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From the series for MAGIC Magazine

Part VI: Anatomy of an Engagement

As a wrap up to this series, I thought I'd share with you one of the primary systems I use in running my business, which involves booking engagements for a number of magicians. This particular system is actually a set of other systems which take us from first contact with a potential client through the final follow-up following an engagement that client has booked.

How do we get potential clients interested in us? First they must learn that we exist. I live in Las Vegas, and I encounter quite a few magicians who live here and complain about the ‘lack of work’ for magicians here. When I ask them what they are doing to market themselves, invariably they tell me they've dropped stuff off at some of the agencies that book parties. What have they done to follow up? Nothing. I know other magicians who "make the rounds" often, dropping in on agents and party planners, sending postcards and e-mails, and making it clear that they are ‘here to serve.’ They work regularly – even the less talented ones. Why? Because they know how to get themselves noticed by the people who can hire them. It's not difficult. Just create a system for ‘Pre-Contact Marketing,’ and use it. Here's how I do it.

There are many ways to find a new contact. Sometimes someone will hand you their business card and tell you they want to be kept abreast of what you're doing. Sometimes you have to scour the yellow pages or the internet to find potential new clients. Sometimes an old client will recommend you. In any event, you want to get as much information about them into your contacts files as you can, and begin the process of courting them.

Once I’ve located a possible prospect, my system for courting them begins by sending a postcard, and perhaps following up with an e-mail or a second post card. This at least gets a name and image into their minds. I just want to pique their interest at this point, and don't need to give them a hard sell.

A later step, for me, is sending a short sales letter explaining why one of my clients might be perfect for an event this particular client is planning. I usually send along a brochure of some sort that will reinforce the idea of how professional we are, but not a full promotional kit or video.

After the sales letter, I sometimes follow up with another postcard or e-mail, and sometimes I call. If I'm going to call, I make sure I've outlined what I want to get across in the call before I make it. I don't want to waste either their time or my own. If, for some reason, they are not interested, I want to learn that as quickly as I can, so I can go on and spend my time with potential clients who *are* interested. I never act offended if someone is not interested, as I want them to remember me positively, even if we’re not going to work together on that particular project.

When the client finally *does* call you, a good first impression is essential. Most of these calls will be similar, so you can prepare for them, and thus make certain you make a good impression.

One way to make sure you'll say the right things is to use a phone script. This is a small booklet with all your prepared answers to common questions written out in advance. You can put tabs on it for each of the most common questions so that you can turn to them quickly.

Most of the time, when a potential buyer calls me, they've arleady decided they are interested in one of my clients, and don't need much selling on my part. They ask immediately about pricing and availability. I'm happy to answer them about availability immediately. If the client they want is already booked somewhere else, neither of us wants to waste time talking any further. So it's important to have an up-to-date calendar on hand, listing all booked dates and those on hold.

If the date is available, I'm not in such a hurry to answer the "pricing" question. Both of my clients work in a wide range of venues, with many different shows available. So I have a regular list of questions I need to get answered before I'm prepared to discuss priciing. Here are some of them:

1. Mr. X has many different kinds of shows available, ranging from walk-around close-up magic to the giant illusion spectaculars we do in casino show rooms and large theaters. If you can tell me a bit more about your event, and what you're thinking of in terms of the show, then we’ll see if we can't figure out the best package for you.

2. How many will be in the audience?

3. How much time do you want him to perform?

4. What's the purpose of your event (party, meeting, product launch, etc.)?

5. Will there be other performers? If so, who are they?

6. How many performances do you want? If it's more than one, do you want them all the same, or different?

7. Do you require customization (I'm ready to describe ways we can customize to help them get across a particular message)?

8. What kind of staging have you planned?

9. Do you have a specific budget in mind?

During our short discussions that arise out of each of these questions, I can work in my "standard" sales pitches for things my clients do especially well, and that we have done for other, similar events. A pharmaceutical giant might be launching a new product for their sales force, and I'll make a point of telling them we've done similar events where Marco Tempest, for example, can take a speaker or audience member inside the body using virtual reality so that they can see a new drug at work, thus making what might otherwise be a dry technical description into an entertaining and memorable presentation. A multi-national technical company might be having a sales meeting for it's representatives from all around the Pacific rim, and I'll point out that much of Jeff McBride's show is derived from authentic Asian performance disciplines - and that it can be played without language, so that everyone at the meeting, no matter what their primary language might be, can enjoy the performance. For many years I kept a list of this kind of "sales points" as part of my phone kit. Today, I've used most of them so many times I don't really need to refer to the phone kit anymore. I still keep files on my desktop with what I think of as my "elevator pitches" for each of my clients, though. These are short, detailed descriptions of who they are and what they do, designed to grab someone's positive interest quickly, and to get them to say yes to the question, "Would you like me to send you a video and promotional kit?"

