

# Who is Bill Herz?

How did he get to be the busiest corporate meeting magician in the country without anybody knowing it?

Bill Herz is a unique magician. Not because he performs at more than 200 corporate meetings annually, and not because he has generated ten times more publicity in business journals than any other corporate magician. Bill Herz is unique because his personality combines tremendous self-confidence with an unassuming, humble quality which is

perfectly suited to the corporate environment. Bill Herz appeals to corporate executives. But it's more than his Brooks Brothers' suit and tie. To understand the magical appeal and success of Bill Herz, M.A.G.I.C. magazine had contributing editor Danny Orleans conduct an in-depth interview.

**BY DANNY ORLEANS**

Bill was born into a family of lawyers, in Larchmont, a New York City suburb and received his first magic set 28 years ago at the age of eight. The magic bug bit and he began performing anywhere and everywhere he could throughout his teen years. (His partner at that time was Paul Cummins, now an Apocalypse contributor.)

An Amherst College graduate, Bill received his MBA from Cornell. Before focusing his magical efforts toward corporate meetings, he booked entertainment at Club Med, toured with a rock band and worked for a promotions firm. Currently, he presides over Magicorp Productions, Inc., which is run out of his New York apartment. His wife, Gwen Scheuer directs the financial aspects of the company, as Bill is out of town about 75% of the year.

His press kit is the corporate magician's fantasy. A colleague of mine, upon seeing it said, "Wow." Upon opening it, he said, "Oh my God." And upon looking through the four-color reprints of over a dozen feature articles in major business publications including The Wall Street Journal, Successful Meetings, Meetings and Conventions, The Meeting Manager, Ad Week, Crain's and several airline magazines, became more vulgar in his choice of expletives. Herz's testimonial letters are exemplary and filled with detailed praise from CEOs and high ranking officers of Fortune 500 Companies. It is clear that Bill Herz not only understands his clients' needs, but he also exceeds their expectations.

Along with Paul Harris, he has recently written *Secrets of the Astonishing Executive for the general public* (published by Avon

Books). This is a book of magic tricks designed to help people in the business world "maximize any business situation with techniques to make their product, proposals and them unforgettable." The book is filled with some standard magic effects which Bill and Paul have cleverly oriented toward a businessperson's daily experience. However, it also contains some never-before-revealed secrets by such magic notables as Max Maven, Mac King, John Kennedy, Al Baker and Ted Annemann.

Bill also teaches company presidents, CEOs and corporate executives to perform magic to enhance a speech, increase the effectiveness of a presentation, or make a luncheon meeting more memorable. Much of his publicity focuses on that aspect of his business. So in my phone interview I asked him about it.

When the *Wall Street Journal* article about you and Magicorp hit the newsstands in December of 1988, a lot of magicians said that by teaching executives to do magic, you were exposing secrets. How did you answer them?

To me, "exposure" is giving away secrets for the sake of giving away secrets—to people who aren't interested in them. When I teach executives, they learn the tricks correctly because I make sure they do it right. I'm not teaching for the sake of teaching. There is always a specific reason why the executive is learning a specific trick—to make a point in a speech, to launch a new product, whatever. And they're paying for it. The only difference between them buying the effect from a magic shop and learning it from me is that when they learn it from me, they learn it correctly. I never reveal secrets which don't apply. I've also found that company presidents have a tremendous appreciation for the art of magic. You know what? They keep the secrets better than most magicians because they are businessmen, and they understand the value and power of a secret. So is it exposure? I don't think so for a minute.

Doesn't your book reveal secrets to people that aren't interested?

What should I put in the book? Garbage? Other people have brought this subject up and here's the only "anti-exposure" argument I'll accept: If someone thinks it's OK for me to publish the book, then you have no right to say what tricks I can include. Now, if you say it's totally wrong to publish a magic book for the general public, then you can complain about every trick in the book.

And following that argument, they must then object to every magic book for laymen?

Exactly! What's the difference between publishing my book and *Scame on Card Magic*? If people want to learn (magic) they should have the opportunity. I'm not standing on street corners giving this book out to anyone saying, "Here... here's how magic is done!"

What's been the reaction from corporate executives?

