

## The Sales Magic Formula – What Life Insurance Agents Can Learn from Magicians

At first glance, it's easy to dismiss the world of magic as something completely unrelated to selling life insurance. However, both groups face similar challenges in terms of winning over a skeptical audience of "non-believers" who are determined to not be tricked into doing something they don't want to do. For insurance agents, the majority of prospects have convinced themselves that they don't need any additional insurance. For magicians, their audience is conflicted between the demand to be entertained, the knowledge that magic entails deceit, and the desire to not be the one who is deceived. In other words, both involve motivating a reluctant participant to let their guard down and acquiesce to outside influence.

However, while most successful life insurance agents are content with one sale for every three attempts, magicians must succeed every time they perform. This higher expectation for results makes it worthwhile to explore the differences and the similarities between these two skills.

A book by Alex Stone titled "[Fooling Houdini](#)" provides a fascinating glimpse into the obsessive societies of magicians, mentalists, card sharks, and scam artists. The book opens by revealing one of magic's well kept secrets – the Magic Olympics. Every three years the best magicians in the world "descend on a chosen city, armed with their most jealously guarded secrets, and duke it out, trick for trick, to see who among them is most powerful. The Twenty-third Olympics in Stockholm were the biggest in history, with nearly 3,000 attendees from 66 countries and 146 competitors vying for medals in 8 events." Qualifiers must receive written authorization from the president of one of eighty-seven different associations sanctioned by the International Society of Magicians. Events are divided between two primary categories – stage magic and close-up magic – and performers are judged for elements such as technical skill, originality, showmanship, entertainment value, artistic impression, and magic atmosphere.

The Magic Olympics highlights an important difference between the primary focus for sales versus magic. In sales, we celebrate results and honor our top performers based upon the amount of sales they produce. In magic, they focus on technique and ability, creating an even playing field for a basement amateur to compete equally against the most famous Vegas performer. How awesome would it be to have a Sales Olympics, where the best sales people from every industry came together to match prospecting, closing, and objection handling skills?

Just as good sales techniques require a solid foundation of basic training, aspiring magicians must master a number of fundamental techniques before they can execute even the most basic of tricks. For example, the first card trick that every aspiring magician learns is The Ambitious Card. A quick search on YouTube reveals thousands of variations as each magician masters and modifies the trick to make it their own. However, what the videos don't reveal are the countless hours of practice necessary to master any one of the required techniques for the Ambitious Card trick to work. Starting with basic fundamentals such as the mechanics grip, the push off, and the pass techniques, and evolving to a succession of ever more complicated card handling skills, magicians must tackle a gauntlet of difficult and unnatural hand motions that must be executed with a combination of perfect precision and casual indifference.

Life insurance agents are correct to opine that the reason the first year commissions are so high for life insurance is because it's so difficult to sell. Perhaps one of the reasons it's so difficult to sell is because

our agents don't spend enough time becoming truly proficient at it. We want our agents to always be out selling – maybe they should be spending more time practicing? Virtually every magician both professional and amateur has developed their own personal version of the Ambitious Card – wouldn't it be great if our agents were equally committed and creative in developing their own version of “the medical close” or “the cost of waiting”?

But too much technique can be a bad thing as well. There are many life insurance agents who are experts on every product nuance and tax loophole but never sell a thing. It's interesting to note that despite the technical virtuosity that is a prerequisite for any successful magician, the Magic Olympic judges access far more points to execution than to the techniques themselves. How often do we consider “artistic impression, originality, creativity, showmanship, or entertainment value” when measuring our sales force? This is another important distinction and raises a key question about our sales training. Why shouldn't a meeting with a life insurance agent be entertaining? Does our industry have to embody Woody Allen's observation that spending the evening with a life insurance agent was evidence that there were worse things in life than death?

Magicians represent the best balance between a dedication to technical proficiency and artistic showmanship. This commitment to creativity enables magicians to customize their repertoire to not only accommodate the specific needs of various audiences, but also to differentiate their tricks from those of their peers. In fact, when developing a new trick, magicians start with the desired effect they want to achieve, and then work backwards to figure out how to create the illusion. They rely on a bevy of tried and true techniques that have been passed down from previous masters in order to figure out how to achieve the desired effect and then develop a story line to lead the audience through an entertaining and surprising narrative.

In contrast, most of our sales training processes are very linear, beginning with making the appointment and ending with closing the sale. Skillful agents become proficient at overcoming every imaginable objection at every stage of the appointment process. In this aspect, they are very similar to a magician developing a routine. What's missing is arguably the most important element – a story that captivates the prospect's attention and leads them unwittingly yet willingly to the desired conclusion, potentially bypassing the usual objections before they are even considered.

The best sales people will tell you that they sell with stories -- facts and technique don't motivate or inspire anyone. What would your company's sales training look like if it focused on turning out storytellers rather than sales people?

Entertainment and showmanship are not the only reasons magicians focus so much attention on developing a story line. Misdirection plays a crucial role. In order for any magic trick to work effectively, it is critical that the audience's attention be diverted away from certain actions at specific instances. Although the idea of “misdirection” may carry a negative connotation in the context of salesmanship, the execution of this technique merely involves understanding some fundamental elements of human behavior that are prevalent in all of us. This can involve something as simple as a tendency for an audience to focus on a hand that is moving rather than stationary, or something as nefarious as how susceptible we are to the powers of suggestion.