During an initial call, it's always important to be prepared to offer further sales aids. These can be in the form of a brochure, full promotional kit, a DVD, or even the offer of a short face-to-face meeting or audition. Nothing you could possibly send could be better than personal, face-to-face contact in which you present some small piece of magic for them. However, this isn't always possible, and a set of good, professional looking promotional materials is the next best thing.

If your potential buyer agrees to a meeting, and you can manage it, by all means set one up as soon as you possibly can. Think of the meeting as a presentation, and make sure you have all the materials you need to support that presentation. Make sure you have a copy of your promotional kit with graphics, testimonials, etc. Before the meeting, make sure you are completely prepared. Know exactly what you want from the meeting, and set yourself up to get it. I often rehearse what I want to do in a meeting before I actually get to it.

Make sure you present yourself both professionally and as a magician. I like having my clients present a small sample of magic live during the meeting, because the experience of magic is so much stronger live than it can ever be on video or in photos.

Learning how to make a sales pitch is a skill you'll want to develop, but which is beyond the scope of this article. A good presentation leads the potential client through all the steps they need to go through in order to commit to buying your show. By thinking it all through in advance, you should be able to do this, right up to the point where you ask them to sign the contract. The biggest mistake most sales people make is not actually asking for the sale - so make sure you do always remember to ask when you present.

One of the best ways to ask for the sale is to present them with your contract and take them through the basic parts of it. You can wind this up by suggesting that "I can just fill in the details here, and we can sign it right now, if you want to lock up the date."

If your potential buyer isn't ready to commit at the end of your meeting, don't pressure them to do so. However, it's perfectly fine to ask them for a date by which they will make up their minds. I generally tell clients who are "on the fence" that we will give them a "strong hold" for one week while they make up their mind, but that after that anyone else who asks for that date will get priority. I generally say, "So, I'll check in

with you next Friday (or whenever), if I haven't heard from you by then. Will that work for you?"

Once you've set up a time to follow up, make sure you actually do so at the date and time you've set. A date to talk by phone should be just as important as one when you're set to meet face to face. Don't stand up your potential buyers!

At this point, most clients will be ready to either say yes or no. Let's assume they've said "yes."

The first thing you'll need to do once the client says yes is to talk them through the major points of the contract again, just to make sure you both have the same information. Be sure you know who is hiring you and where their offices are - you'll need to send your contract to them there, and include that information in the contract. Make sure you're both on the same page with regard to exactly where and when you'll perform, what kind of show you'll be doing, what kind of support they need to provide, and how and when you get paid. All of this is information you'll want to put into the written agreement. Tell them you'll be sending the letter of agreement over, and would appreciate their signing two copies and returning them to you along with their deposit check as soon as possible. Tell them you'll sign and return one copy to them as soon as you receive it. Send the agreement immediately - by e-mail, fax or through the mail.

The agreement and deposit check should come back to you within a week. If they don't, make a phone call to remind the client. If they seem to be dragging their feet, remind them that the agreement isn't really an agreement til it's been signed and a deposit received, and that someone else could still call and book you for their date if they don't confirm immediately. When the agreement and deposit do arrive, sign the agreement immediately and get it ready to send back. I usually make one trip to the bank and post office, depositing the check and returning the signed agreement at the same time.

It's always a good idea to call your buyer a day or two before the engagement. Make sure you both have all details correct: Where you'll meet them, when you'll be there, how you get in to the building, what they have to provide (tech support, lunch...whatever you've agreed to), and the fact that they are to have a check waiting for you. I like to review just what the purpose of the show is with them at this point, check any last minute technical details we might have discussed, and briefly talk through what will happen the next day at the venue.

Before each show, you need to pack the things you need for that show; costumes, props, hand-outs...whatever. Part of your "show system" should include check-lists for packing and unpacking. I've heard many stories from working professionals who, after years of performing the same act, found themselves on stage one night having forgotten a major prop. The stories are funny after the fact, but the situation doesn't feel funny at all when it happens to you - and having a good check list both for packing and unpacking to set your show will go a long way towards keeping it from happening to you.

Your client may not feel they need you to arrive early, and arriving too early can present problems. However, it's much better to always be a few minutes early than to *ever* arrive late for a show. Arriving late is a good way to avoid gettng paid. My clients always like to be "on site" several hours before a performance, and in place well before their oficial call. Sometimes this places you perfectly to "be the hero," when someone else screws up. Jeff McBride has, on a number of occasions, been in position to go on earlier than he was contracted to, thus allowing a show to go on as scheduled even though another performer failed to show up, or showed up late. Being the one who "solves problems" for producers is a good way to make those producers want to hire you again. Being "the problem," is, of course, a good way NOT to get hired again.

It's always a good idea to check in with your client or their representative when you arrive on site, to make sure where they want you to set up, go over any last minute changes they might have in scheduling, and to get introduced to any other staff you might need to interact with during your show. At a birthday party, there may be just the person who hired you, but on a large corporate gig you'll want to meet the stage manager, the producer, several crew heads, and others.

