

## Biography

# Bill Herz: Learning Tricks of the Trade

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photographs

For fees ranging from \$1,500 to \$50,000, Bill Herz will help executives work magic at their meetings and conferences.

When it comes to business, Bill Herz, founder of Magicorp Productions, Inc. in New York, is a veritable wizard. His stock-in-trade is putting a little pizzazz into otherwise predictable presentations. Herz not only performs eye-catching magic at meetings held by companies such as Kodak, General Foods and IBM, he also designs special tricks that executives from those firms can perform themselves to intrigue prospective clients or fellow employees.

When the president of the credit division of Dun and Bradstreet had a point to get across at an important meeting, the executive didn't mince words. He simply ordered his director of sales to climb into a box and sealed it. Then he pulled out several keenly edged swords and with Machiavelian glee, thrust one blade after another into the box.

"We're going to stab the competition. We'll jab our customers into seeing what a good job we can do," he announced. The audience held their breath. "What we're going to do is make our competition disappear," he said. To prove he meant business,

he swung open the lid of the box—it was now empty.

Likewise, when Steve Solomon of Fuji Photo Film wanted to acquaint his independent sales representatives with the company's latest product, a computer floppy disk, he didn't simply give a lecture. He placed the disk in a clear box, then snapped his fingers. It vanished before everyone's eyes and the box miraculously filled with cash. Clearly, this product was to be a real moneymaker.

Neither of these two buttoned-up executives is in the business of entertaining—they asked Herz to teach them such tricks to help underscore important messages. By pulling the proverbial bunny out of a hat, they made their audiences sit up and take notice and were able to put their point across in a memorable fashion. It was not magic for magic's sake, Herz stresses.

"Corporate meetings tend to get very predictable; they have the same old thing happening year after year," he observes. Slide shows and colorful graphics can only go so far. "We bring life to meetings, and make stars out of the executives by teaching them tricks that fit in with what they're talking about."

The savvy showman, who has done everything from turning General Motors' salespeople into donkeys to making Sony's CEO appear to materialize out of a giant Walkman, makes it his business to develop illusions for occasions ranging from awards banquets to trade shows to ribbon-cutting ceremonies. For fees from \$1,500 to \$50,000, Herz has worked his magic at meetings for groups as small as 10 to gatherings for up to 2,800.

Some firms use magic as the theme to perk up stuffy corporate bashers. "We bring in top magicians and put on a night of magic like only the inner circle of magi-

cians have ever seen," says Herz. Aside from sheer entertainment, the magic works wonders in other ways as well, he observes. "It gets everybody talking. It's a corporate ice-breaker." Marveling over magically appearing coins, elaborate card tricks and the like helps to forge a common bond. It makes it easy for those who don't know each other to introduce themselves. "They can say things like, 'How can that guy do that?' or, 'Wow, did you see that?'" Herz notes.

Sometimes Herz performs at such functions himself. George Ort from AT&T remembers the first time Herz performed at one of their dinners. "Bill came in and walked through the crowd doing magic tricks," he recalls. "Then after dinner he set up a small table and began to do some close-up magic." Before long there was a whole crowd gathered around him.

While to meet the slight, unassuming performer, attired in jeans and a cotton shirt, or to look around his understated, modern Manhattan apartment with nary a knickknack around, you'd never think that it was this sort of attention that drew him to magic in the first place. He received his first magic kit at the age of eight and was immediately enthralled. The appeal was simple. "I was a pretty short kid and this was something that gave me attention," he recounts.

That wasn't all magic gave him. At the age of 14, while selling Fuller Brushes door-to-door in the upscale, Larchmont, New York, neighborhood where he grew up amid a family of lawyers, the young performer learned to use his sleight of hand to help turn a profit. To get the attention of prospective buyers, he would whisk quarters from between the straws of the brushes—after that it was simply a matter of closing the deal.

(Right) Herz with wife Gwen in their New York City apartment. (Far right) The self-proclaimed workaholic says he's constantly on the road, and he lives and breathes magic.



To hone his skills, he spent a great deal of time exchanging ideas with other magicians. "There used to be a place where magicians would hang out in New York City [Tannen's, a magic supply shop]—every Saturday without fail I would be there," he recalls. He still maintains contact with many of the magicians he met there.

As much as the young man loved magic, he also had a bent toward business. After graduating from Amherst College, he spent a year as the Director of Entertainment for Club Med. There he got a feel for the business of entertaining. "I really learned what worked and what didn't work," he says.

While he gained some good, practical experience, he didn't stay at the job long—he had other ambitions, namely to open a magic nightclub. To learn the fundamentals for that, he attended the Cornell School of Hotel and Restaurant Administration. It was there that he came to realize that his dream might turn out to be more than he had bargained for.

