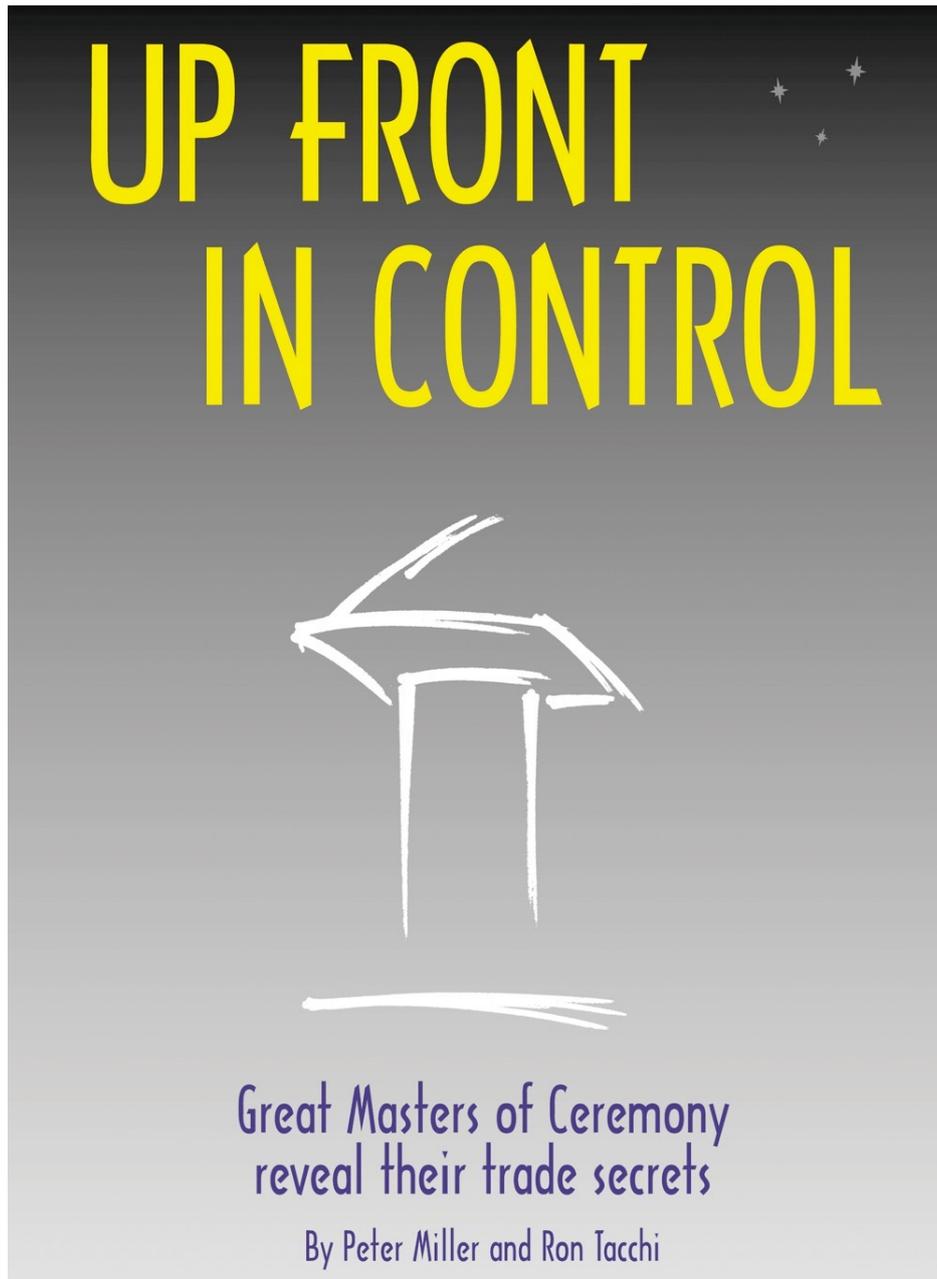


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UP FRONT IN CONTROL

Great Masters Of Ceremonies reveal their trade secrets

Written by Peter Miller and Ron Tacchi



Updated and revised Edition

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to making clear, concise communication - every time

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Forward

Dear Reader,

As someone who has produced more than 2,000 events over the past 13 years, I really do know the value of an accomplished Master of Ceremonies.

As meetings and events get more complex, the input of a skilful MC can be integral to an event's success. Not only do they bind the occasion together with warmth, knowledge, humour and style, a MC is a great asset to any organiser. MCs often bring a different perspective to how you planned to run the event and they act as a de-facto stage manager whilst you're possibly off attending to other logistical requirements behind the scenes.

Even after all this time, I learnt many new things by reading Ron and Peter's excellent book. It provides an invaluable checklist of planning and executing a smooth running event. I am certain that this book will become a classic text for all aspiring MCs and a handy reference for all organisers.

Ron is a legend. From the moment he stepped in with only two hours notice to MC the Meetings Industry Association's 1st conference back in 1979, to his almost single handed nurturing and vision that made our local MC industry more professional and valued, Ron is one of the most versatile and experienced MCs on the planet.

Likewise, Peter is truly a star in the ascendant. We have worked with Peter many times. From protocol laden government events to most recently where his charm, skill and great ability saw him bring together thousands of "happy" people of many cultures to share the excitement of spending the opening of the new millennium under the stars at Ayers Rock, which he refers to later in the book.