They love it. But what's really surprised me is the ingenious suggestions I've gotten from executives. I could write another book on just their additions. I have CEOs that should quit their jobs because they are such good performers.

This is the first interview you've given to any magic trade magazine. Bill Herz and

Magicorp are two names that virtually all hobbyists and most professionals don't recognize. You have obviously made no efforts for peer recognition. How come?

When I go to a magic convention it isn't important for me to be recognized. I have my friends in magic. Magicians are not the audience I'm trying to appeal to. Don't get me wrong. I love magic. But, I'm trying to be known by the corporate world. When I walk into a hotel, and look at the meetings scheduled for the day, I get pissed that I wasn't hired for them.

But don't you have any desire to be recognized by magicians or the general public as a "great magician."

I would absolutely, without a doubt, turn down the opportunity to be famous.

Are you serious?

Absolutely, my performance idol is Michael Davis.

The juggler?

Right. I work with him all the time. He does a zillion corporate dates, gets top money, entertains the hell out of his audience, and he can walk down the street and nobody bothers him.

So it isn't important to you that magicians know who you are and that you work for the top corporate clients at the finest hotels and meeting sites in the country?

No. It's often said, that people who have money, don't talk about it. I believe that magicians who are satisfied with themselves, the quality and quantity of their work, don't have to talk about it either. That reminds me of my favorite magician joke:

Two magicians are talking...

Magician #1: "So how are you doing?"

Magician #2: "Terrific, I'm up for an NBC pilot, I'm preparing for a cruise on the QE2, then I have a solid month of corporate dates, I'm publishing two books within the next six months and a Broadway producer is checking out my nightclub act. Things are unbelievable! Are you working a lot?"

Magician #1: "Well, to be honest with you, I have one Lion's Club banquet coming up next month, it's not paying a lot but..."

Magician #2: "Really, who's booking that?"

I think there's plenty of work out there. I've never been one for people tooting their own horn or patting themselves on the back.

Let's say I'm a magician in a small or medium size market. And let's say the largest business in town is ZAP Insecticide. They

manufacture bug spray and own 50% of the market share in the Midwest. How can I use the Bill Herz success formula to get their attention and get booked?

My marketing technique is more of a psychological approach. I don't want to go to them, I want them to come to me. To do that, I have to go to them to create the demand.

How do you create demand?

There are several different ways. One way is to tell the client that I can work *with* him rather than *for* him. There's no car salesman pitch such as, "This deal is only available for a limited period of time." No sales pressure. I am low key. I let them know I specialize in a service that may be beneficial to them. Also, I demonstrate that there are others who have used my service successfully. I demonstrate a track record. This is very important in the corporate world. And that's why it's a tough market to crack. Sort of a "Catch 22" situation.

How did you get around it in the beginning?

Initially, when I was trying to get my foot in the door, I "lengthened" the list of my clients to assure prospects that I could deliver what I said I could.

Sounds a little risky.

It was more than risky. It was stupid. I'd never do it that way again if I had it to do all over. I'd just knock on more doors instead.

The publicity in all those business journals must certainly "create demand" as well? How did you get it? And how effective is it?

A lot of people ask me about it. In order to get the attention of the media, you must have something that separates you from everybody else, something unique. Not only from other magicians, but from everybody that has submitted a press release to the publication in question. You must have something that makes *you* stand out. A hook.

What was the Bill Herz "hook"?

Teaching magic to executives. But you'll notice, if you read the reprints, that it's the executives that were always quoted. Sometimes, more often than me. The *Wall Street Journal* followed me around from show to show and interviewed executives and got their reactions to my work. It's the executives' comments that justified the article.

Have you received much television publicity?

Some. But TV is a waste of time.

**What do you mean?**

As an effective vehicle to publicize what I do, it is. Don't get me wrong, All publicity is good for business but if you were to offer me the "Today Show" versus the *New York Times*, I'd take the print over the electronic media in a minute.

**Why?**

First of all, print lasts longer. A publication has a shelf life of anywhere from a day to a month. A television sound byte lasts seconds. A potential client of mine doesn't even have enough time to get a pencil out to write down the name of my company before he's inundated by the next news report or commercial. If the publicity is in print, he can tear it out, file it, and call me when he needs me. Secondly, my target audience is corporate executives who read newspapers, not housewives that watch TV.