"The hours I would have had to put in were so crazy—it virtually would have been round-the-clock, which it is now," he notes ironically with a shake of the head.

Right out of graduate school he eagerly took a job working for a promotion company, but early on he realized it was not for him—he could not get the urge to perform out of his system.

"At the end of eight months I said, 'I've used up all my vacation days, and my sick leave and my weekends performing, maybe it's time to get involved in magic full time.'"

Initially he performed in many places, including some dives. He is philosophical about the experience. "It was a good training ground," he observes, adding, "Performers need experience in many different environments." As he gained recognition, it became easier and easier to obtain jobs. "After I knocked on enough doors, people began to say, 'Hey, this guy really is good.'"

Along the way, one area he naturally gravitated toward was the

corporate world. "I had grown up in that environment," he says. For the young magician, who by that time had many friends in business as well as a degree in the hospitality industry, the corporate boardroom seemed to be an inviting stage.

"I got the idea of performing during meetings, so I began working out routines that would fit," he recalls. From there he began trading on his mounting entertainment credits and his numerous business contacts to line up corporate work.

New doors opened for him, albeit gradually. His first year, 1983, the 27-year-old magician worked for about 20 different corporations, initially performing three to four days a week. Nowadays, he has over 200 clients, and performs five to six days a week.

Over the next four years he began expanding his reputation, making contacts abroad as well as in the United States. This took him in an unexpected direction—teaching the executives themselves to perform. He was in England showing Terry Bilham, marketing manager for Liberty Life Insurance, the magic he had planned for the corporate banquet, when the canny executive asked if he could try some of the illusions himself.

Herz shrugs and recounts what happened. "I said, 'Sure, no problem,' and we ended up teaching Terry as well as some of the other people in his company some tricks and they did the whole show." It was a big hit.

When he came back to the United States, he related the anecdote to some executives from another company and was surprised to find they were also interested in performing tricks. "That's great! We want to do them, too," they told him. He laughs as he thinks back at what unfolded next,

**“We understand business and that’s the key. It’s not a magic show, it’s a business event. The hard part for us is downplaying the magic.”**

**Herz says he got into magic early on because he was a short kid who needed attention. At the age of 14, he began incorporating magic into his Fuller Brush routine door-to-door.**

shaking his head at his own lack of prophesy.

“It still didn’t dawn on me that this could be big until I mentioned it to another company and they were just as eager to learn the tricks—then I realized ‘Hey, we have something.’”

By October 1987, he decided the time had come to start his own company. The consummate businessman, he drew up a business plan then raised approximately \$60,000 through family and private investors to get started. Judiciously he set up a small office right in his Manhattan apartment, where aided by his wife, Gwen, and one employee, he launched Magicorp.

The company took off so quickly that he found he didn’t even need the business plan he had so painstakingly put together. “I already had a lot of corporate clients for whom I had performed, and when we sent out brochures about Magicorp starting up, everybody said, ‘Hey, that’s a good idea,’ so there really was no lag period like we were afraid there would be,” he says. The first year alone he grossed \$90,000. This year he expects from \$650,000 to \$750,000.

Part of the secret to his success stemmed from his unique service—teaching executives to perform tricks themselves. “It was a needed commodity,” says Herz. “A way for executives to add life to otherwise predictable presentations.”

That’s why George Ort, the man in charge of AT&T’s customer executive programs, contacted Magicorp. After spending five years assembling the “best people” to give talks on information technology, he was a bit taken aback to find one of his own talks lacking impact.

“I’d give three talks at any given seminar—two of which were world-class presentations. But then I had an AT&T sales pitch

talk that was not very good,” recounts Ort. “I’d be up there watching people yawn and I said, ‘I’ve got to liven this thing up.’ That’s when I ran into Bill Herz—he took that talk and turned it from a real sleeper into a real killer.”

One of the points Ort was trying to bring home in the talk was the importance of executing a job perfectly. To illustrate this, he used a simple card trick in which a member of the audience picked a card from a deck and Ort then displayed a card with half this value. For example, when a four of hearts was picked, Ort would flash the two of hearts. But what happens if someone picks a seven of hearts? How can anyone predict half of that value? You can if you’re a “magician” and your deck has a 3.5 of hearts. The message was clear—there is no tolerance for error in a sales presentation. You have to be on target all the time.

The magic made a big difference in the presentation, changing it from one of the lowest rated talks to one of the more popular ones at the seminar. But the new popularity of the presentation, albeit pleasant, wasn’t what pleased Ort the most. “Before, when I’d finish the talk, people would leave the room to get a cup of coffee. Suddenly, I incorporate the magic and people want to come up to me and talk to me about it, which means I get an opportunity to say more to them about the things I’m trying to make points about,” he gloats.