For any producer or organiser who wants their event to be the best it can be, the use of a professional MC is an added guarantee of success. By reading this book, you will know what to expect from your MC and see the countless ways they can help you.

As an aspiring MC, you'll learn the myriad of skills and responsibilities that go into making you a MC people will want to hire and guests will want to see. By learning from Ron and Peter's respected and acclaimed track record, the professionalism and style of all MCs can only rise – a great thing for all of us who rely on MCs to enhance their events.

I wish Ron and Peter well with this bold and trailblazing publication.

David Grant
Managing Director / Producer
David Grant Special Events

Preface

The summer edition of “In Any Event”, the Australian newsletter of the International Special Events Society (ISES), talks about the trend towards many special event producers using professional MCs instead of sourcing the talent from within the particular industry.

This progressive article states: ‘Producers now require a MC to provide the audience with both entertainment and information in an accessible way. MCs also need to sell the event to the general public and connect them to the overall game plan. A MC should also make the audience feel they themselves are responsible for the success of a function.’

Similarly, many companies who stage their own functions are realising that the modern MC has very specific organisational skills: if you want your function to run smoothly and be an enjoyable experience, you need someone up front who is a professional. Companies who previously used an acquaintance or a friend to help them out are now hiring an expert to MC their events. There is too much at stake to risk mistakes!

Besides having highly developed skills in meeting, and being appropriate to, the specific objectives of an event, MCs are now expected to have a comprehensive knowledge of the product or organisation they are working for.

Our prediction is that the future will see generically professional MCs who also specialise in certain industries. As meetings become more specific to the topic or industry, the client’s brief to the MC will reflect this. Although many MCs are multi-skilled, it is probable that a client will prefer an experienced outdoor MC for their exterior product launch and another type of MC for their distributor conference. An example of this is the strong call for niche or specialist speakers who are both highly skilled in the fine art of speaking and experts in their subject matter.

Introduction

When was the last time you sat in an audience and were put through the discomfort of a meeting that obviously was not well run? The event may have been extremely well planned, but it failed because of lack of leadership from someone up front who had the responsibility of being the MC.

There are functions held every day that fail to live up to their potential because the person leading the group lacked the skills to deliver a flawless event. This is a great shame, since the remedy is simple and can be easily learned – as you will soon discover.

Performing the role of a MC can seem a daunting task at first glance. However, with the distillation of over 30 years combined experience in this guide, you have all you need in terms of methods, procedures and rules.

We will take you step-by-step through the process of conducting any social or business function from start to finish, and show you that it is not such a difficult duty as it might at first seem. In fact, the job of a MC is a rewarding one with a huge feeling of satisfaction as your prize.

We have written this book to respond to the growing need for quality in every aspect of special event preparation. The increasing demand for the service that a professional MC provides is evidence that PCO's (professional conference organisers) and business meeting planners are aware of the influence and ease an experienced Master of Ceremonies can bring to their event. They like to think of a MC as an instant human insurance policy for themselves and their event.

The Australian newspaper said that: 'The success or failure of the MC tends to colour delegate reactions when reviewing the worth of a given event' (5/9/97). This is a rather tactful way of saying that an MC can make or break a function. It is surprising, then, to note how little has been written on the subject. This book is designed to complement and extend the information that is already available.

Our advice will be helpful to anyone who currently has, or will in the future have, the obligation of standing up in front of a group and seeing that the objectives of the function are met. This ranges from organising the speeches at your daughter's wedding to being the MC at a three-day corporate conference with an audience of thousands. A MC's role can extend to either, and since both events are equally important, he or she needs to get every aspect just right.

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Many professional speakers, who combine their presentation expertise with the skills needed to be a MC, have found that it often leads to additional opportunities to supplement their income base.

We only wish that a book like this had been available for us at the beginning of our careers so that those early audiences need not have endured some of our rapid, on-the-spot experimentations!

Those early mistakes, however, were transformed into lessons, and the lessons then became part of our experience. Now, for the first time, that experience has formed the basis for this comprehensive study of the subtle arts of the compere and MC.

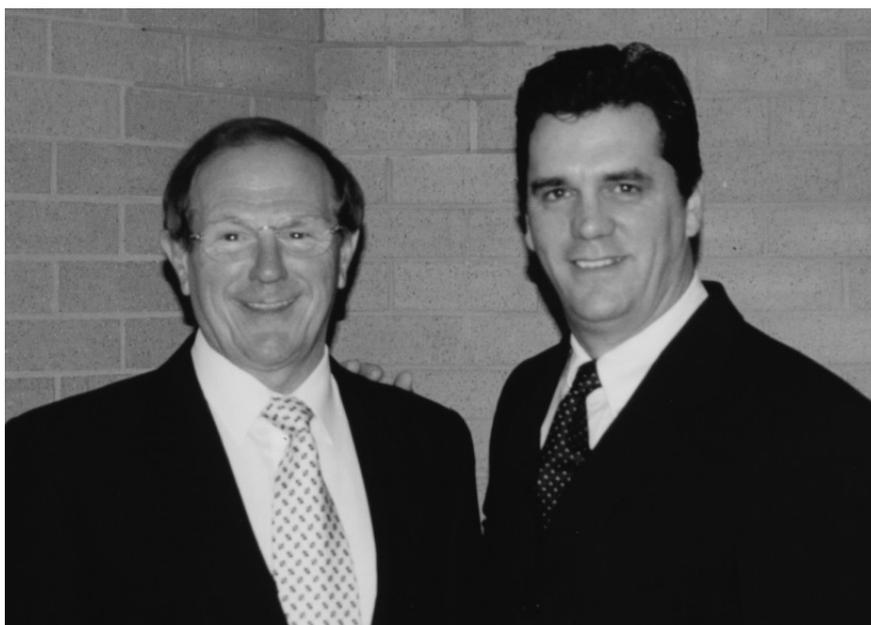
The book has been written for MCs now working who wish to lift their proficiency skills, for those who desire to work as a MC or compere, and for those who are required by their employer to take on this role for a function.

