. All kinds of hands went up when [the actors] asked for suggestions from the audience. They were really good at creating interactivity and taking a group that's quite cynical and making them really want to participate," said Zech. "And because of the way they used improvisation, they were able to bring in absolutely current things that were on everybody's mind—like the stock market. Literally, they could pull in things that happened that very day and bring it in as a humorous element."

**"Not only are they local, they're truly professional, absolutely creative and really fun to work with."**

—SYDNEY ZECH, *Dain Rauscher*

**Funny Business** | Brave New Workshop's corporate funny business is booming, with more than 75 training sessions and 125 business entertainment functions every year. The workshop menu includes strictly training sessions, entertainment programs, or a combination of the two. While a 30-minute entertainment sketch averages about \$2,750, the cost of a two- to three-hour workshop runs \$4,000 to \$5,000. Texas Instruments opted for a three-day, \$30,000 workshop for its national sales convention in Dallas. A similar program is currently

being planned for Sprint.

The Brave New Workshop has a talent pool of some 50 actors, but only 20 of them meet Sweeney's qualifications to participate in the corporate workshops. The Brave New Institute, yet another branch of Sweeney's humor factory, offers 14 improvisational classes every week. About half of the institute's 270 students are corporate professionals, so a lot of what develops in the classroom winds up as new material in the corporate workshops. "We kind of have this human laboratory happening, so we're always revising what works," Sweeney said.

It's a smart way to keep the humor fresh and the corporate clients coming back for more. Zech said she would definitely hire the Brave New Workshop again. "Not only are they local, they're truly professional, absolutely creative and really fun to work with."

What's next on the Brave New roster? Sweeney recently bought 70 acres and a lodge home in northern Wisconsin, with a private lake full of trout. "My goal in the next five years is to build a corporate creativity retreat," he said.

Sounds like he'll have no trouble packing the house. ■

contactinfo

Brave New Workshop Theatre Training  
2605 Hennepin Ave. S.  
Minneapolis, MN 55408  
612-377-8445  
www.bravenewworkshop.com

bottomline

Since 1997, the Brave New Workshop has gained national attention for its corporate comedy training program, which takes the basic philosophies of improvisation and applies them to smart business practice. BNW's corporate services include on-site custom comedy sketches, audience-interactive improvisation, video scripting, production, speaker support and theatre rental. Clients include General Mills, RBC Dain Rauscher and Texas Instruments. Recent coups: Co-owner and executive producer John Sweeney was recently accepted into the highly selective National Speakers Association.