

Magical MBA working tricks on execs

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Bill Herz's business, he'll tell you, is keeping secrets. But for the past two years, this magician with an MBA has been giving away the tricks of his own trade.

Mr. Herz, who got his first magic kit at age eight, had done nightclub schticks but found them repetitive and boring. In 1980, he began tailoring his trade to business audiences only and created a company, Magicorp Productions Inc., that may gross as much as \$500,000 this year.

"I was fascinated by corporate groups," explains Mr. Herz, who lasted nine months at a nine-to-five job after graduating from Cornell University's school of restaurant and hotel administration.

Challenge to entertain

Business, he says, gives him a more sophisticated, intelligent audience and calls on his creativity: "It's a challenge to make a business message entertaining."

To get corporate messages across, he's made root beer floats for A&W Brands and turned a Chevrolet employee into a jackass to characterize stubborn customers, working his magic at sales meetings and trade shows for Fortune 500 companies as well as smaller ones (he draws on 30 magicians to help out on larger shows).

His 83% repeat business is undoubtedly bolstered because he looks the part, dressing in business suits and white shirts. "People often tell me, 'You look like someone who works here,'" he says.

The 32-year-old magician regularly signs secrecy agreements on product introductions and knows marketing plans two years down the road.

But two years ago, when Mr. Herz was in London for Liberty Life Assurance Co., Chairman Terry Bilham decided he wanted to pull off an illusion of his own before a large audience. So Mr. Herz had him appear magically in an oversized book.

Since then, he's shared his secrets with many executives, including Sony Chairman Akio

Morita, whom he made magically appear in a giant Walkman, and Jann Wenner, former publisher of *Rolling Stone*, who came forward in a cloud of smoke from a copy of the magazine. Recently, his Fuji proteges did tricks to tout new promotions at the Consumer Electronics Show.

"Frequently executives are thought of as removed—this humanizes them," says the teaching magician, who charges \$750 to \$3,000 for tutelage.

Dressing up dry facts

Glenn D'Agnes, chief financial officer of Vintners International Co., had a tough assignment just after the firm split off from Seagram Co. last year. "I had to go through the finances of an LBO and the first year of operations. It was very dry, lots of numbers," he recalls.

Mr. Herz showed him how to wave a wand and make a bottle of wine turn into 100 dollar bills.

Was Mr. D'Agnes uptight about his performance? "You're talking to an accountant," he says. "We're not used to doing magic tricks. But Bill spent a couple of hours with me on this 20-second thing."

Now Mr. Herz regularly asks his corporate trainees to sign a secrecy pact.

Since he's begun letting executives in on his tricks, he's seen his company take off. This January's sales were \$50,000, up from \$8,000 in January 1985. He expects to gross at least \$375,000 this year, up from last year's \$98,000.

In part, Mr. Herz is riding the growth in special-events and meeting entertainment, says Col-



No illusion: Bill Herz, a magician with an MBA, enjoys making his living mystifying attendees at corporate functions and trade shows.

leen Davis, editor of *Meeting News*, a trade publication. "Corporations are getting a lot more sophisticated in the events they're choosing. And magicians are more popular for leading major presentations or breaking up seminars."

But Mr. Herz's dry, humorous style also gets credit for his word-of-mouth business. "He has a terrific sense of humor, a million and one comebacks," says Michael Weinstein, executive vice president of White Plains-based A&W Brands. "We don't like to do the same thing twice, but we make an exception for Bill."

To Mr. Herz, performing is play: "The brighter the audience, the easier they are to fool," he confides gleefully. "IBM—those guys are cake. Scientists are easy,

because they're used to going from A to B to C to D; I go from A to D. They love it, they go nuts."

Says his wife and business partner, Gwenn Scheuer, formerly a financial analyst at CBS, "Bill's enthusiasm is contagious. He loves the challenge of working with meeting goals, since no company has the same personality and needs. He works ridiculously hard; it's a crazy life."

Mr. Herz, who spends three to four days a week on the road, admits, "I'm so engrossed in it, it's scary." Even off duty, his preferred pastime is developing new tricks.

The renegade in a Larchmont, N.Y., family of lawyers, Mr. Herz says he never outgrew the magic-kit stage. He continued refining his tricks while at Amherst College, taking a year off to be entertainment director for Club Med's eastern region.

With MBA in hand, he tried the straight world for a while but found he really wanted to perform. So he "knocked on some doors" in the business world.

Mr. Herz, who had been charging only \$250 per performance, was told his fee was too low and immediately doubled it. Even though his price has risen—Mr. Herz charges as little as \$750 and up to \$40,000 for a major production, while his average fee is \$2,000 or \$3,000—"I'm still the cheapest alternative to a big-name star," he says.

But he sees another reason for the growth in his magic business: "In this computerized world," he says, "it brings you back to being a kid." □ **CNYB**