It is our intention to provide the most complete resource ever published. It covers, we believe, every area that a MC might possibly encounter in his or her career.

The MC industry finally has a frame of reference to establish itself as a core part of any special event.

Best wishes

Pete Miller and Ron Tacchi (pronounced 'tacky')



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Part A

The Job

1

A LEARNED SKILL

*A plane cannot fly without a pilot.
A car cannot go without an engine.
A ship cannot steer without a captain.
A yacht cannot sail without a skipper.
A child cannot learn without a teacher.
An orchestra cannot play without a conductor.*

Of course there are many more examples, but the point is **an event cannot excel without a MC.**

This maxim is becoming more apparent as each new event that is staged by a business becomes crucially important in the overall marketing strategy. As the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions) industry continues to set higher standards, every piece of the organisational puzzle (including the MC) is vital to the whole picture.

A professional MC of the twenty-first century is an integral part of that process – but for the moment, let us start at the very beginning.

That was then, this is now

The perception some people might have of a MC (particularly at weddings) is of an older man, dressed in a frilly white shirt, with a rather large red velour bow-tie, telling tired old jokes that only he finds funny. This stereotype belongs in the Dark Ages – way before anyone had any concept of a professional attitude towards being a Master of Ceremonies.

The modern approach to compering and MCing is vastly different. Audiences are now so sophisticated that someone who takes the microphone at any corporate function, whether for the entire evening or just to give an introduction, had better

know what they are doing. Any failure behind the lectern could affect their chances of promotion.

We are a society that demands an ever-higher standard in everything we do. Modern technology enables things to be done in a very sophisticated way, but at the same time it sets a high standard. Consequently, event organisers must ensure that their function is run smoothly, on time, that the guests walk away with a ‘warm fuzzy feeling’ and the occasion will bring substantial prestige and profit to their client. The obvious conduit to achieve this is someone with practiced communication skills, who has the ability to stand up in front of a crowd and galvanise them.

The spoken word has always been, and will always be, the most powerful medium to motivate people. However, the majority of people dread the thought of standing up in front of an audience and speaking. The fear of a possible ‘personality failure’, the terror of being judged on their public performance, can turn normally secure people to jelly. ‘I stood up to speak, but my brain sat down’ is a common, self-defeating mantra.

On the other hand, people are drawn towards someone who is skilled in the venerable art of public speaking. Like the great orators of ancient Greece, a MC uses both broad-based and specific presentation skills. When these skills are used well, the MC appears relaxed in front of the audience. By making it look easy and smooth, a confident MC can inspire the next speaker towards the lectern, not remind them of how much they hate public speaking.

The Romans were also good orators, using the voice powerfully in such inventions as the auction. This great vocal tradition is still a huge crowd-pleaser today, and many a MC has starred at a charity event or a fund-raising evening using auctioneering skills. Where the Romans auctioned slaves, the merchandise these days is usually real estate, art or memorabilia. Dr Elisa Harris from La Trobe University has studied the phenomenal longevity of the auction process and believes it is ‘... the last surviving oral tradition’– besides, of course, the gentle art of being a Master of Ceremonies.

What exactly does a MC do?

The good MC will relax an audience and make it easier for them to be involved in what is happening; his or her main focus will be the audience.

MCs can make an occasion ‘come alive’. If a MC does not grasp the concept of ‘bringing a function to life’ then this event, which so many people have worked for so long preparing, might never reach its true potential. All that remains in the minds of the audience is a wasted opportunity.

**When MCs are good, they are fantastic.
When they are bad, they are disastrous.**

Because it’s a live situation, the MC may have to steer the program through many potential problem areas involving different people with different levels of skill. The MC is the one person responsible for making sure everyone with a job to do knows what to do and when. This brings us to what many consider to be the most difficult part of the MC’s role – that is, to carry out this (sometimes stressful) responsibility with humour, flair, confidence, style, charm and wit. In other words, to inform and entertain at the same time – not unlike simultaneously tapping your head and rubbing your tummy.

An audience is looking for leadership and guidance, and this comes from someone who is organised enough to handle many things at once and still keep smiling and stay calm.

As is true of other areas of presentation, filling the MC role effectively is the result of having a clear understanding of what is expected, along with thorough homework, attention to good techniques, and practice.

**We stand up to be seen, speak up to be heard
and shut up to be appreciated.**

It is likely that a MC will be mentally exhausted by the end of a function because there is so much to be observed and anticipated. Besides keeping the show running to schedule, a MC must assess the changing mood of the audience, predict unforeseen occurrences, and work to ensure that all this comes together without any gaps or ‘dead air’.