Let's get back to ZAP Insecticide. Now that we've seen how you create demand, what do you say when you meet with them to discuss their meeting?

Let's begin with what you shouldn't do. One of the biggest mistakes I've seen magicians make when selling their services is that they act like a car salesman. A customer walks into a dealership and the young salesman says, "Hi. Boy, do I have a car for you." Well the customer's internal reaction is, "Wait a minute, you don't know anything about me, you don't know if I'm married, if I have kids, if I'm looking for comfort, speed, if I drive in snow, etc."

But if the salesman says, "Tell me all about you. Are you married? Planning children? Are you looking for performance or comfort? How far do you drive to work?" Then my reaction is different. He may show me the same damn car he was going to show me anyway, and he probably will! But, now my perception is that he's showing me a car that fits my needs, rather than his commission structure.

**How do you relate that to ZAP Insecticide?**

You must show them that you want to learn about their company so you can give them a service that fits their needs. First you call them and tell them you have an unusual service to offer and you would like to find out what types of business meetings they have every year.

OK, the National Sales Manager tells you about their annual summer golf outing for clients. Also there's a marketing meeting for sales reps to get them motivated and introduce them to new products and programs.

Now you can come back to them saying you have a special after-dinner show doing magic with golf balls for their summer golf outing, and that magic may also be the perfect tie-in for their sales meeting, because their bug spray makes insect problems disappear... like magic! You must position

what I need to know without them realizing it.

**What types of questions do you ask?**

What do you do? What do you make? Was it a good or bad year? Has there been a major shift in management recently? Are



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magic as a perfect fit to the goal of their company's meeting or product.

**The Sales Manager says, "Really, how would you illustrate that?"**

Now you stop with the description. You must get in and show them. Don't tell them. Show them. People don't have imaginations. He's hooked. He's clearly interested. Get an appointment. Say, "Instead of telling you, I'd like to demonstrate it for you next week. Would Tuesday morning be convenient?" You have to *show* them the magic. A client cannot feel the impact that magic has by listening to a verbal description. They must see it.

**Do you still visit clients to demonstrate the impact of magic?**

You bet!

**And what goes on at these meetings.**

I find out what I need to know about the company in order to create a program that will be irresistible.

**How do you do that?**

I ask questions. And I get them to tell me

people worried about their jobs? Is the mood good or bad? Questions that give me a pulse of the company. I can then customize a show to meet their needs.

**How do you develop scripts for corporate programs?**

I sit down with them, find out the objective they wish to communicate to their sales force or employees and I put it together. I've gotten to a point where I can knock out a script pretty quickly.

**Do you have standard scripts?**

No. But I know what they're looking for. I can fit any trick with any business situation. In fact I often play this game with magician friends of mine. Have you heard of Vernon's "Card Trick That Can't Be Explained?"

Yes.

We play "The Business Situation That Can't Be Explained." They name a trick and a business situation and I find a way to put it together. As in Vernon's trick, my job is to find an "out." It's great practice for those initial client visits.

I watched you do a meeting in Chicago a few years ago and before your presentation you did a lot of crowd mingling without performing close-up, and you walked out on stage in full view of the audience while they were eating lunch. Isn't that breaking the first rule of performing, "Thou shall not let the audience see thy face before the show"?

At corporate meetings, nobody makes a grand entrance. And usually, everybody

business suit. Dress so that they can identify with you, bond with you, trust you. This is as important when you're selling your act to them, as in the performance itself. You could be the greatest magician in the world, but if you walk into their boardroom in a sequined tuxedo with a punk hair style, they won't touch you. You'd be better off wearing Topsiders and khakis. That's what they are familiar with. That's a world that they know.

at ease and then follow through.

What do mean by "follow through"?

There are people who give great presentations but cannot deliver. You must deliver what you say you're going to do. Don't produce rabbits if you said you were going to produce elephants.

So this "putting them at ease" process, includes personal grooming and conservative business attire in your opinion. It's really all about first impressions, isn't it?

You bet it is. They want to know that you speak their language. And I think it's true in any field. I suspect that if you were playing the college market, a business suit wouldn't work.

Unless you were wearing Nike's with it.

