



When Georgia-Pacific, headquartered in Atlanta, set out to introduce its seasonal line of Coronet Paper products to its sales reps, the company realized that the launch would be the key first round in revving up enthusiasm among an established selling force that had already "seen it all." At the same time, the company needed to find a new way to focus the public's attention on its brand name toilet tissue and paper towels.

Such a two-pronged objective at the annual sales meeting required something different. In-house planners thought about a music video, or staging a musical show where actors and actresses would wrap themselves in paper and "act out" the product message. Then, one staffer made a phone call to New York and found the theme that turned the meeting into the unforgettable company event of the year.

Magicorp Productions was hired to infuse the meeting with magic. The company's president, Bill Herz, created illusions that depicted important product attributes and product information. To emphasize absorbency, for example, a paper towel was plunged into water. Applause thundered when a volunteer from the audience retrieved the item — completely dry. The employees cheered again when Coronet's vice president of sales made his entrance — from a puff of smoke. A marketing rep appeared to be cut in half to demonstrate that a salesman can be in two places at one time only through magic. These tricks are standard for any working magician, but at the Georgia-Pacific show, company executives, trained by Herz, pulled off the magic. And the crowd loved it!

In conjunction with the magic theme, Herz

prepared a consumer booklet on performing tricks with Coronet paper products. The premium was advertised on each product and sent to anyone sending in a proof-of-purchase seal.

The season's product launch was fun, exciting and very successful and indicative of how companies are turning to non-traditional venues and attractions to deliver messages to audiences — especially employees and consumers — who are already inundated with information.

"Magic in the corporate world is in great demand," says Herz, who works with companies all over the world. He himself performs at functions, but just as frequently he is called upon to teach executives to perform the illusions that will underscore selling points or company goals at large meetings.

"Magic has a unique entertainment value," he says. "Everyone is fascinated by it. And we've found that magic solves problems that almost every business meeting will encounter sooner or later."

According to Herz, magic is an unparalleled visual device that communicates a point. Even numbers presented within an illusion are recalled, because magic creates a longer-lasting impression than a slide. Magic also takes away the predictability of a message. It can add humor to an intrinsically humorless presentation, and drama to an important point.

Magic, furthermore, enhances the presenter. "Let's face it," says Herz, "everybody thinks that what they're saying is the most important thing. A marketing director cares about marketing. The sales manager cares about sales. But at a meeting, the most important thing is to keep the audience interested in those subjects. A trick performed

**Increasingly,
companies are
looking for an
unusual way to
transform routine
meetings into
magical affairs.
Not surprisingly,
magic is one way
they're doing it.**

by Barbara Mack

during a presentation keeps the audience turned-on to the speaker, and really listening to what he or she's telling them."

Herz also points out that magic can turn a boring presentation — or presenter — into a livelier experience, and give personality to a speaker who is delivering a prepared text.

"Some people just aren't comfortable speaking in public," Herz says. "We give them a 'visual' trick to perform that really enhances their rapport with the audience. Both their speech — and their public appearance — are given a much warmer reception."

"The entertainment factor in today's meeting can't be overemphasized," says J. Franklyn Dickson, CMP, and president of Ray Bloch Productions, one of Herz's frequent clients.

"Most meeting formats are predictable. There's the cocktail party dinner, awards presentation followed by speechmaking — and the messages come to be recycled, too. The meetings themselves are repetitive: most companies have the requisite annual meeting, sales meeting, trade show, etc. The one way to keep everyone interested year after year is to entertain — usually with large doses of humor."

Companies themselves recognize that their meetings can be boring. "Last year," recounts Dickson, "John Hancock came to us and told us their meetings were too steeped in tradition and had lost their ability to motivate. In short, they were telling us they knew they needed help. Since they didn't expect a drastic change in the internal message that would be delivered, they asked us to supply the stimulation, motivation, and most importantly, the communication between speakers and audience."

The meeting Dickson crafted included Steve Allen as Master of Ceremonies and Herz as resident magician. "By having Bill perform magic tricks during evening events, and illusions that supported company messages during the day on stage, we created a subtle continuity of message through humor and style."

Dickson looks to other entertainment formats for enlivening corporate presentations. For Manufacturers Hanover in Toronto, he created an employee video in MTV-style to involve the entire company in the 100th year anniversary celebration. He also employs talents like Michael Davis, who was seen in Broadway's *Sugarbabies*. "Michael is a clever juggler whose on-stage patter mixes humor with corporate facts. Juggling objects, after all, is very much like juggling new products or sales quotas or positions within a company. And nothing more graphically illustrates monotony than throwing and retrieving the same object over and over again."

Ventriloquist Ronn Lucas is another performer who has found a niche on corporate stages. "Puppets can say things no human can and keep his job," laughs Dickson.

"Ronn very rapidly makes his puppets the

conscience of the audience."

In addition to the motivation and communication entertainers can add to mundane proceedings or repetitive events, entertainment in its many guises offers a real payback to the corporate bottom line, according to Dickson. "When the scripting, audiovisuals, talent and ceremonies all work together, the enthusiasm generated is almost always translated into better performance that can be measured in dollars and cents." MM

Barbara Mack is a New York City-based writer who follows national trends in corporate meetings.