What skills are needed?

MCs have a natural affinity and curiosity about how human beings react. They are interested in the dynamic interface between groups of people and are inquisitive enough to enjoy watching an event unfold and seeing the different relationships develop (not necessarily romantic ones!).

Many people have trouble in being both warm and personal and at the same time being assertive and professional. These are central skills for a MC and the reason why good masters of Ceremonies are highly respected by many organisations.

MCing is similar in several ways to public speaking. Many of the same principles are used to affect an audience, and the same skills on the platform that a speaker will instinctively possess (or master) transfer comfortably to the lectern.

On the other hand, it's a mistake to assume that just because you can confidently stand and deliver a presentation, you can automatically succeed as a MC. This error has been made many times and has brought embarrassment and discomfort to even the most seasoned speakers. The conundrum remains that when a MC performs well, it looks incredibly easy– and in the words of Shakespeare, ‘... there's the rub’. Many people simply assume that the MC job will be as easy for them as it was for the smooth communicator with deft control they once watched at a function. But as the leading light of the Australian speaking industry Doug Malouf would say, ‘When you ASSUME, you make an ASS of U and ME’.

With the help of this book, we will be spared these public mistakes forever more. Many audiences have had to sit through an evening where the MC was under the misapprehension that because he had made a ‘toast or three’ at a couple of receptions over the years, he could also carry a function from beginning to end.

We do not want to give the impression that MCing is a super-human task, requiring a sense of humour, loads of confidence, a set of bright white teeth and a disc jockey's deep voice. The terms mentioned in this book like ‘timing’ and ‘spontaneity’ are only words to describe a competence in that area. As the title of this first chapter suggests, these skills can be learned; no one is a born MC.

There is no such thing as a natural.

The birth announcements lists baby boys and baby girls ... no baby naturals

‘When I was first asked by Westfield Shoppingtown to be their compere,’ Peter says, ‘I said “sure” without really knowing what the word compere actually meant. I hurried home to consult my dictionary and found little there to help me. Then I searched the Yellow Pages and rang various institutions hoping to get trained up as a compere, and quickly became very worried to find that there were no courses I could attend. After that, and even worse, I took myself off to the State Library to find a total lack of published material on the subject. It appeared that no one had ever bothered to annotate this seemingly invisible career.

‘So I discovered how to compere by sheer persistence and determination. After all, no one else was going to teach me. My apprenticeship was live on the job – at Westfield’s expense! I must’ve been all right, though, because I still work for them occasionally more than ten years later.’

The point of the story is that the skills of a MC are accumulated through experience; they are absorbed and assimilated into the psyche by ‘just doing it’ (apologies to Nike). However, far from being ‘thrown in the deep end’, a thorough preparation via this manual and a dose of good old common sense will get you off to a flying start.

Peter said his learning curve has been steep from the very first time he shuffled on stage with a microphone tightly clenched in his fist, and bellowed out ‘Urrrr ...’ (clearing throat and coughing into the microphone): ‘The show will be starting in five minutes, all right?’

‘I was first attracted to the more formal role of a MC,’ Peter went on, ‘because I was unhappy to see talented people sharing the stage with a MC who had not thought much about the job. When a good MC performed the role, the customers enthusiastically received the artistes. The audience enjoyed the performance more because the MC had effectively aroused their anticipation, and the performers “rose to the occasion”. The combination of a great MC and the creative performer was a wonderful cocktail.

‘But why was it so rare to witness, if the result was so enthralling? Even when the performer was world-class, it took him or her longer than it should have to get the audience involved if the introduction had been shoddy. I felt the MC had an important responsibility to present the performers in the best possible light. It was the old story of believing I could do better.’

Your ‘kit-bag’ as a MC is constantly evolving into an expansion of your personality and a recognisable silhouette of your talent.

We each have a different range of skills at our disposal, and it is an important part of being human to know which skills are our strongest. Ed Phillips, a television presenter, says, ‘If you’re good at something, a crowd won’t affect you’ (Sydney Morning Herald). This is welcome news to a MC. Peter Holmes, a journalist writing about television game show hosts, mentions many of the attributes you would expect in a MC: ‘... there is a skill involved in hosting a game show. You need the look and the sound, but also timing, grace under pressure, and the ability to put at ease everyday folk who have never taken a pick at the [game] board’ (Sydney Morning Herald 25/7/94).

Furthermore, Tony Squires, host of ABC-TV’s ‘The Fat’ and channel 7’s ‘110% Tony Squires’, wonderful corporate MC and ex-television critic for the Sydney Morning Herald, remarks about legendary game show host John Burgess ‘... haven’t ever noticed Burgo, really, which is his terrific skill.’(8/98) Squires was making the salient point about all good MCs– they are not the celebrity, the show is.

One of the true hallmarks of a MC is to say a lot in a few words – brevity is welcomed by almost anyone, especially an audience eagerly waiting for the next segment on the program to begin. Noel Coward was famous for his brevity, albeit highly satirical.

It is important for the MC to assume the central role without being pompous or obtrusive. Like the unbiased mediator, the best MCs are remembered mainly for their deft control of the event, not their personality.



Guests sometimes assume the MC is a staff member

Why were you chosen to be the MC?

