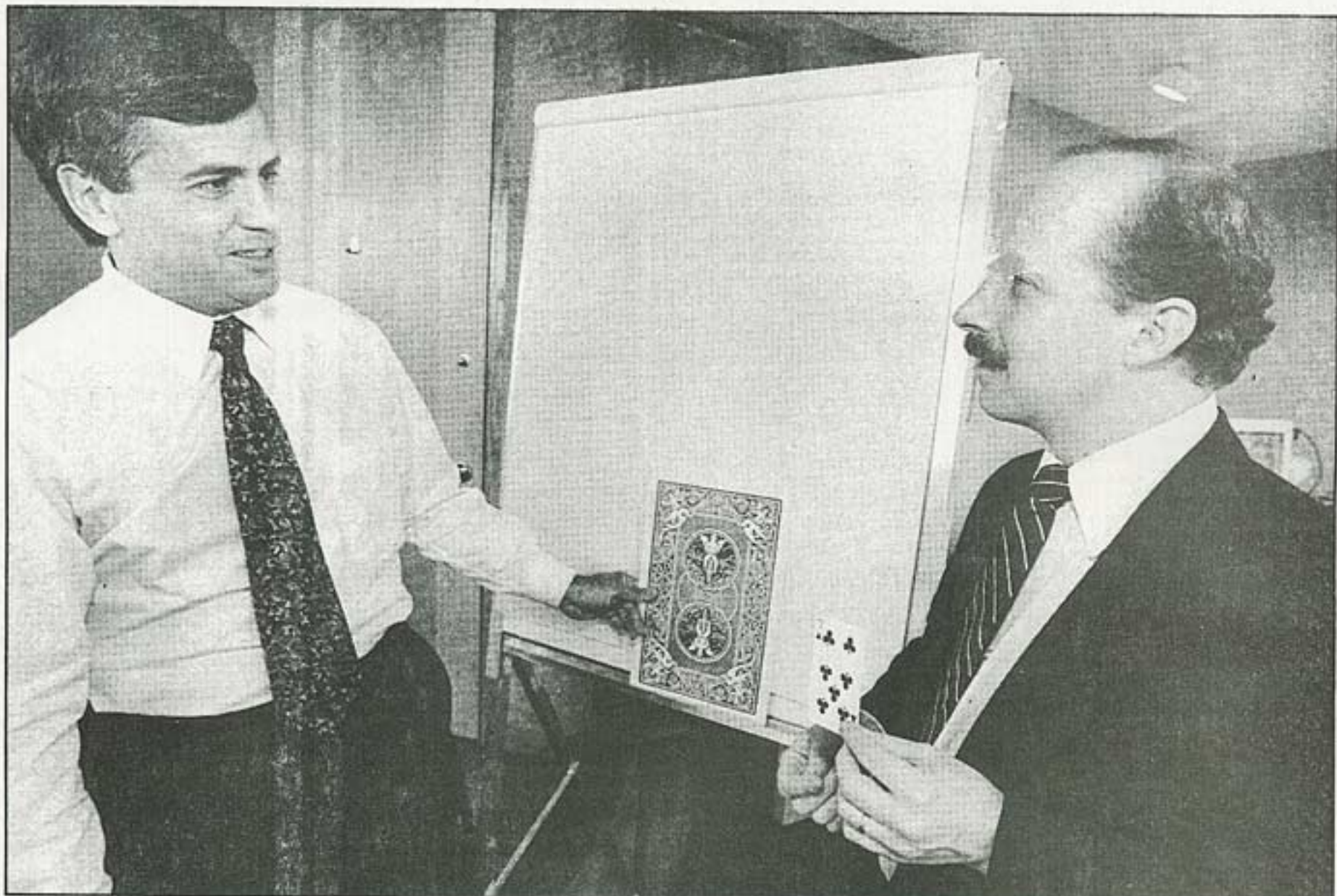


With Sleight of Hand, C.E.O.'s Turn Heads



Janet Durran for The New York Times

Bill Herz, right, a magician, teaching Manny Fernandez a trick he later used while delivering a corporate message.

By JACK CAVANAUGH

AS tricks go, turning Manny Fernandez into an instant magician would seem to be no easy feat. After all, Mr. Fernandez is a corporate executive from Wilton with no background in the art of legerdemain.

But a few weeks ago, to the astonishment — and amusement — of about 200 analysts for Gartner Group Inc., an information technology research company of which he is the chief executive, Mr. Fernandez deftly performed two magic tricks which, (a) made points relevant to the company's business and, (b) clearly demonstrated that Bill Herz is a master at teaching corporate top brass how to do what he likes to call "participatory illusions."

Unlike Mr. Fernandez, Mr. Herz, who also lives in Wilton, is a professional magician who shows upper-

echelon executives how to perform tricks that can deliver messages in an entertaining and amusing vein.

Indeed, the day before Mr. Fernandez wowed the Gartner Group analysts, who had assembled from around the country at the Tarrytown Manor in Westchester County, Mr. Herz had spent a half hour with him in his office at the Gartner Group's world headquarters in Stamford. Mr. Herz showed Mr. Fernandez how to do two tricks, or illusions, after first performing them himself. One involved a deck of cards and the other, a mind trick, and the message that Mr. Fernandez said he would try to convey to the analysts was the importance of being accurate.