Exactly. But then it isn't business attire anymore.

Your feelings about tuxedos?

I have just one, and I only wear it to black tie events.

Do you think that executives are as uncomfortable presenting *magic tricks* in a business meeting as a magician would be presenting a *business speech* in a business meeting?

Probably. But that's exactly why it's so successful. The audience is used to seeing the CEO get up and present stern lectures all the time. The performance of a magic trick humanizes him. It bonds him with his group because he has the "guts" to step out of his role for a moment. And even if his performance of the trick is not stellar, who's going to boo, heckle or call him a jerk?

Since the audience is on your side does that mean a less-talented performer could be more successful in the corporate arena than working for the general public?

Not necessarily, it's a completely different mentality. To be successful anywhere, you have to be a good performer to begin with, then you have to focus on one area. You can't be everything to everybody. I have the highest regard for the people in magic who take this approach. For example, Paul Gertner. He's the trade show king. He goes after that market, he does a good job and makes sure his clients are satisfied. It's very rare to find a great illusionist, stand-up, and close-up performer all rolled into one.

Do you think that attempting to be everything to everybody is why many magicians don't succeed?

Yes, because they spread themselves too thin. The quality of their act suffers. Also, the expense involved to promote two or three different types of acts doesn't make it



## 'My marketing technique is more of a psychological approach, I don't want to go to them, I want them to come to me'

knows everybody to some degree. Since I am a relative stranger, I want as much of the audience to be familiar with me as possible. Then they're on my side. In a sense, I'm warming them up without them knowing it. If I hadn't had a cold that day, I'd have eaten with them too.

You're kidding.

No. It makes the executives more comfortable if you accept their hospitality. I want to be considered one of the guests who does tricks. I always try to eat, and chat and socialize with the group.

What other "rules" do you break?

Ever hear the rule, "Dress like a million bucks whether you have it or not." That really bothers me, because I think it's missing the whole point. For the corporate world, I would rewrite that as, "Dress the way your audience dresses." Meaning if they're in business suits, you should be in a

True or false? A Corporate VP, who has to hire a magician to fit the theme of his meeting, is more afraid of hiring a bad magician and being embarrassed than concerned about hiring someone who may be terrific?

True, absolutely! You have to realize that in the corporate world, executives are afraid of making mistakes. People are tense about their jobs. Why take a chance on hiring somebody who could be a goon? The last thing they want is for the boss to come down on them. Executives are terrified of looking bad in front of the boss.

So if you're a hit and their boss likes you?

You're home free. Nobody's going to disagree with the CEO and say "I hated the magician." Once the CEO loves you, you can do anything; ask for more money, entertain at their private as well as business events, marry their daughter... Seriously, at your initial meeting, you've got to put them

as profitable as just doing one act and doing it well. Look around, the really great acts in magic have risen to the top by committing themselves to one performing style and honing it until it was truly great. It's easier to rise to the top if you find your niche and specialize rather than being a jack-of-all-trades and master-of-none.

**Wait a minute... How about Karrell Fox or Johnny Thompson?**

Look, of course there are exceptions. But Karrell Fox doesn't have to rely on magic tricks. He could just entertain by telling jokes. I didn't say it was impossible to shine in more than one area, but I believe that most magicians are better off approaching the business knowing that they can't do every kind of show in every type of venue. Look at Lance Burton or Siegfried and Roy in Vegas. John Ferrentino is great in comedy clubs. Doc Eason is terrific as a magic bartender. Eddie Tullock has made his living doing trade shows and only trade shows since World War II. Irv Weiner was king of the college market in the 60's and 70's. Charlie Reynolds is the Broadway special effects consultant. Ross Johnson, who I've never seen, supposedly has the hottest mindreading act on the corporate circuit. Each performer has picked his niche and carved out his presence until he's become a permanent fixture in it.

**One thing that will strike any magician that reads your book, is that you are very tapped in to the psyche of the executive, his day-to-day trials and tribulations, and the politics of corporate America.**

You just said a key word. *Politics*. To be successful in the corporate world you have to be aware of the politics. I can walk into a room and not only tell you who the boss is, I can put them in pecking order, by seeing who's laughing loudest, who's moving most easily about the room, who's watching the room... I can spot it a mile away. You've got to know the politics, what to mention, what not to mention. You can't go into a meeting blindly saying, "I'm the greatest magician in America, and I'm going to make your sales meeting great!" You have to know what's going on with the company.