There are probably a number of factors leading to your appointment as the MC. A position of authority or familiarity within a company, a recognised ‘gift of the gab’ or specialised knowledge about a certain product are a few possibilities. Others might include previous public speaking experience or an out-going personality. However, these attributes will not prepare you completely for the task of leading a group of people through an event that has a specific outcome.

The occasions you are called upon to be a MC are likely to become more frequent as you rise higher in the executive ranks or levels of responsibility; the job often comes with the territory as a person assumes a leadership role in his or her profession. In a modern business environment, it is practically expected that anyone who wants to scale the dizzy heights of leadership, will automatically be able to speak confidently in public (including sessions with the media). The task may be to introduce the main speaker at a professional meeting, act as a moderator for a panel of experts, preside over the proceedings of an organisational conference, or serve as MC for a retirement party or change-of-command ceremony.

A guest of honour, host or producers of an event are often tempted to indulge themselves as the event MC. This choice can severely diminish their objectivity from the lectern and can look more like a money-saving exercise than a practical decision, especially if they are worrying about their guests instead of the purpose of the experience.

Many people avoid the job of MC when it is offered to them, assuming that it means many headaches for little reward, and guarantees a terrible time at the event for the MC. Neither has to be the case, however. Taking on a MC job can have a real pay-off in terms of recognition, enjoyment, and influence. Provided the job is well done.

Experiences that help

Many good MCs evolve from the radio industry because it has such a strong focus on using the spoken word efficiently. Being skilled in speaking is one thing– actually enjoying the language is another. Peter often relates the story of how he was fortunate enough to be coached in athletics at ‘The Kings School’ by one of Australia’s greatest radio broadcasters, Mr Alan Jones. Besides being intellectually dazzling, Peter recalls that Mr Jones always had a fantastic command of the English language. He also makes a wonderful MC, thanks to his highly developed oratory skills.

The ability to be in charge but remain neutral is a tremendous advantage in any situation, but is absolutely crucial for a MC. This tactfulness is similar to a referee at a sporting event or a judge in court – you cannot afford to show a bias. If the audience sense that you are weighed too heavily in favour of any one area, you may lose their trust and attention and never be able to get it back.

Australian International cricketer and television personality Max Walker is well known as a archetypal MC. He has written about what it is like to be a MC in a book called Ladies & Gentlemen: tales and misadventures from the microphone. Max likens the roles of a MC to that of a cricket umpire ‘A good umpire at a cricket match always goes unnoticed. But without them being firm, fair and honest the contest would turn into a shambles.’

Coming from a background in drama, Peter believes that his success as a MC is due largely to the communication skills he learnt during his acting training. He encourages actors to consider MCing as another form of employment.

Be assertive, be interesting and show deference

The star of the show is the event itself, not the MC. It is easy to forget this fact when you have a microphone in your hand; hearing your voice over a PA can give anybody a false sense of power. What the guests do not want is a MC who is there to steal the limelight.

When a human being gets up in front a large group of people the (self-imposed) pressure of being publicly judged can make it hard to relax. Some people then resort to taking on an ‘image’ of how they would like to appear. Unless you are an accomplished actor, this performance will almost certainly come across as ‘wooden’.

A high self-esteem will give you the inner confidence to be yourself up on stage. You must believe that the person you are – the personality that you present – will be sufficiently interesting to hold an audience’s attention. Courage comes before belief; so take heart if you are feeling a little deficient in the self-esteem stakes sometimes. We all feel unconfident at times and doubt our own ability, but a good dose of courage (sometimes in the form of motivation) can restore our sentiment of personal worthiness. Trying too hard often causes failure. You must start from somewhere, so go ahead and ‘fake it till you make it’ if you have to. Take a look at Chapter 11 ‘Personal Style’ for more on the fascinating subject of just being yourself on stage.

An expanded MC industry is only a step away. We hope a book like this will finally give all those thousands of audience members who have had to put up with boring

MCs – while knowing they could do a better job – a chance to prove themselves right. Everything mentioned as a skill in this book is ‘do-able’ by anyone with a desire to see a function succeed. The competencies require no great leap of faith to accomplish. Unlike singing, the performance of a MC is not regimented by a strict tradition or clearly defined by technical proficiencies like musicianship.

Summary

- The MC is not the star, the event is.
- A MC is an expert in brevity – it’s a skill to say a lot in a few words.
- The ability to remain neutral is the hallmark of a great MC.
- Good MC skills can bring kudos, esteem, and extra earnings.

2

THE JOB DESCRIPTION

Many people who take on the role of a master of ceremonies for the first time are amazed at how many different skills are needed to bring the event together and present it confidently.

An experienced MC will make the job look incredibly easy and smooth, but do not be fooled by appearances. Great MCs hide the amount of preparation they have done and the behind-the-scenes stress will not be visible. Like a duck gliding peacefully across the water while its legs are furiously paddling beneath or a model who keeps smiling and looking elegant even though her dress is slipping off as she struts the catwalk, a great MC can turn disaster into humour and at the same time inform, entertain and keep the event running to time. An amazing skill – we're sure you agree.

Am I a MC or a compere?

The Oxford Dictionary is no help on this one; it gives the same definition for each word. Semantics aside, a compere is someone who is running the entire show, the focal point, a solo performer. A compere will take an audience from one situation to the next and be totally involved in all of it. A compere is there for the whole time, 'hands on', always commenting on the action on stage and building a real dynamic relationship with the audience in the process. If something is happening on stage, then the compere will be involved somehow. If nothing is happening, then the compere is also 'not happening' and some music will probably be playing.

