



The magic word

Corporate magician Phil Smith uses sleight of hand to get a business message across

BY SEAN DONAHUE

Nothing boosts employee morale like seeing the boss sawn in half. Just ask Phil Smith, who has cut up dozens of managers, bosses and CEOs

Smith, who says the toughest part of his job remains convincing skeptical businesses that magic has a place in the corporate world.

"There's a percentage of companies out there who definitely think that magic

save using his client's services. He also frequently employs company products in his illusions, such as making Oreos appear and disappear during a Nabisco promotion, and uses the company's name as the "magic words."

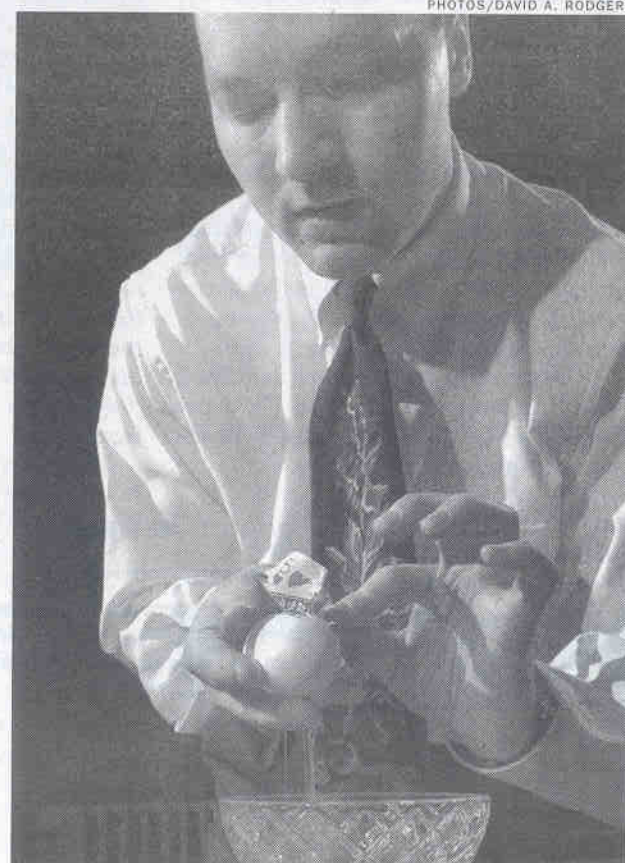
... idea is get people to drop their guard, have a bit of fun, and give them a memory on which to hang his client's message. "I'm kind of like a secret salesperson," he says.

Smith also performs a 40-minute stage show (featuring the boss-sawing trick) at company parties, conferences, sales meetings and employee training sessions. He recently performed a stage show during an annual safety training course for the building material company Pike Indus-

plines he could find to magic. Smith was a part-time professional magician for almost 20 years, working mostly children's parties and a few adult events. Seven years ago, he was inspired by a magician's trade magazine to begin considering magic as a corporate marketing vehicle. He began spending more time marketing himself, using brochures and customer recommendation letters. "I realized I had to start treating it like a business," he says.

That businesslike approach means spending about six hours learning about the company and the message it wants to get across, then 12 hours developing and rehearsing a unique routine for every corporate performance. He only charges businesses for performing time, though: \$350 for his stage show, and \$300 for the first hour of a walk-around performance, negotiating a lower rate for each additional hour.

PHOTOS/DAVID A. RODGERS



Nothing up his sleeve: Phil Smith invites you to pick a card. He then produces an egg from a folded newspaper. He cracks the egg and — voilà — finds your card inside.

over the years. "That's what the employees want to see," Smith says. "That's the big one."

Slicing into the company brass is part of the act for Smith, who bills himself as a "corporate" magician — a mix of entertainer, promoter and motivational speaker. By working a company's products or marketing pitch into his repertoire of card tricks and sleight-of-hand illusions, Smith turns a typical magic show into a product promotion or employee training session. For the past seven years, he's played trade shows, grand openings, sales meetings and company parties across Maine and New Hampshire for clients ranging from Advantage Payroll Services to Xpress Copy. Corporate and adult clients now account for the majority of the 200-plus shows he puts on each year — he still does kids' shows, he says — and during busy times like the holidays he can find himself rushing between as many as five shows a day.

But that success didn't come easily for

is cool, but there's always the larger percent who think magic is just for little kids' birthday parties," says Smith.

These days, a five-minute demonstration of his act is usually enough to soothe the nerves of potential clients and convince the skeptics, he says. That's because Smith avoids magician stereotypes: He has no cape, no hat, no rabbit and no comely assistant. Instead, he wears simple business suits that allow the 39-year-old to blend in with his corporate audiences.

Audience comfort is especially important, because Smith specializes in up-close

tricks that he performs while roaming store aisles, company parties or trade show booths. A typical trade show performance usually starts with Smith enticing one or two spectators with a few quick card tricks. Then, as he gathers a larger audience, Smith begins dropping the company's marketing spiel into his act. He might make a 50-cent piece appear between two business cards while talking about the money businesses can

tries, in which he made personal safety equipment such as hard hats and safety glasses appear and disappear to enliven a familiar message about workplace safety.

His shows win over adult crowds, Smith says, because they don't rely on the type of lame card tricks your Uncle John might have showed you as a kid.

"There's a percentage of companies out there who definitely think that magic is cool, but there's always the larger percent who think magic is just for little kids' birthday parties."

Phil Smith, corporate magician

Smith is an expert in sleight of hand, and his 25-plus years of experience show as he pulls off impressive tricks and feats of legerdemain — while wearing a short-sleeved shirt — during a recent interview.

The Biddeford native began practicing the craft at age 10, when he received a magic kit as a Christmas present. He got serious about performing a few years later, going so far as to study theatre at the University of Southern Maine because it was the closest academic disci-

For all the money, though, the corporate circuit has its perils: Smith fears the drunk at the company holiday party, and the humorless boss sucking the fun out of the saw illusion. He must also deal with analytical skeptics who try to inveigle the secrets of his tricks from him. Like all magicians, Smith won't

reveal how his tricks are done — not even to his wife, Valeriya Kurkina-Smith.

That's probably why, although his goal is to eventually perform 300 shows a year for corporate or adult audiences, Smith says he'll always work the occasional kids' show just for fun. "It's nice to see the reactions of kids that believe it's real magic."

Sean Donahue, MaineBiz staff reporter, can be reached at sdonahue@mainebiz.biz.

ABRACADABRA PRODUCTIONS, WESTBROOK

Owner: Phil Smith

Service: Magic shows with a marketing or business message

Founded: 1995

Employees: 1

Revenues, 2002: Did not disclose

Contact: 854-0937, or 1-800-964-TRIX
www.corporatemagician.com