

MARKETPLACE/PROFILE

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Tricks for the Trade

"Corporate magician" Billy Harris uses magic skills and a wacky sense of humor to break the ice at company retreats and trade shows.

BY WENDY NERI

It's 8 a.m. and you're at a regional sales meeting listening to the CEO of your company introduce a guest speaker, marketing expert Dr. William Harris. The conservatively dressed speaker takes center stage and begins rambling about how his latest book can help boost profit margins, increase sales volumes, expand customer awareness, blah blah blah.

"Let me read something from Chapter 7," he says. Just when you're about to nod off, a flame bursts out of the book. Suddenly, the audience members sit up in their chairs, and Harris begins reelin' off jokes and moving around the stage with the energy of someone who's had a few too many espressos. By now, everyone is laughing, including the CEO, whose \$100 bill has just been turned to ashes. Luckily, the 26-year-old Billy Harris is not only funny, he's also a magician who's able to make the \$100 reappear.

A self-proclaimed "corporate magician" from New York City (the Ph.D. title is simply part of his act), Harris uses his magic skills and wacky sense of humor to break the ice at company meetings and

trade shows all over the country. "At 8 a.m., when most people are trying to get their first cup of coffee down, I get them off their feet," says Harris, who has been performing magic since he was 5. He also has a bag of tricks to illustrate company themes and products. To demonstrate the concept of teamwork, for instance, he'll do a card trick with members of the audience. To show trust, he might use a



Billy Harris makes meetings a "hare more interesting."

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bowling ball to “smash” a diamond ring borrowed from a woman in the audience only to make the ring reappear inside of an egg later in the show.

Harris, who financed his education at San Francisco State University by performing at company cocktail parties, has gathered crowds at trade shows promoting everything from shoes and luggage to food and electronics. “Some companies give away free pens at a booth, and some people hire me,” says Harris, who majored in theater.

Though he still performs at the larger trade shows, such as COMDEX in Las Vegas, his main focus since 1990 has been corporate meetings and conferences. His client list now includes such companies as Sterling Vision, Inc., News America FSI, Cusa, Inc., Pepsi Cola, Ford Motor Co., McDonalds, Samsung Electronics America, the Foster Grant Group and Apple Computer, all of whom shell out \$4000 to \$10000 for his services.

“He’s a lot of fun to watch” says Penny Williams, marketing coordinator for the Foster Grant Group and organizer of a four-day conference at which Harris performed. “He’s very upbeat, and he absolutely had the crowd’s attention.”

Harris worked his magic at some 30 meetings a year throughout the country, and he has performed in Australia, Canada, even on a cruise ship in Mexico. To keep up with the industry, he regularly reads business publications such as the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Fortune Magazine*. “Much of his repertoire is having knowledge of how these things work,” he says. “That’s part of my job.”

What’s not part of his job, he insists, is to be a motivational speaker. “I’m not the person who tells you how to improve your life,” Harris says. “I’ll save that job for the *real* doctors.”

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