Both MC and compere have a responsibility to link the audience with the action on stage. The skills are the same for each role, but as we point out in Chapter 6, the preparation and responsibilities are not the same because the objectives are distinctly different.

Instead of being totally involved in all the action on stage, the MC will get the show started, and then move on and off the stage, introducing, announcing, commenting and housekeeping. A MC will share the lectern with a lot more people than a compere will.

The term compere is of French origin and is adapted from the word conferencier, the same word used in the lewd description of a nightclub during the war at the very beginning of our book. It is an expression that many Americans are unfamiliar with.

Most of the references and advice throughout this book apply equally to MCs and comperes. Where there is a difference, it has been noted.

tion *noun*, compensatory *adjective*

compère (say kom-pair) *noun* a person who introduces the performers in a show or broadcast. *compère verb* [French, = godfather]

compete *verb* (competed, competing) take part in a competition.

Today's MC is different from yesterday's

In the past, a large company would invite someone from show business to MC their function because most MCs were a celebrity or had a background in entertainment. If smaller companies could not fill the spot with someone from their own ranks, they also used a local 'personality'. Over time, however, this was seen as unsatisfactory because the presentation was always given precedence over the program.

Gradually, companies realised they needed someone to run a meeting efficiently more than they needed the show-business component; the purpose of the meeting were more important than the pizzazz. And so, if they could not find an entertainer with specific industry knowledge, companies began demanding expert professional MCs. The emphasis had shifted to someone with the skills to disseminate information, and put it across in an entertaining way. Before the entertainer would double as a MC, now it's the other way around.

There are still many entertainers who are very competent MCs, since they understand the difference between the two roles – they know when to 'dance' and when to be the perfect master of ceremonies.

Business is always looking for good MCs who are specific to their industry. The emphasis is on someone with the skills to disseminate information, and put it across in an entertaining way. Previously, the entertainer would double as a MC, now the order is reversed – people expect a MC to run the meeting efficiently and want them to also be entertaining in the process.

MC or Emcee?

Some countries have expanded the MC initials and spell them 'Emcee', perhaps to avoid any confusion with anyone on the same program whose initials might also be MC (Matt Church or Military Cross). This lengthening of the term MC into the word is rarely used in Australia (where this book originates) but is quite common in other parts of the world, especially in a more formal setting.

Another unusual aspect about the term 'master of ceremonies' is that it acts as an umbrella for a multitude of roles. From facilitator to moderator, chairman to president, compere to toastmaster to sergeant-at-arms, a MC might be required to show skills over a large area of expertise. It is one of the aims of this book to define all of these areas and show what would be expected from a person in each designation.

People expect a MC to be somewhere between a game-show host and an undertaker. Brian Ladd

This quote shows the incredible range of public expectations that a MC has to deal with. So the most important part of a MC's work is being familiar with the range of skills needed (and expected).

Many different hats:

Flexible, adaptable and appropriate are words that belong in a MC's job description. Imagine the MC switching hats for each and every role that is required. Each role (or hat) should help the audience understand what is going on and make it easier for them to watch and feel part of the event.

The hat is never a big brown country Akubra with a wide brim; it is a subtle but classic style that rests comfortably upon the MC's head. Each new hat is similar in (personal) style to the one the MC wore before; the audience must never really be able to detect the difference. The word to keep in mind is the musical term segue (pronounced 'seg-way') meaning to keep playing the music while the singer switches songs.

A MC must know the boundaries and limitations of each hat. As soon as the MC becomes dominant in one role (or hat), and crosses over into becoming that role, he or she diminishes their professional effectiveness in all the other aspects mentioned in this chapter. Instead, the MC should casually adopt the 'hat', switching them as smoothly as you would change gears when riding a pushbike.

This change is most often done through dialogue, known as 'patter'. For instance, at a recent Christmas function, Peter had to pull at the emotional heartstrings of the audience and then segue into introducing the humorous guest speaker, Allan Pease.

'I managed this' says Peter 'by interviewing the organiser of the children's charity from the floor. When I finished, I used the time it took me to walk back through the audience to the lectern to say: "It's a very worthwhile cause and one that requires our attention, especially now at Christmas time. But talking of paying attention, I invite you now to turn your seats towards the front as we welcome our morning's speaker."'"

Sometimes, the MC might have to wear two hats at the same time because the action on stage requires more than one hat to make it work.

Basically, a MC is responsible for the smooth running of an event. How they do this is dependent on how many different hats he or she is talented and experienced enough to wear. Let's look at the names of some of those hats that fit the MC's head.

Housekeeper

In its simplest form, the role of a MC can be purely functional. Without all the ‘bells and whistles’ (otherwise known as entertainment value), a MC could get through a meeting by doing just the basic announcements and still be considered adequate; but just being adequate is not what this book is about.

First and foremost, an audience must receive the necessary basic information for the event to function smoothly. Like an administrator or secretary, a MC keeps the house in order. If this is done well, everyone else looks efficient and organised. The term ‘house-keeping’ is a popular and appropriate label used by MCs to announce details that every guest needs to know. For example, housekeeping might include the location of the nearest ladies’ and men’s restrooms (‘toilets’ is a rather crude phrase when it is echoed over the microphone) and also when and where the coffee and tea stands will be situated.