**Is this as true for the county fair, blue and gold dinner, or company Christmas party as it is for the corporate boardroom?**

Yes. Whenever you encounter more than one decision-maker, there is politics to deal with. It can be as simple as a Mom who has to consult with her husband over the magician's fee for their daughter's birthday; or as complex as negotiating a long term contract for a Vegas show.

**So does that mean it is more important to**

**know how to sell magic than actually perform magic?**

No, I think they are both equal. You have to deliver and you have to be ethical.

**Ethical? What do you mean?**

Just this weekend I got into a major argument with a magician who I believe made a big business error. And I'll tell you why. He told me that he just sold 2000 sets of "Three Card Monte" to his trade show client for \$9000.

**Over \$4 each?**

Yes. He looked at me as if to say, "Aren't you impressed with my profit margin?" I said, "I think that's horrendous! That's ripping off your client. Not only is it bad because if they find out you're going to lose a client; it's bad for all other magicians. More important, it's ethically wrong."

**What is the appropriate markup on an item like this which you just buy and resell?**

I go by the standard advertising agency markup which is 17.5% If I have to hire an artist to customize it, I'd add on to their fee because I'm supervising the project. But a client expects that. Nobody expects you to work for free. But they *do* expect you to be fair. We have an ethical responsibility with corporate America to be fair, honest and deliver what we promise at a competitive price. We also have a responsibility to other magicians. Once this company finds out that the magician overcharged them—and they will find out eventually—not only will they not use this magician again, they're going to stay away from all magicians.

**What else do you think drives people away from selecting magic or magicians as an entertainment or a promotional vehicle?**

Mediocre magic.

**What do you mean by that?**

I've always said "What kills magic is not 'bad magic.' The general public can spot 'bad magic.' It's 'mediocre magic.'"

**What's the difference?**

Let's take the world of music. Everyone can tell the difference between a mediocre singer and a bad singer. We are exposed to singers and music constantly. On TV, radio, movies, and nightclubs. If we see a mediocre singer, we know that she is mediocre because we have lots of other experiences with singers to compare it to.

But the general public doesn't see as many magicians as they do singers, and they are more likely to generalize their first impression of a magician, to all magicians. If they are experiencing a bad magician, their

impression might be, "Oh, this guy is bad, I could see that extra coin in his left hand and he was wearing one of those fake thumbs. My kid's as good as him." That's OK, because this person knows he's seen a bad magician and knows that better ones *do* exist.

But, if they watch a "mediocre magician" work, for example at a trade show, perhaps they won't be able to figure out how he does any tricks, but they may leave feeling, "I don't know how he did it. And I don't know why that company had him in the booth. It had nothing to do with the trade show or their product. What was he trying to sell anyway?" In other words, the "mediocre magician" had a numbing effect on the passers-by. He didn't move them emotionally, wasn't memorable, and he didn't make his company or their product memorable.

The sad part for the "good magicians" is that the passers-by may very well conclude that, "So, this is what experiencing a magician in a business setting is like." Unfortunately, when they are looking for entertainment or a sales motivator, they will remember their experience with "mediocre magic" and hire a comedian, or motivational speaker instead.

**Your publicity packet is very impressive. You have ten times as much press as anyone; quotes from Johnny Carson, Gregory Peck and very big names in business, as well as testimonial letters from corporations whose policy it is not to write them. Tell us about how you market your act. What technique works best to make a corporate magician's phone ring?**

Nothing works as well as publicity. The problem is, that it's extremely difficult to get. Once you're in the *Wall Street Journal*, everybody wants you. I got 40 calls the day the article appeared in the *Journal*. I include reprints of all the articles in my packet. There are so many that I don't think anybody reads them. They page through them, "Oh, he was in *Forbes*; oh, he was in the *Wall Street Journal*; oh, the *New York Times* did a piece on him too." I don't think they read them, but the articles validate me. The decision-maker is now more comfortable to make the decision to hire me to do their meeting, because they figure, "If this magician screws up, I can say to the boss, 'Hey, don't blame me—even the *New York Times* said he was great!'"

