

How He Turned The Magic Of Business Into The Business Of Magic

It took more than one trick up the sleeve of Bill Herz, professional magician, to build his New York-based Magicorp Productions into a company that grossed \$825,000 last year.

"To be honest," he says, "it wasn't even my own sleeve."

In 1986, after a performance at a corporate banquet in London, he taught an executive some simple tricks that the executive could perform himself during a one-day sales meeting. "He contacted me later," Herz continues, "and said his audience was won over immediately. His presentation was the one they remembered at the end of the day."

Herz—who earned an M.B.A. from Cornell in 1982 and had been performing at corporate events since 1983—soon saw, whenever he mentioned his London experience to his clients, that many of them wanted to get into the act.

"That's when I realized that business is a performing art and the managers are performers," he says. "Slide shows and colorful graphics can only go so far, but an illusion makes their message unforgettable."

In 1987, Herz started Magicorp, which provides customized magic for corporate events. The company's centerpiece is Participatory Illusions, a term Herz coined to describe creating and teaching magic for executives to perform. Now Herz, 35, teaches magic to more than 100 executives a year, from a client list that includes Citicorp, Revlon, and IBM. His fees range upward from \$1,500, depending on the complexity of the illusion he's teaching and the props and assis-

tance it will require. The key to his success, Herz believes, is that he understands business.

"It's not a magic show," he says of the typical presentation that executives make after he teaches them how to do it.

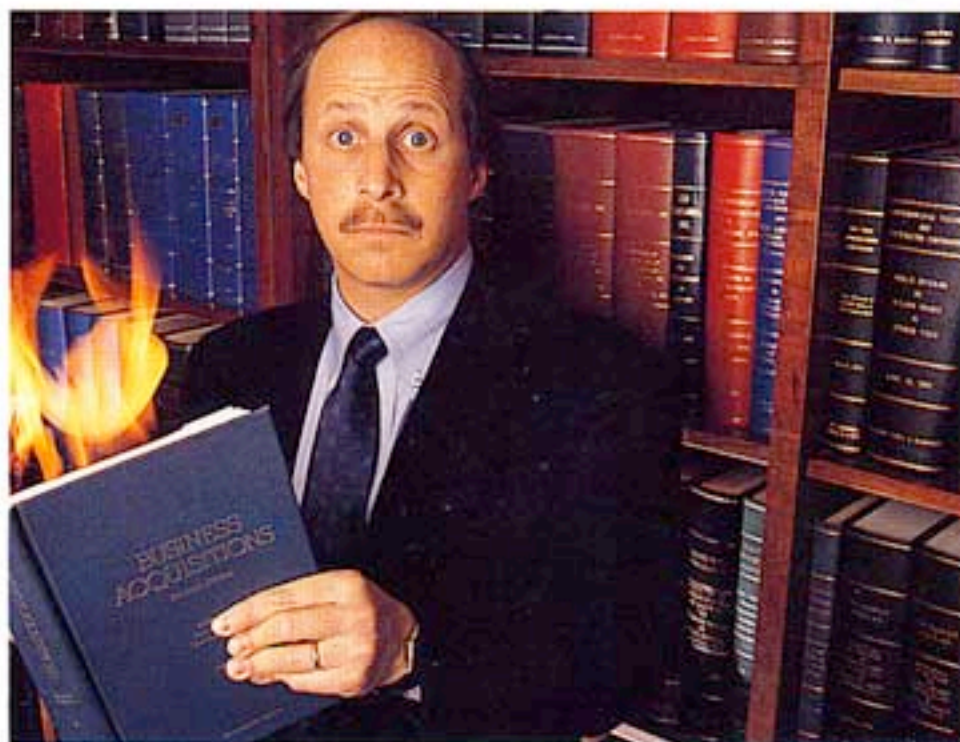


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Magicorp's Bill Herz brings a light touch to serious business meetings.

"It's a business event and must be conducted as such. We want people to talk about the message, not the magic."

After clients discuss their objectives with him, Herz creates illusions that support their presentations and can be mastered in less than 20 minutes. For example, when an insurance company presented its sales force with new policies, Herz taught a vice president how to rip an old policy to shreds and reassemble the torn papers to reveal a new one. When another company wanted to convince its sales staff of the importance of a new floppy disk, Herz taught an

executive how to convert the disk to cash in front of the salespeople.

Herz discovered the link between magic and business early. At age 14, during a summer job selling brushes door-to-door, he won his first sale by making a quarter appear from the straws of a broom. "I realized quickly that the product had not changed, just the presentation," he remembers. "All my presentations from then on included magic. My sales increased tremendously."

For large productions at corporate events—which may or may not involve participation by executives—Herz brings in specialists in comedy, magic, illusions, stage manipulation, and sleight of hand. Now he is planning to expand his business with a new division that will provide magic premiums, giveaways, and direct-marketing pieces. He is also co-author, with fellow magician Paul Harris, of a book, *Secrets of the Astonishing Executive* (Avon), to be published in June. He and Harris tested 45 illusions for use in everyday business situations.

Corporate magic is not for every corporation. The problem is not stage fright among executives (Herz has yet to see a trick fail), but the cost. Herz says most of his shows cost between \$3,000 and \$10,000. Elaborate tricks requiring special props can cost as much as \$15,000. Major productions lasting several days with many performers can cost \$60,000.

Herz has all his clients sign secrecy agreements, promising not to reveal how the tricks are performed. In return, he frequently must promise not to reveal confidential information about new products or sales projections.

His most requested trick is one he can't perform. "I'm sorry," he says, "but I can't make the competition disappear."

—Virginia Randall