Communicator

Functions are always held for a purpose. This might seem a ridiculously simple statement but it is vital that this purpose or intention be known and understood, otherwise the MC will have no direction towards a result.

The client briefing (see Chapter 6) is when you will discover this purpose: why the organiser is holding the event, and what they intend to achieve. A MC must determine in detail what impression a client wants to leave with guests at the finish of the event.

To be gauged successful, the MC must be a mouthpiece for the client, and communicate the client’s intention to the audience. Once this main purpose is fully clarified and understood, the MC must find a way to communicate this message to the audience during the function, using the magic of his or her own personal communication skills– the MC’s patter. So when the guests walk away at the end of the function, they should be fully cognisant of the client’s message.

Entertainer

To be purely functional would deny the MC a great opportunity to make the event memorable. For this to happen, there needs some seasoning; the MC needs to be able to inject some entertainment component. This is the added value that clients will gladly pay more for.

There is a similarity in the attributes of a great MC that you will find with successful radio announcers. As a program director at Sydney Radio 2UE said about recruiting his on-air staff ‘... you hire the best opinionated entertainers ...’. David Marr also commented that 2UE star broadcaster Alan “Jones mastered the Australian radio art of fuzzing the lines between entertaining, informing and selling”. (Sydney Morning Herald 29/1/00). This is also a definition that might fit many great MCs.

Peter recalls how he was thrilled when a client wrote: “He’s spruiking for our sponsors and exhibitors, and entertaining the audience, appeasing our clients, and appears to be having a good time while he’s doing it”. (Cotton Balderson TOTAL EVENTS P/L 11/99). Even though that quote is a piece of blatant image management from the author, it makes the point of the MC being more than just an entertainer.

There are similarities between a good MC and a good auctioneer. ‘They’re showmen,’ says Dr Elisa Harris from La Trobe University. ‘The really successful auctioneers are good salesmen – they are very personable, very approachable, with a nice blend of the formal and informal. They don’t look like business executives or used-car salesmen, yet they stand out as individuals who know what they are talking about.’

Actor

Whether they consciously know it or not, every good MC becomes an actor each time they arrive to start a new job. He or she adopts the culture of the company like an actor adopts a character. This instant corporate identification comes naturally to many trained actors who enter the business world. As Peter explains, ‘I know how much my acting training helps me as a MC. From simple movement on stage, to voice production and discipline, my education in theatre is fundamental to how I work.

‘Acting training helps me to think on my feet, and not lose momentum. I can feel the vibes of an audience at the same time as I am changing “hats” asking myself all the while, ‘What does the audience want at this point?’ I intuitively know the answer and am able to deliver the appropriate response.

‘Also, I can be conscious of many things at once. In the theatre, there were many times when a fellow actor or the required prop did not arrive at the usual time. We had to immediately improvise and also stay “in the moment”’. This is an acting phrase that describes how an actor’s concentration span must continue to keep the imaginary scenario going on stage and not drop the characterisation that the audience believes in.

Peter continues, ‘Immediately after I watched Brian Tracey present at the NSAA conference in Sydney 1998, I gave him a copy of my audio tape as a gift for his

wonderful presentation. As soon as I mentioned I was an actor, his face lit up and he became very animated; anyone who knows Brian Tracey would be very surprised to see him animated! He then proceeded to tell me about how the best tips on public speaking had been given to him by a theatre director in Toronto, who he stills works with when he is preparing new material.’

Peter believes that if the entire world learned a few acting techniques then we would all live in greater harmony with one another, because we would understand our own emotions and also realise why people react the way they do. As far as helping a MC improve there is no doubt whatsoever that learning a few communication secrets from the magical world of drama and theatre will expand your talents, and make you a more emotionally mature person. After all, actors have studied communication via drama for centuries. The methods are well researched. These ‘secrets’ give an actor incredible confidence in situations that would faze most people.

A different kind of acting training (but just as effective) is ‘Theatre-sports’. This is extremely difficult to master and takes concentration, trust, courage and spontaneity. However, the pay-off is enormous in terms of stretching you way past what you ever thought you could achieve. Again, these are skills that will catapult you into the realms of greatness as a MC.

Comedian

There are many fine stand-up comedians who make excellent MCs. And many useful techniques can be learned from the area of comedy. However, the different approaches of a MC and a comedian are determined by the result that each is looking for. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 9, ‘Humour’.

‘I have noticed an odd coincidence. There are 500 of us here tonight and we have all ordered the same meal’.

Motivator

Ready or not, the assembled crowd have paid their money and will expect some sort of inspiration from the MC. This motivation usually comes in the form of enthusiastic attitude and an energetic delivery.

Cook

Like the great chef that distinguishes themselves from the also-rans by adding just the right herbs & spices to a meal, so a great MC will distinguish them self from all the other MCs by the injection of some “spice” to liven up the proceedings.

Leader

When it comes to being in charge, a MC’s speaking ability is less important than his or her talents as a charming ‘sergeant at arms’. The MC, as a leader, needs the ability to control both him/herself and the audience. Conversely, a MC without control is a lost leader.

Arbiter of style

Besides being a guardian of etiquette, the MC is responsible for creating a mood. The most obvious point here is the attire the MC has chosen.