For example, shortly after finishing Alex Stone's book I met a local magician named [Shaun Robison](#) who was a previous silver medalist in the Magic Olympics. Shaun disclosed that in one of his routines he asks his audience to touch their *cheeks* with their finger while he is simultaneously touching his own *chin* at

the same time. He estimates that 90% of the audience members will end up touching their own chins rather than cheeks without even realizing it just because they are subconsciously mirroring his actions.

Life insurance agents employ a similar technique by nodding their heads or continually seeking affirmation throughout the sales process as a means to get the prospect to nod and agree as well.

In a chapter titled “The Mentalists”, Alex Stone discusses a personality test given by American psychologist Bertram Forer in 1948 to a group of thirty-nine college students. Forer gave all of the participants identical results containing generic statements lifted from a newsstand astrology book. “The students were then asked to rank the accuracy of their profiles on a scale of zero to five, with five being a perfect match and zero being poor. The average score was a 4.26, meaning that a majority of the students thought the personality descriptions were spot-on. Forer’s original result has been replicated dozens of times – to this day the average rating hovers around 4.2 – and psychologists have since given a name to the astonishing eagerness with which people will embrace stock personality sketches as unique portraits. They call it the Barnum Effect, after P.T. Barnum’s famous dictum ‘We’ve got something for everyone’.”

I will refrain from drawing any parallels between the above paragraph and some of the assessment tools on the market today.

It turns out that the more personal information a subject provides, the more accurate they tend to rate their profile. For example, “a person claiming to be an astrologer asked one group for their exact birth dates – day, month, and year. The second group was asked to disclose only the month and year in which they were born; while the third group gave no information. The participants then received identical horoscopes allegedly based on the information about themselves they had given. Remarkably, the three groups rated the accuracy of their readings differently. Those who had revealed no information about themselves gave it an accuracy rating of 3.24. Those who had given the month and year of their birth averaged a 3.76. And those who divulged their exact birth date, 4.38.”

This certainly would seem to support the benefits of taking the time to do some thorough fact finding before making the sale!

Mentalism is branch of magic that includes telepathy, mind reading, palm reading, fortune telling, ESP, clairvoyance, and metal bending. Alex Stone learned a basic “cold reading” script and began trying it out as part of his act. He would have participants write the name of someone close to them on a piece of paper. Alex would then tear the paper up in front of them, while secretly peeking at the name through “an ingenious ruse known as the center tear.” Then he would ask a few rudimentary questions about the subject and launch into the script until he ultimately “guessed” the person’s name and relationship. He became so proficient at this routine that one man accused him of spying on him: “You were watching me from across the bar”, he said. “You must have been. You were listening in on my conversation. Otherwise, how could you know all that stuff?”

These cold reading scripts are so effective that after visiting a “psychic” just to field test what he had learned, Alex Stone wrote that “later that day, I caught myself brooding over what Stephanie (the psychic) had said – that is until I remembered the source and pushed those thoughts aside. And yet no matter how hard I tried to dislodge them, they had a stubborn way of creeping back into my consciousness. One of the scariest things about mentalism is that even after you understand how it works, it still feels believable”.

What does mentalism have to do with sales? The MINDvention is the world's largest mentalism convention and attracts participants from more than twenty countries around the globe. Stone writes of his experience attending the Las Vegas MINDvention conference. "With their suits and headset mikes, many of the guests at the convention looked like motivational speakers, and it's no coincidence. A lot of mentalists earn high-dollar fees giving mind-over-matter pep talks to major corporations. There's a distinctly business-class vibe to the mentalism industry, and the discussions at MINDvention were frequently loaded with corporate buzzwords. There was a lot of talk of compliance technology, cold calling, spectator control, positioning, and negative closing. Mentalism, I realized, was one part magic, one part acting, and three parts sales."

Mentalism is such a powerful tool that books about the subject contain "stern-sounding disclaimers cautioning readers that the methods therein were for entertainment purposes only". I will add a similar disclaimer here that capitalizing on this gullible aspect of our human nature for the purpose of inspiring positive thinking in corporate executives is very different from manipulating an elderly couple to buy a product they don't need or understand. However, the potential as a means for a sales person to better connect with his prospects in order to foster trust and relevancy is too significant to ignore.

This brings us back to the common challenge that magicians and insurance agents face – the problem of winning over a skeptical and unwilling audience. Alex Stone ties it all together with his summation about the key role that mentalism plays in a magician's success. "Whereas conventional magic tricks have a tendency to alienate the spectators – you know the secret, and they don't – mentalism engages them on a deeply personal level, creating an illusion of intimacy. The focus is on them and their problems, not on the magician. If magic is about being fooled, mentalism is about being understood. Whereas where magic creates questions, mentalism is about answering them. I figured that mastering the techniques of mentalism might help me broaden my repertoire and make my magic more relatable."

What life insurance would not want to be more relatable? What sales approach would not be more effective by focusing on the prospect rather than the agent? And what close wouldn't be more effective if the prospect felt they were being understood rather than fooled?

Magicians recognize that the very nature of their profession tends to alienate their audiences. There is a chapter in Alex Stone's book titled "It's annoying and I asked you to stop" – a refrain every life insurance agent has heard in response to their persistent prospecting. However, through a combination of dazzling skill, imaginative story lines, and a touch of mentalism, magicians have found a way to not only win over their audiences, but succeed virtually every time.

Perhaps by adding a little magic to our own sales training it's possible that our agents could achieve similar success.