From Nightclubs to Board Rooms

Obviously reveling in the experience, Mr. Fernandez, then performed both tricks adroitly. "He's really enjoying this, and, with his personality, he'll do just fine tomorrow," Mr. Herz

said later. And Mr. Fernandez did just that, performing both illusions without a hitch while weaving them into his presentation before the analysts for the Gartner Group, which has 38 offices worldwide.

Since abandoning a short-lived career as a nightclub magician, Bill Herz, who is 37 years old, has been focusing almost entirely on the corporate circuit as the head — and chief performer — of Magicorp Productions, which is based in New York City. Formed in 1987, Magicorp provides customized magic for corporate events, like the Gartner Group meeting in Tarrytown. But in recent years, the centerpiece of the company's business has been teaching executives to perform illusions on their own at board and sales meetings, trade shows and other corporate functions.

"This is not magic for magic's sake, but magic as an aid in communicating a message," said Mr. Herz

who has more than 200 corporate clients, including many Fortune 500 companies, and at times employs other magicians to assist him. "Although I perform at many of the functions, my role is to make a star out of a chief financial officer or some other exec who is trying to get across a message. I like to stand in the wings and let the execs take the bows."

Though he spends most of his time traveling around the world, Mr. Herz appears often in front of Connecticut clients, which include the Travelers Corporation, Aetna Life and Casualty Company, Southern New England Telephone Company, General Electric, Chesebrough-Pond and United Technologies Corporation.

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Amazing What's in the Yellow Pages

"One of my objectives is to liven up a meeting and, in the process, inject some humor," Mr. Herz said. He did just that at the telephone company's annual Yellow Pages meeting in Trumbull two years ago. As a vice president was being introduced, Mr. Herz appeared with a mammoth replica of a telephone book. First, he opened the book to show that it was empty. Then he closed it and opened it again — and, presto!, out walked O. Haydn Owens Jr., the vice president of the phone company's publishing department, who has since retired. "The audience went wild," said James Yacavone, staff manager for publishing promotions.

At other times corporate executives, under the tutelage of Mr. Herz, have made the chief executive of the Sony Corporation materialize out of a giant Walkman, have sawed the sales director of a company in half "to demonstrate," Mr. Herz explained, "that you can't be two places at once," and have "fed" an executive into a giant fax machine, from which he emerged on the other side somewhat flattened out to underscore M.C.I.'s message at this particular meeting: "Flatten the opposition."

In each instance, Mr. Herz tailors his illusions to whatever message a company is seeking to get across. In some cases, elaborate props are used. But more often Mr. Herz and the executives performing the illusions need only a deck of cards and a pad for the mind games that are part of most routines.

Foolproof Tricks

Surely, it would seem, some tricks must go awry, considering that they are being performed by novices with whom Mr. Herz spends only about 10 or 15 minutes on each illusion. Not so, said Mr. Herz. "In about 2,000 performances, I've never had anything go wrong," he said. "No one has ever blown a trick. And I don't think they will. I can't afford to take a chance on an executive's reputation."

At the beginning, Mr. Herz had to sell himself to prospective clients. But nowadays virtually all of his business is through referral. And, he says, about 60 percent of it is repeat business. His fee ranges from \$1,500 a day to \$10,000, but it is considerably higher when elaborate props are used.

His promotional brochure contains

a two-page list of clients, which includes American Express, A.T. & T., Bristol-Myers, Coca-Cola, Ford Motor Company, General Mills, General Motors, Revlon and Pepsico. The brochure also includes about two dozen letters from officials of major corporations expressing their thanks, in many instances, effusively, for his performances and his instruction.

When Mr. Herz appears before a corporate group, he dresses the part. That means a conservative suit and definitely no top hat or tails, the garb of choice of most magicians. But then Mr. Herz doesn't pull rabbits out of hats. "Quite often, someone will say that I look just like the other guys in the office," Mr. Herz said. "And that's just what I want to hear."

Magic Makes a Profit

Growing up in Larchmont, N.Y., the son of a lawyer, Mr. Herz began dabbling in magic at the age of 9. "I was short and it was a way of attracting attention," he said. By the time he was 14, selling Fuller brushes during the summer, he was using magic to make a profit. As an attention getter Mr. Herz would whisk quarters from between the straws of the brushes. "It definitely paid off," he said.

After graduating from Amherst College, Mr. Herz spent a year as the director of entertainment for Club Med before receiving a master's degree in business administration from Cornell University. Following a year with a promotion company, he realized that he was out of his element, which was magic. "I did magic shows in nightclubs in places like Vegas, but didn't like the life style or the atmosphere," he recalled. "I played in a lot of dives along the way, but it was good experience."

In 1983, Mr. Herz hit on the idea of performing at corporate get-togethers. "I already had some good contacts in both the entertainment world and in business, but I had to knock on a lot of doors while starting out cold," he said. He caught on, albeit slowly, and by the mid 1980's was even appearing before corporate groups in Europe. While in London in 1987, Mr. Herz was showing an executive of Liberty Life Assurance Ltd. the tricks he planned to do at the company's annual sales meeting. "He asked me if I would show him a few tricks to do, and I did," Mr. Herz said. "The next day he did the tricks and was a smash hit."

The Hardest Trick of All

It wasn't until after a few American executives also asked him to teach them a trick or two that Mr. Herz realized he had inadvertently come upon a new approach. That summer he and his wife, Gwenn, formed Magicorp Productions Inc., setting up an office in their Manhattan apartment, which they still maintain.

Mr. Herz concedes that he cannot perform for companies perhaps the most requested trick.

"I tell them, sorry, but I can't make the competition disappear," he said with a smile. ■