

LOOKING TO PUT THE MAGIC BACK INTO MEETINGS AND SHOWS?

BY WILLIAM KEENAN JR., SENIOR EDITOR

Bothered by flagging enthusiasm at your annual sales meeting? Or by shrinking attendance at your trade show booth? Just say presto, abracadabra, shazam!

As a matter of fact, a number of companies keep up interest and attendance by doing just that—booking magicians to represent them and to support their sales efforts at trade shows, and building sales meetings and new product presentations around magic and illusion to underscore their themes.

Hocus-pocus, you say? Well, sometimes a little hocus-pocus can be a big help. For instance, following Vintners International's leveraged buyout of Seagram's wine divisions, including Taylor California Cellars and Paul Mason, Vintners' Barbara Goodstein was putting together a series of presentations by company officials to liquor distributors, and she decided that the CFO's speech needed a little spicing up.

She called on Bill Herz, a practicing magician and head of Magicorp Productions Inc. in New York City, who designed a trick that the CFO could perform as part of his presentation. The CFO was selling the distributors on the profits to be made on Vintners' newly acquired line of wines, and Herz wanted to reinforce that message. "We devised a trick in which the CFO holds up a glass ice bucket with a bottle of wine, referring to the wine as the company's

new magic wand. To underscore that point, he pulls out the bottle, taps the ice bucket, and the bucket suddenly fills with cash," says Herz.

For another client, Herz was asked to help find a way of illustrating an important message at the company's sales meeting. He had the company's marketing director put the sales director in a box and saw him in half. "The message," Herz says, "was that 'you can't be everywhere at once, but if you don't pay attention to competitors, they'll walk off with your customers.' And with that, two salesmen push the top half of the sales director off stage. 'And if you don't pay attention to customers, they'll walk off by themselves.' And the marketing director tips the other side of the box down and the legs walk off by themselves."

Magic has the ability to attract and keep a crowd—an ability that's highly prized among sales and marketing people. For instance, Bud Dietrich of Belleville, Ill., is a specialist in close-up magic who performs for companies at trade shows. He sees his mission as twofold. "The first is to draw a crowd; that's done with the magic. The second is to get them relaxed and receptive to the message you're trying to get across. That's done with humor and by getting members of the crowd to participate in the magic." It works well, Dietrich says, to draw prospective customers into the booth and get them to ask questions—about the magic, yes, but about the product or service as well. In addition, he says, "The longer I can keep them at my client's booth, the less time they have to visit elsewhere."

It must work. The proof is in re-

peat bookings, and Dietrich has been performing magic at trade shows for Flygt Submersible Pumps for 21 years, and for Peabody-Myers Corp., a heavy equipment manufacturer, for 16.

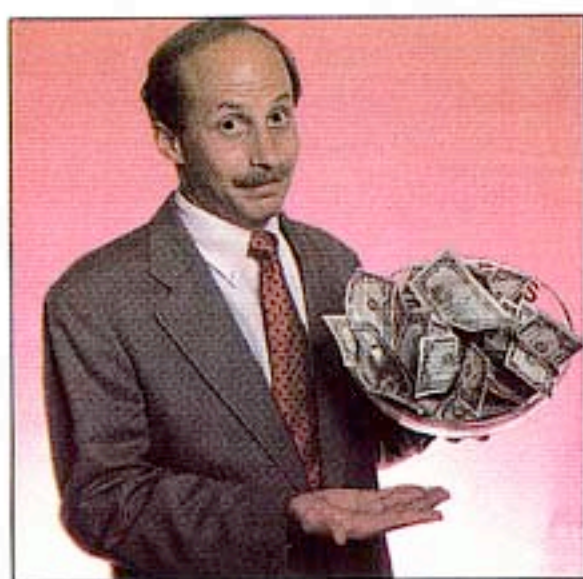
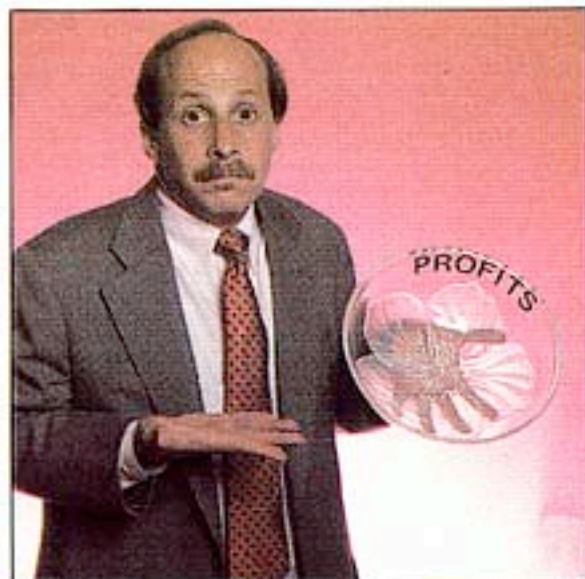
Choosing a trade show magician, on the other hand, gets a bit more subjective. "A good trade show magician," Bud Dietrich says, "becomes part of your sales team and can often be used for public relations work in addition to working within the confines of your trade show booth." For this reason, he adds, you should be as careful about choosing a magician as you would any other sales agent. "You should be satisfied that the magician would qualify as a representative of your company under all conditions, including working in the booth, at sales meetings, in hospitality rooms, and person-to-person."

Obviously, you'll want someone who's skillful—and you can assure yourself of this by requiring an audition. But, says Dietrich, you'll also want someone who can integrate your sales presentation into his or her act and show enthusiasm and confidence in your product.

Keep in mind also that there are some dangers in working magic into your trade show or meeting. If the magic is too spectacular, it could overshadow your product or the message you're trying to get across. You don't want people walking away talking about the magic—ideally, the magic should draw the audience in and supplement and reinforce your message.

Barbara Goodstein of Vintners, for instance, says that the ice bucket trick used by their CFO was so popular that now everyone wants to use it—even for presentations at which it isn't really appropriate. So she expects to go back to Bill Herz for a new bag of tricks for future meetings and other events.

Herz himself says that he often has to advise clients to scale back the amount of magic they want to use at meetings, or advise against tricks or illusions that might not be appropriate given the message or the personality of the executive who will be part of the trick. "You don't want to make the CEO appear out of thin air if everyone hates the guy," Herz says. Of course not—much better to see him in half and then misplace one of the parts. □



Here's a trick that any sales team would like to be able to perform: Out of thin air . . . a bowlful of new sales profits.