

Making it Look Easy is Hard Work

In a [podcast](#) post-mortem about hosting the Oscars last week, Jimmy Kimmel told Bill Simmons that Martin Short is the greatest dinner guest of all-time along with being a member of the Mount Rushmore of great talk show guests.

Then The New Yorker ran a story this week asking [Is Martin Short the Greatest Talk-Show Guest of All-Time?](#) The most intriguing aspect of this story was the process Short goes through in preparation for these guest spots:

In a recent conversation with Vulture's great interviewer David Marchese, the actor and comedian Martin Short talked a bit about the process he goes through when preparing to be a guest on a late-night talk show. "What I do for a typical talk-show appearance, and I'm not exaggerating, is I'll send in something like 18 pages ahead of time," Short said, adding that he then spends at least ninety minutes speaking with a show's producer, cutting down his proposed material and shaping it into a conversation he'll have with the host. What looks almost like an organic chat on TV is really a tightly choreographed two-man bit, with Short doing, as he puts it, "an impersonation of myself being relaxed."

This is an insane amount of work for what probably ends up being 5-10 minutes of actual airtime. I watched some of these appearances. It comes off as if Short is going off the cuff and improvising on the spot. I never realized how much work it takes up front to keep up that appearance.

I'm fascinated by the process comedians go through to perfect their material. You would think stand-up comedians are simply funny people who know how to tell a good story and a few jokes. But there is so much more work that goes into it than most would imagine.

A few years ago Jerry Seinfeld did an interview with the New York Times that laid out the process he goes through to write a joke (this one was about Pop Tarts):

He said he had been working on this joke for two years! It was written out on a yellow legal pad in many different iterations. There's also a process for the set-up and punchline, which he wanted to get the biggest laugh ("They [Pop Tarts] can't go stale cause they were never fresh.").

Comedians don't simply go play sold-out stadiums with a list of jokes in hand. They go to dozens of smaller comedy clubs to work on their material. They change their inflection or a word to test the responses of different audiences until they've perfected the end product.

Before doing a 9-minute monologue when he hosted Saturday Night Live last year, Aziz Ansari said he probably did over 100 stand-up sets over a month-long period to get it exactly how he wanted it.

Chris Rock, another comedian who spends an inordinate amount of time perfecting his routines and jokes, has become something of a mentor to Ansari. Here's what he had to say about his protege's preparation for SNL in an interview with [Vulture](#):

Yeah, he knew he had to do it 100 times. Anybody that's really good over-prepares, and he's got no problem. He kind of embraces it. You go to the Comedy Cellar any night and Aziz is in the booth and he's got his headphones on and he's listening to his set from the night before. He's not listening to the new Kendrick. [Laughs.] He's going over his set.

When you see these people work it seems effortless. It's like they were born with it. And in many ways, I'm sure there's an element of natural ability that's [impossible to teach](#). But the biggest reason it appears so effortless is because of the sheer amount of preparation involved before you see the finished product.

There are many parallels between the preparation involved in stand-up comedy and the business world.

In his book, [Your Move: The Underdog's Guide to Starting a Business](#), Ramit Sethi lays out the idea that there are two types of entrepreneurs in the world:

You see, ultimately there are 2 types of entrepreneurs. The first type is the one who's constantly complaining about feeling overwhelmed. We all know people like that. You ask them, "How are you doing today?" and you know exactly what you'll hear in response: "Really busy. Crazy busy." They look frazzled, like they can't believe how unfair life is.

Meanwhile, the second type, you ask them how everything's going, and they say, "Yeah, it's really good. Business is good." And you're just like, "Oh, okay." You wouldn't know if they were in the middle of their most complex campaign in their career, because everything's handled.

What's the difference? Sethi explains it all comes down to having a systems mentality:

It's not natural skill or intelligence or work ethic that separates these 2 types of entrepreneurs. Just a systems mentality.

I love anything that removes willpower, motivation, or passion from the equation... which is precisely what systems do. Systems don't care if you're excited about a new project or tired from a late night. Systems are impervious. They just keep working.

Sometimes it's hard to see what goes on beneath the surface in both comedy and business. Those who are successful in each endeavor spend plenty honing on their craft.

The people who make it look easy need talent to succeed. But more often than not, the only reason

it looks so effortless is because they put in the time and effort before you ever see the end result.

Making it look easy requires plenty of hard work.

Further Reading:

[Life Lessons From Famous Comedians](#)