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### How's Tricks?

Billy Harris' corporate deceptions



Billy Harris is a real cutup. If he doesn't take a pair of scissors to your necktie, he might just drop a guillotine blade on your neck.

Huh?

Not to worry. If you volunteer to be his assistant, Harris will put you at ease. "Just relax; this is just a little warm-up," he'll say amiably. "The blade is going to come right down and go through your spinal cord and shoot through your esophagus." Plus, he'll thoughtfully put a wastebasket below your chin, see to it that you get a free T-shirt out of the deal and lead the crowd in a cheer. It might go something like this: "One-Two-Three! APC!"

APC as in American Power Conversion Corporation, the manufacturer of battery backups for computers, and one of 15,000 names in Harris' database of clients, production companies, event planners, trade show managers and marketing directors. At the last two Comdex computer trade shows in Las Vegas, APC called on Harris to plug its wares with his edgy brand of hocus-pocus—for you see, Harris is a corporate magician.

But even his title is an illusion. "People hire me and they think they're hiring a magician, but hopefully they'll think of me as a member of the team," Harris says, "a salesman who happens to do magic." Sleight of hand blended with stand-up comedy is his means of communication, whether to draw a crowd at a trade show, to emcee a sales meeting or to launch a new product. His gigs keep him up in the air—literally. Last year, the Delta Platinum Medallion flyer racked up 125,000 miles in the United States alone.

Harris, 33, sees himself as heir to "old-school" comics such as Buddy Hackett, Alan King and Henny Youngman. "These guys would do 10 shows in Atlantic City and places like that," he says. "[If] you're in a convention center in Las Vegas, and there's 100,000 people there, [and] every company's doing big presentations, and people like me come in and do 10 shows a day . . . it's kind of like a modern vaudeville circuit."

Show biz is in Harris' blood: He's distantly related to 1920s vaudevillian and radio star George Jessel; his grandmother was a singer at various resorts in New York's Catskills, and two of his great-uncles played guitar in big bands. With a natural bent for comedy, Harris has been practicing magic since the age of 5. "I was fascinated by the whole art," he says. "I'm the kid who got the magic kit and had a little black magic hat, and my mother would look inside the hat, and I would push the button, and it would shoot water in her face.



## Tell Us Your Story!

Are you a Delta frequent flyer with an interesting story to share? Or do you know someone who is? Sky is looking for more Billy Harris'es, people who travel regularly and whose experience we can write up as a good "Traveler" story—people whose tips, tactics and techniques may well improve our readers' lives.



**E-mail** [editorial@delta-sky.com](mailto:editorial@delta-sky.com) or select "Feedback" on Sky's Web site ([www.delta-sky.com](http://www.delta-sky.com))



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And, of course, I thought it was hysterical, and she didn't."

Though Mom may not have appreciated the gags, the children in Harris' South Jersey neighborhood did, as he parlayed his high jinks into professional entertainment at birthday parties and, later, weddings. Harris then moved out West, where he earned a bachelor's degree in theater from San Francisco State University. "Once I was in San Francisco, [it] being a tourist mecca, I started doing the local cocktail party thing," he explains. Local event planners would hire Harris "to come in and wear a tuxedo and do sleight of hand," usually card tricks. During one such cocktail party in 1988, he says, a friend and client approached him and said, "You gotta do this for our trade show." Harris had found his calling.

For "Slightly Harris," the early years were tough. "It was pound the pavement," he recalls. "I'd do one show, steal the Yellow Pages from the phone book and call every company I could get my hands on." Now he gets gigs largely by word of mouth, and has a client base consisting of heavy hitters such as Hewlett-Packard, Fujifilm and Boeing. "I travel almost 100 days a year," he says. "I basically do 25 to 30 trade shows in a year and about 20 sales meetings in a year."

Harris never leaves home without wireless access to e-mail with his Sony Ericsson T68i phone or his Apple Titanium PowerBook, containing his lengthy mailing list, images from his Web site ([www.billyharris.com](http://www.billyharris.com)) and video clips. "Everything is on the laptop," says Harris, "so that when I meet people on the spot, they can watch what I do": producing a card from his mouth; working his way out of a straitjacket at the Improv in Washington, D.C.; cutting an executive's necktie in half; and of course, presiding over the guillotine. "I meet a lot of my clients just flying on Delta," he says. He also spends a fair amount of time in Crown Rooms e-mailing clients and production companies in preparation for a show.

That communication is crucial to Harris' work: Before he can do anything, he must first find out what kind of message a particular client wants to convey. Once that's established, Harris reaches into his bag of tricks and custom-designs a comedy and magic act.

So, for example, when APC wanted to send the message at Comdex that its battery backups would continue working even after a power source is cut, Harris immediately thought of the guillotine. "I pull out the blade, and the blade represents a power surge—so it's totally metaphorical," he explains, as he begins his routine. "And this carrot represents your power, so a volunteer puts this carrot in the guillotine. So then the blade comes down, chops the carrot in half, and this is what happens when your product is not backed up by APC. So let's show you what happens when your power's backed up by APC. . . ." And it's at that point that Harris replaces the carrot with a trusting live subject willing to stick his or her neck out.

When he isn't on the road, Harris is busy planning his next presentation and polishing his craft from his home office in Los Angeles (he has an apartment in New York as well), or just enjoying life with his wife, Sharon, and their dog, Missy. "When you're a road warrior," he says, "you really value your time." After Harris' appearance in the Netherlands at the International Broadcasting Convention in Amsterdam, last October, he and his wife managed a getaway to Paris and a weekend in London.

This month, Harris is emceeing a benefit for the Pasadena Children's Museum in Southern California, having just come off the trade show floor—where he was plugging for Sonic Blue, maker of instant replay television and other entertainment products—at the Consumer Electronics Show in Vegas. From time to time he considers doing straight stand-up or TV work; whatever the gig, his job boils down to one thing: making people laugh.

"People love to laugh. And people love to be fooled by magic," Harris says. "How do you cut the girl in half? Or how do you make that person float?" And after all these years, that old black magic still has Billy Harris in its spell. "To me, what I do is not work," he says. "It's just what I do."

—Nancy Oakley

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE