Mag

tricks in communication

It is not all sleight of hand with magicians. They understand how to make people believe what they see, says magician and PR and marketing communicator **Nick Fitzherbert.** Here he explains just how to apply magical rules to get your message across

Further Information

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References

Jeremy Clarkson - http://driving.timesonline.co.uk/section/0,,12389,00.html

HOW OFTEN have you heard work colleagues remark when unreasonable requests are made, “they must think we just have to wave a magic wand”; or say, “we are not mind-readers”, when communication problems arise?

Well, I have to refrain from such outbursts because around 12 years ago I actually acquired a magic wand, started to learn some mind-reading techniques and eventually became a full member of The Magic Circle.

As someone who works in PR and marketing, I found that the more I learned about magic the more I was convinced that many of the principles behind the tricks ought to be applied in the world of commercial communication. Eventually, I teamed up with some likeminded business people, who were also members of the circle, and together we identified 20 rules used by magicians, which are equally effective in business - see list.

The rules are simple and soon feel intuitive once you start to use them. Rule 5, for instance, states that 'concentrated attention requires a single point of focus' or, as I learnt one night at a circle meeting, 'don't divide attention between yourself and what you are doing'.

For magicians, this means avoiding doing card tricks at arm’s length. If they do, the gaze (and attention) of the audience would be constantly flicking from the magician's hands to his face.

In any presentational situation, ensure that you position yourself immediately adjacent to your PowerPoint screen or other visual aids. Furthermore, always set yourself up to the left of your props, from the audience's viewpoint. This is Rule 6 - 'Attention tracks from left to right, then settles at the left'.

As I delved back into magical history during the process of developing the rules with my fellow magicians, I found so much that resonated with my experiences in marketing. For example, Rule 1 focuses on the creation of expectations and perceptions.

Magicians are acutely aware that the moment people see, hear, feel, taste or smell anything it automatically triggers a range of expectations and perceptions in their minds. In effect, it opens up a 'file' in their brain that tells them what they already know about that subject and rejects anything that doesn't fit. Magicians build their communication and effects around the expectations and perceptions they trigger.

This brings to mind a PR campaign I was involved in to re-launch a very famous drinks brand. The client was determined that his multi-

million pound investment in plant, packaging, marketing and re-formulation of the brand should come over loud and clear. He was not best pleased, therefore, when I forecast that the moment we mentioned the brand name the overriding thought in the minds of the media would be the annoying little cartoon animal that had featured throughout the brand's history but had now been laid to rest.

So, I organised a 'leak' to the press that the cartoon character had been axed and a couple of days later the story ran in every national newspaper. The axing story fulfilled the media's natural perceptions and needs but then prompted the question, 'so what are you doing with the brand?' This brought us back on track with the client's desired message and the overall result made him very happy indeed.

Clarity and impact aside, communication will only be effective if you can convince the audience about what you are telling them or showing them, and a number of the rules focus on this area. Rule 19 states that 'people put more reliance on something they have worked out for themselves'. If, say, a magician drops something and stoops to pick it up it may be that he was simply being clumsy. However, it is more likely that he wants the audience to register - even if only subconsciously - that he has nothing else in his hand so that when he then produces something from that hand it is all the more impressive.

In magic circles this is known as an 'accidental convincer' and it's based on the principle that we believe whatever we tell our brains to believe but instinctively question everything that anyone else tells us. So, by letting us work out for ourselves that his hand is empty the magician can be far more convincing than by spelling it out more overtly. This is what can be so great about PR. It floats messages in front of its targets and allows them to reach their own conclusion, to highly convincing effect.

THE RULES

ENGAGEMENT

1. The framework for any communication is determined by the expectations and perceptions triggered the instant that any of five senses are stimulated

2. Expectations and perceptions can be reinforced or diminished by prestige, atmosphere and environment, and desire

3. Communication can only register effectively when it builds on what the audience already knows

4. The brain filters out most of the information it receives, leaving only what it considers to be important

To apply the rules in a business context you need to:

- Base your communication on what your audience already knows by using familiar reference points. In magic, most people are familiar with playing cards, so they can be used for communication with almost anyone. The current popularity of 'street' and 'close up' magicians can be attributed in part to their use of everyday items rather than specially built props. In business, when Bill Gates first foretold the coming of PDAs (personal digital assistants) such as PalmPilots, he referred to them as 'electronic wallets'. This meant that his audience could immediately visualize the size and shape of these new devices, as well as perceiving how they could be used and where they would be kept.

Another effective communicator is TV presenter Jeremy Clarkson; in part because of the way he uses similes. He puts technical matters into language that everyone can understand. Recently, in his column for the Sunday Times, Clarkson described the performance of the BMW M5 by saying, "It looks ordinary but goes like a rat up your trousers".

When giving a presentation you need to:

- Anticipate the expectations and perceptions triggered by your communication. Do you need to build on them, milk them or change them?
- Create a single point of focus, reinforce it with left-to-right positioning and eliminate all potential distractions
- Work at your 'opening' and 'closing' statements – firsts and lasts are remembered
- Enliven your language with words that 'paint pictures', e.g. backbone rather than basis. Use powerful language, e.g. challenge rather than problem
- Use openness to reduce doubts but avoid over stressing, which is generally perceived as a sign of weakness
- Remember that people's reactions are influenced by those of their peers so focus on the most receptive members of your audience.

By following the rules used by magicians it is possible to increase your effectiveness as a communicator, even though you won't actually be able to pull a rabbit out of a hat, produce a playing card from behind someone's ear or saw a lady in half. For those tricks you need to learn another sort of magic. PM

THE RULES (continued)

ATTENTION

5. Concentrated attention requires a single point of focus

6. Attention tracks from left to right, then settles at the left

7. The audience will look where you look, where you point and where you tell them to look

8. Curiosity, movement, sound, contrast and anything that is new or different are friends and foes. Each has the potential to seize attention

9. The wider environment can often add to or detract from your message

10. Every element of your content will either add to or detract from your message

11. Attention is sustained by variation, which creates the illusion of brevity

IMPACT

12. The senses offer five different ways into the brain

13. First and last statements are remembered

14. Negative statements impede communication as they need unscrambling before the meaning can be interpreted

15. Over-familiarity leads to 'invisibility'

16. Sustained impact depends on transferring information to long-term memory

CONVICTION

17. To be convincing you have to believe in yourself

18. Doubts are reduced by openness but may be increased by over-stressing

19. People put more reliance on something that they have worked out for themselves

20. People's reactions are influenced by those of their peers.

(List courtesy of Nick Fitzherbert)