While many executives like Ort take readily to performing, one of the toughest problems Herz had to overcome in reaching some clients was reluctance to try the tricks. “Everybody said, ‘Oh, I’m all thumbs,’ or ‘I don’t have time to learn a trick,’” he says. The long-time performer smiles. Such trepidations are actually groundless, he assures.

Herz with client Jonathan M. Tisch, president and chief executive officer of Loews Hotels. Herz says he works with executives intently, making sure that none of his clients blow a trick.

"While the tricks may look fancy, they're easy to do," he promises. Intently he shifts forward in his chair and raises his hand for emphasis. "I've never had somebody blow a trick and I never will—I can't take a chance on an executive's reputation."

With more complicated illusions, this can call for some pretty fancy footwork. "Sometimes we'll have 'assistants' who are actually magicians on the stage to 'help'—they do the dirty work but make the executive look like the star."

Despite such reassurances, he admits there are still some people who are reluctant to try the razzle-dazzle. "Every now and then we get a guy who says, 'No, no, no, this is a business meeting. I'm not going to be up there and risk making a fool of myself, taking a chance doing a trick.'" The low-key businessman never forces the issue. "The way we handle that is, I'll say, 'Let me teach you the trick. Take it home, show it to your family, then if you still don't want to do it you don't have to.'" This approach usually works magic. "Every time they come back and say, 'Well, okay I tried it, and it seems to work.' Then they do it and it's great."

Wouldn't it be easier to just perform the tricks himself? Why take the time and trouble to lay things out for stumbling amateurs? It's all a matter of perception, Herz says. "Our theory is that we're going to be gone after the meeting," he explains. "We think it's important that the executives become the stars—it humanizes them."

He points to the CEO who suddenly magically appears on stage. "The audience likes this guy," he observes. "It shows he has a sense of humor—has some fun in him."

In addition, he explains, the CEO also gives the trick more impact. "We want to get the message across in an entertaining but



memorable fashion," he says. "If I do it, I'm viewed as the performer, but if they do it, they're viewed as the executive who's using magic as an illustration."

But what about the well-known magician's credo? Aren't magicians supposed to keep the tricks of their trade a secret? Herz nods expectantly, suppressing a sheepish grin, much like a kid who's been expressly forbidden to borrow his dad's car but who's done it anyway because he knows this is the exception and he will be forgiven.

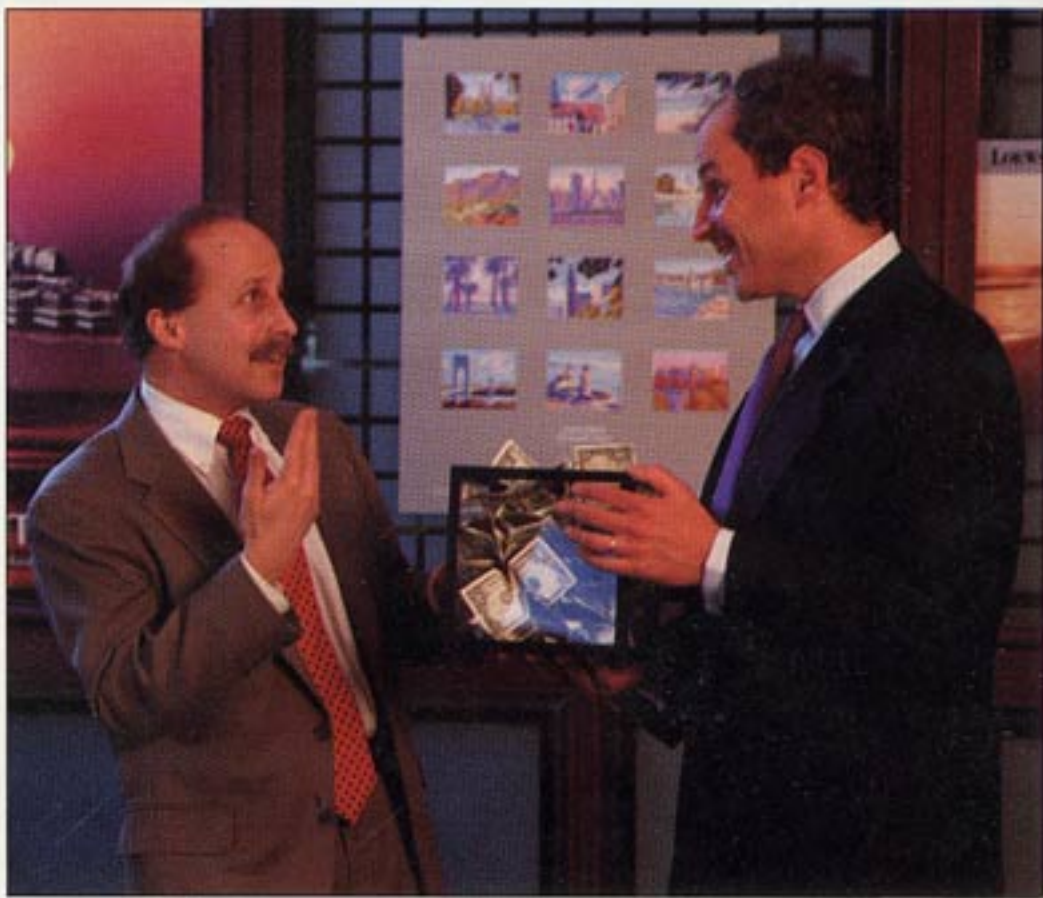
"The credo is don't give away tricks for the sake of giving them away," he points out, explaining, "I don't give away tricks, I teach executives one or two illusions." He likens it to a musician who teaches someone a song on the piano—just because they know one song doesn't make them a musician. Likewise, Herz says, "If I teach someone a trick, they're not a magician, but I can make them look good." However, to allay any fears, he does have the executives sign secrecy agreements.

