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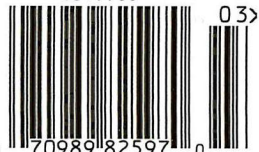
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THE NETWORKER



A rare look inside the MagicCom headquarters

Magic man

How Dan Witkowski's secretive MagicCom helps corporations liven up the ordinary

BY STEVEN SCHUSSLER



Dan Witkowski, a magician and the founder of MagicCom, is an enigmatic figure. In an age of instant access to information, you'll find relatively little about him or his

company online. The MagicCom Innovation Labs are found in a nondescript, high-security building in the Minneapolis area.

"A lot of the work we do here is confidential, and, as a magician, I am great at keeping secrets," he says as we tour his facilities.

Corporations come to MagicCom to make their ordinary products — sodas, extension cords, medical devices — reach customers in extraordinary ways. Using his passion and love of magic, Witkowski finds ways to make everyday products or unpleasant experiences more engaging and user friendly.

Consider a child getting a shot at the doctor's office. MagicCom developed a technology that transforms the experience,

so the child never sees a needle. While the child looks at a computer screen to pick out a Band-Aid with their favorite character, the arm is chilled by a CO₂ cartridge and simultaneously injected with the needle. "They are distracted from the pain and fear," says Witkowski. "All the child feels is a blast of cold, and then they receive a fun sticker of their choice to apply over the puncture spot."

MagicCom has developed food processing technologies that increase the freshness and stability of consumable products without the use of chemicals or additives. For Proctor & Gamble, it's working on an iPhone app that detects bacteria in the mouth, to be used after brushing the teeth.

About 15 years ago, Proctor & Gamble acknowledged that despite its excellent scientists and researchers, it couldn't possibly come up with every idea on its own, says Witkowski. So it reached out to others who were qualified to help it innovate. More companies started taking a similar approach, and opportunities opened up for MagicCom.

For each project, the firm brings in core groups from around the globe for different areas, like design or management, forming a SWAT team of sorts. "There are some top-secret projects where team members are in different parts of the world," says Witkowski. "Often, they never meet each other face to face, nor do they always know who the client is."

Witkowski and his team hold epic brainstorming sessions, pulling ideas from both traditional and non-traditional sources. For

research, they use the Internet, the James J. Hill Reference Library in St. Paul, and MagicCom's own internal library, which subscribes to about 125 magazines.

"Most people tend to be visual, so we will spread out books with pictures and try to make connections," says Witkowski. "Steve Jobs had the best definition of creativity: It is about making connections and seeing connections that other people don't see."

Another key to the creative process, he says, is seeing that many things are transposable, where you can take one industry's approach, borrow certain things, and create new elements where it becomes unrecognizable.

Witkowski, who likens creativity to a muscle one can build and flex, admits he's at his best when under pressure. "We start with the question, 'What if this could be successful beyond all measure?'"

In the end, a project usually comes down to making the product financially successful. For the Campbell Soup Company, MagicCom developed a removable hologram for cans that could be cost-effectively produced in the hundreds of millions.

MagicCom is a holding company for several smaller entities that hold patents on products in different areas. It licenses out the proprietary technologies to the end user, or works to codevelop new products for a company.

Witkowski credits his entrepreneurial success to being fortunate that he was able to turn a very eclectic set of interests into a business. Lucille Ball once told him, "It's a hell of a start if you know what makes you

happy early on." For Witkowski, it was clear he had a penchant for magic and entertainment, and indeed he's been a magician, director, and producer, rubbing shoulders with celebs and working crowds from Broadway to the White House. He founded MagicCom in 1977 as a way to turn his interests into a business.

One of the company's most-watched projects was a magic trick at the halftime show of Super Bowl XXII in 1989. Witkowski also developed the master plan for the Minneapolis HolliDazzle Parade, and the company has worked with the government on various projects since 1982.

The early success of the company, and its long track record in subsequent years, means there's little need for MagicCom to market its services. "We have been doing what we do for 36 years, and people who we worked with in the early years as product managers are now executives running their own divisions," says Witkowski. "MagicCom has been established as the go-to source when they have no idea where else to turn."

Witkowski was born and raised in Minnesota, which he has always considered his primary home despite living for periods in larger cities like New York. His father worked for Grain Belt Brewery for 48 years, and his mom was a homemaker. "I was the youngest, the little bratty brother and the black sheep of the family. At 93, my mother still hopes that one day I might get a real job," he laughs. "My parents never pushed me in a direction and respected what I wanted to do."

Witkowski believes you can do whatever you want if you know what gives you joy and happiness and are true to that. He's a great example of the power of optimism. "I have had many no's and obstacles in my career," he says, "but every door is made to be opened. No is yes waiting to happen ..."



STEVEN SCHUSSLER is CEO of Schussler Creative, the founder of the Rainforest Café, and the author of *It's a Jungle in There: Inspiring Lessons, Hard-Won Insights, and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring*.



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