**So your packet helps make the decision-maker feel comfortable... he or she knows that they are doing the right thing when they hire you?**

That's its primary function—to hold their hand.

**Do you make cold calls?**

their politics, and the value and prices of what I'm offering them it is stupid not to give them a psychological edge to "win" the negotiation. I only do this with clients with whom I've worked. If the person who is arranging the meeting has a boss who he has to look good in front of, everybody wins if he can "talk the magician down a few hundred bucks."

**All these CEOs know each other and they move around from company to company. Do you ever get "caught" charging different prices for the same service?**

I wouldn't dream of charging different prices for like services. It's just death. And it's not ethical. Your selling a service, and the price shouldn't change.

**Shouldn't?**

Look, there's always negotiating and justifying any price. But I think the big mistake is, "There's more money in the budget so I can charge more." That's only true if you are giving them more. And there are ways to find out how much money is available.

**How do you do that?**

It's really the same way you determine a budget for a private party client. You may ask, "Where will the party be held? Are you having a buffet or sit-down dinner? Meat or chicken? How many guests are you having?" The answers to these questions tell us, as performers, if the client has a large or small budget, and can usually give us an idea of what they may have budgeted for entertainment.

**Is it the same set of questions for a corporate event?**

Some are, some aren't. More important, the answers will be different. I get a sense of their budget by determining who will be attending the meeting—clients, an internal sales force or employees? The budget for an incentive meeting at the Ritz Naples is going to be more than a regional sales meeting at the Airport Marriott. I'll say, "Tell me about the three day flow of the meeting, what are your plans?" If they say "Well, we're having three afternoon seminars. The speakers will be Tom Peters (author of *In Search of Excellence*), Lee Iacocca, and we thought you conducting a session about using magic in sales would be fun." Then I know that they are not going to have a problem budgeting in my fee. But if they say, "We're going to have a beach party and a DJ, depending on budget," that tells you another thing. Now that doesn't mean I'm going to change my price, in fact I'm not going to change my price. It does tell you not to bother trying to sell them more than what they are asking for.

**Do you ever give an introductory price?**

Never. Although I do perform my share of free shows for charity. The only justification for reducing my price, would be if the client says something like, "We've really heard great things about you, and we know that you're expensive, but our budget has exactly such-and-such dollars." And they tell you what they've got! If it's reasonable what I'll say is, "I'll do it, with the understanding that I can cancel up to two weeks before the meeting."

**So are they left stranded?**

Of course not. If I have to cancel, I'll find them a replacement who will do a good job.

**They're comfortable with that?**

It's part of the original agreement. If I have to cancel, I'll find them an approved substitute.

**So how many meetings are you doing a year?**

During meeting season, September through the first week of December and then again from the second week of January through the middle of June, I perform at three to five meetings per week. Since I have a few selected magicians doing other things for me as well, Magicorp is probably doing 250 to 300 events per year. To do that, I have to make it work geographically.

**What can you tell me about your "on retainer" arrangement with AT&T?**

They pay me a certain salary and guarantee me a certain number of meeting appearances per year.

**Suppose they call last minute and you're not available?**

I have two approved substitutes—one of which is doing a show for them in Florida as we speak.

**Last year you told me you did 30 meetings for IBM in one month?**

Yes, that was IBM's 100% Club. It's their recognition event where they fly in top salespeople from all over the country. Last year it was in San Francisco and Hawaii. They have so many people working for them that they can't reward them all at once, so they have a series of meetings back-to-back. IBM is so big. While I was doing the shows in California and Hawaii, I had someone else doing the same exact thing in Florida at another meeting site.

**Is your business largely repeat business?**

Yes. Next week's shows in California, I have eight meetings over a ten-day period, only one is a new client.

**So does this mean you need to create new material?**

No, the audiences are different. When I say "repeat business," I'm referring to the individual who contacts me and makes the arrangements for me to appear at the meeting.

**What's on the horizon for Bill Herz and Magicorp? Any new projects? Goals?**

A magic restaurant. We're just starting to put the game plan together. Also, Paul (Harris) and I are developing a line of premiums which are unusual and different.