Strangely, one of the problems he has encountered has nothing to do with magicians concerned about protecting their trade secrets. It involves the high expectations of some executives who have their own ideas about tricks they want to perform.

"I get a call every week or so from someone who will say, 'Hey, we want to cut someone in half,' and I'll say, 'Well that's fine, but how many people are going to be at the meeting?'" In cases where a small group of about 15 are gathering in the confines of a boardroom, he has to veto the idea. The reason? The trick has to be on a scale with the surroundings. It's just not practical. "Sawing someone in half requires a large piece of equipment that's not going to fit into a boardroom," he explains.

"That's probably the biggest problem I have," he confides, frowning his brow. "People always think that bigger is better. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. There are times when it's more effective to get a point across with a pad of paper and a pencil

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than a guillotine," he observes.

As one who performs clad in a business suit and tie rather than a top hat and tails, Herz prides himself on knowing what works and what doesn't. "We understand business and that's the key," he notes. It's not a magic show, it's a business event and must be conducted as such. "The hard part for us is downplaying the magic."

This sometimes means avoiding the glitzy trick that is meant to stop the show. "What we don't want is everybody walking out saying, 'My gosh, isn't it amazing the way those three elephants disappeared?' We want them remembering what was just discussed at the meeting," he emphasizes.

There are, however, exceptions to this. Sometimes taking employees' minds off their troubles with a trick can make less than glowing news easier to swallow.

Herz points to a company that had to tell 300 employees that they were being relocated from the New York City office to one in Hartford, Connecticut. To get this across, he came up with an illusion using a

replica of the Empire State Building and one of the Hartford State House. A man got into the Empire State Building and the doors were shut. After spending a few minutes discussing the benefits of being in Connecticut, the CEO told the employees how they were all going to be transported there by magic. Then he snapped his fingers and the doors fell open on the Empire State Building and the person had vanished but not into thin air—he reappeared across the stage in the Hartford State House.

"There was a great response," he recalls. After seeing the trick and hearing all the positive aspects of living in Connecticut, the audience took the "bad news" in stride.

It is no wonder the affable businessman enjoys his work. "I love meeting people, I love magic and I love business—I consider myself the luckiest guy because I'm involved in every business there is," he says.

If there is one disadvantage, he concedes, it's that he is constantly on the road. "Last week I was in Chicago, Dallas, Tucson, Colorado

Springs, Aspen, and back to New York—and that's just one week," he says with a laugh. "I'm physically and mentally exhausted and I'm going out to do a show tonight and 7:30 tomorrow morning I'm leaving for Bermuda to do another meeting."

But the self-proclaimed "workaholic" admits he wouldn't have it any other way. "If I were smart, I would take a breather every now and then," he says. But then again what would he do? "I eat, sleep, and think magic—I love it," he declares.

With an eye toward the future, Herz is writing a book on tricks for executives in business situations. He says his personal goal is to "never get stale." His ultimate goal, however, is a bit more fanciful. "I can't wait for the client who has a meeting and comes to me and says, 'We want to have the greatest meeting ever and budget is no problem,'" he confides.

Unlikely? Perhaps. But then again, who's to say when you're dealing with Bill Herz, a man who can magically make cash appear. ▼