Besides the clothes you wear, there are many other ways a MC can influence the style and atmosphere of the event. The tone of your voice, the speed of your walk to the lectern, the type of jokes you tell, even the precision of your hand directions; all can help to establish the style of the event. Unconsciously, the audience will observe, relate to and then emulate this same style.

Program link or mood changer

Besides being a relay or conduit of information, many people see the MC as someone who prepares the audience for what is about to happen. A MC must be constantly adapting his or her style of delivery to suit the changing energy needed to close one segment and begin another. Each part of the program warrants a different approach. How the MC smoothes the transition from one segment to the next, adapting style as needed but still delivering the introduction in an entertaining and appropriate way, is a true measure of how resourceful they are. Ultimately, this is also a gauge of the range of talent an individual possesses.

A non flattering analogy is that of the event as a mosaic with the MC acting as the glue, mortar or grout that binds all the pieces together to form the final picture. Without this cohesion, the program would look & feel like loose pieces in a puzzle; individual segments existing by themselves.

Journalist and researcher

To understand the culture of the organisation before the event has started is often a difficult task when you have only met one or two people from the company. Access to annual reports and the company history will often reveal interesting facts, while a copy of the program from previous years' events can give you an idea of the precedents.

The client's expectations of the MC, the extent of their role, will become clearer the more investigation the MC does. We have compiled a list of questions that will get you started in this direction (see 'Client Briefing Questions' in Chapter 6).

On-stage interviewer

If a MC can put them self in the shoes of the audience and feel what questions they would like answered, interviewing becomes a relatively easy and enjoyable experience. Natural inquisitiveness should lead you to ask "why?" which in turn will give you the real reason this person has been honoured, or that building has been chosen for the new headquarters or this singer has chosen that particular song.

While listening to the response from the interviewee, the MC must be anticipating where the answer is leading to, in order to find the cue for the next question. However, as any journalist will tell you, there is nothing quite like research as an aid to picking the right questions.

Fireman

Hopefully, the MC need not wear this hat very often because it means someone is in trouble. 'Putting out fires' takes quick thinking, tact and the ability to think on your feet. Some organisers hire MCs for their own peace of mind – a kind of human insurance policy. Both authors are sure that in our early careers, we were sometimes hired for our 'stand-by' effect in case anything should go wrong as well as our ability to make a party come to life.

Public speaker

The skills of a good public speaker can transfer well from the platform to the lectern. However, a successful MC needs many more skills.

MCs are everything a public speaker is, and more. Leigh Farnell was the national vice-president of the National Speakers Association of Australia (NSAA) during 1998. He called professional public speakers the ‘pre-eminent change agents’. Susie Christie is a bureau owner who calls public speakers ‘attitude adjusters’.

With these thoughts in mind, a MC can start to see how influential words can be, and how privileged a position at the lectern is. Like a speaker, in order to maintain credibility, the MC must always tell the truth. Lies are absolutely transparent on stage.

Facilitator or moderator

Amongst the members of the NSAA, there has been considerable discussion about the difference or similarity between the roles of MC and facilitator. The discussion arose from a member’s inquiry about whether a MC facilitates an event, and therefore can call himself a facilitator. The authors believe there is a difference between the ways a facilitator and a MC work, and that the titles should not be combined.

The similarity is that both a MC and a facilitator understand where they want the audience to be at the end of the meeting. A MC needs to have planned exactly how they are going to arrive at this predetermined destination, in what order and what time frame, using a definite structure.

A facilitator, on the other hand, will have a more flexible approach to getting the audience to a destination (which may be less clearly defined). Like doing a ‘hypothetical’, the facilitator lets the meeting direct the flow but facilitates the proceedings – it is a more ‘open plan’ way of working.

These two different methods of working require different skills. For instance, the MC might read from a script whereas the facilitator will discuss, making up the words as they go. While the MC works to a structured, predetermined format but is prepared to be flexible, the facilitator just has to be flexible most of the time.

A MC would run a meeting and bring it to a close the way a commercial airline pilot would land a plane. Using timing, ‘atmospheric conditions’ and traffic controllers, the MC has a predetermined regime to follow. Conversely, a facilitator would skilfully

land the plane at the same time, using the combined talents of everyone on board, in a field somewhere close to the airport.

Conductor

As a musician looks to the celebrated leader of the orchestra for tempo and delivery, so the members of a program will look for and follow the lead set by the MC. Both the MC and the conductor are fully aware of the original concept and how the piece will eventuate, plus its desired effect upon the emotions of the audience.

Salesman

A MC is also a salesman. He is selling the objectives of the meeting and he is selling the people who supported it; in other words the hosts and their sponsors.

Diplomat

Chairmen and politicians are often given exalted or influential positions throughout the world because of their diplomacy or tactfulness. The venerable art of being discreet is another highly prized skill the MC is required to possess.

There are probably even more titles (and hats) that we have not covered here. As the industry grows, so will the range of roles a MC is expected to fill. Instead of the metaphorical guides we have mentioned in this chapter, look into our next chapter for examples how the MC's influence is spread over a wide employment spectrum.

Summary

- Each 'hat' a MC wears makes them appropriate.
- A compere is totally involved in everything.
- A MC is a mouthpiece for the client's intended purpose.
- Companies prefer specifics to showbiz.