Finally, it's time to do your show! Once again, it's great to have a series of systems to make sure things go well. For shows I do with Jeff McBride, for example, we have prop tables laid out with outlines of each prop on the table top. We can tell at a glance if something is missing, because there's an empty outline on the table for the thing missing. What's more, Jeff knows each time he comes offstage just exactly where he'll find the next prop he needs. We usually post large

sheets with the running order of the show on it in each wing. That way, if Jeff or any of his assistants should have a moment when they can't remember what to do next, there's the sheet they can refer to. Each assistant has their own version of the running order, with a list of what each of them must do at each moment during the show. Again...if they forget in the heat of the moment, they have something to refer to. I prepare detailed cue sheets for lights, sound, effects and curtain moves a week or more before we arrive at any venue, and send them ahead. I also have printed copies I can hand to lighting, sound and stage technicians before we start rehearsals, and I usually spend the first several shows in any new venue on headset playing the part of stage manager, calling each cue until our new crew has thoroughly learned the show. A local stage manager takes over this task when I leave. These are just a few of the systems we've developed over the years to assure the quality of Jeff's shows. Since you're doing a different kind of show, you'll want to develop your own.

The engagement is almost never really over when you've performed your last piece and taken your last bow. Right after you've completed a great show is the best time for making new contacts, cementing relationships, and leaving your audience members (future clients!) with the best impression possible. If you take the time then, you can have a great time signing autographs, shaking hands, exchanging business cards and the like. This is also the time to make sure you've asked your happy client to write you a testimonial letter, and make sure you've gotten paid!

Finally, before leaving, it's important to make sure you've taken everything you need, and left your dressing or set up area in good condition. Remember, you always want to be thinking of building good relationships, and leaving your dressing room or set up area in good shape is one way you can do this.

Even when you get home from an engagement, the engagement isn't over. You need to unpack and check the condition of all your props and costumes, and put everything away (or pack it again for the next engagement). This is when you'll find that one of the props is broken, or that you're running low on snowstorms, or something else that you need to take care of. If you have an "unpacking" check list, and keep a pad near by to make notes on things you need to take care of before your next engagement, you'll almost always find yourself in good shape when it comes time to pack up and go again.

The way you follow up after an engagement is one of the things that really shows your professionalism - and can make a huge difference to your bottom line over time. One of your primarly jobs as an entrepreneur is to turn one-time customers into long-time clients, and follow up is one of the primary ways you do it.

One of the first lessons I learned when becoming a professional in show business was "Cash your check immediately." The lesson has served me well, as I have known many actors and other performers who waited a week or two to cash a check they had been given, only to have it bounce, either because the company had gone out of business (on Broadway, they form a company for each show, and the company may have completely closed up and be gone two weeks after a show closes), or because funds set aside for your check have since been used for something else.

Whenever you make a deposit, be sure and enter it into your accounting program as soon as possible. It's easy to forget if you don't do this, and then find yourself in a panic when you open up the program to check your balances.

I think I first read about the importance of thank you notes in a business setting in a book by Harvey Mackay called "Swim with the Sharks." He felt it made ALL the difference when building a relationship with a new client, and would actually carry a stack of thank you cards around with him in his brief case, usually writing the note before he even got back to his office from the meeting. He didn't want to miss an opportunity to say thank you - for a meeting, for a sale, or whatever. It's a good practice, and one which will make a surprisingly large difference in your ability to build long- lasting relationships.

Clients are people you have worked for at least once, and want to work for again. Write up details about the person / company who hired you. When & where it was, what you did, and what kind of response you got. Include information about how they treated you and how you felt about working with them. There are good clients and not-so-good clients...you want to remember which are which.

Your clients list should receive reminders from you ever few months, so they will remember the success they had with you and how much fun you were

to work with. In the process of reminding them, you can suggest they refer you to friends who might want to have a similarly fantastic experience.

It's a good idea to send some kind of personalized follow-up note a few months after an engagement. Remember, you want to continually reinforce the idea in your clients' minds that they had a wonderful experience with you and your show.

That’s my system for handling a single engagement for one of my clients. If it sounds like a lot of work, that’s because it is. The first few times you use the system, you’ll be spending lots of time getting the sytem itself right, and it will feel as though it’s costing you time instead of saving it. However, if you keep at it, and keep refining the system, it takes less and less of your time, and will eventually become almost second nature. Remember – this is my system, which works for me and my clients. You’re system will probably have to be different, because you have a different kind of show, you work in different markets than we do, and you have a different personal style. If you hang in there and take the time to make your system the perfect one for you, you’ll be repaid many times over for the time and effort you’ve put in. Not only will the system save you time in the long run – it will earn you repeat bookings and help you improve the quality of everything you do.