

Cheryl Hall: Challenge beliefs, ad guru says

11:12 PM CST on Tuesday, October 31, 2006

Andy Cohen puts trickery to work every day.

In the process, he wants to make us question our assumptions.

The founder of a New York-based advertising agency, Exposed Brick, is a pioneer in marketing and idea generation who has counseled major brands such as American Express, Merrill Lynch, Time Warner, L'Oreal and Clorox.

He's also an expert magician who started learning tricks from his great uncle when he was a schoolboy in Manhattan.

He used to keep the passions separate, but now he's found a way to use magic as a metaphor to break down resistance to innovative thinking.

"Because we're under such pressure – the intense drive to create new ideas on demand and to come up with new solutions – we rely more and more on our assumptions," Mr. Cohen said during a recent visit to Dallas.

"Unfortunately, we treat our assumptions as truths rather than a set of beliefs that need to be proven. So we often wind up misdirecting ourselves."

Even major corporations fall into this trap, Mr. Cohen said, offering IBM Corp., AT&T Inc. and Coca-Cola Co. as monumental examples of faulty assumptions. Big Blue thought computers and hardware were its future and allowed Bill Gates to license its software for what would become the foundation of Microsoft. AT&T presumed that the cellular business was going to be locally based and too small to care about. And Coca-Cola failed to consider consumers' emotional bonds to its brand when it foisted new Coke on the masses.

"They only did blind taste-testing of new Coke vs. old Coke," Mr. Cohen said. "In essence, Coke discounted the power of its own brand."

Showing the way

Mr. Cohen's new book, *Follow the Other Hand: A Remarkable Fable That Will Energize Your Business, Profits and Life*, comes with a deck of cards and instructions for several low-talent tricks that are designed to get you in a creative mode.

It began as a collaborative effort with Stan Rapp, founder of Rapp Collins Worldwide.

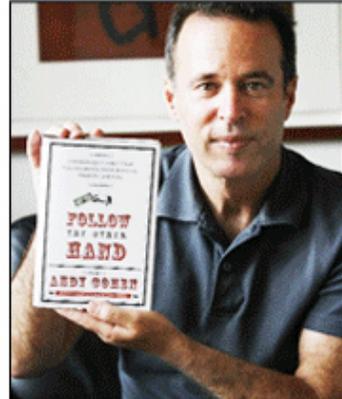
Mr. Rapp decided magic wasn't his thing, but it works for his longtime friend and business associate. "I have seen Andy perform his sleight of hand to the mystification and delight of audiences," Mr. Rapp said. "But more importantly, I've seen him deliver amazing results for some of my clients here in the USA and South America."

Last month, Slingshot LLC, an advertising agency in the West End, hired Mr. Cohen to come speak. He performed mind-expanding exercises for Slingshot's advertising staff and clients.

"Andy tells us to cast out the normal ways of looking at a problem and give yourself permission to solve it with different techniques," said Owen Hannay, Slingshot's founder. "He's fun and engaging with some very substantive thoughts and case studies buried in the magic."

During an interview, Mr. Cohen showed me his most basic illusion, which looks like a trick where he moves a coin from his left to right hand. But when he opens his right palm, the coin isn't there.

"If you challenge the logical assumption, you discover a solution that you didn't know existed before," Mr. Cohen said. "Phenomenal businesses are created by following the other hand."



LOUIS DeLUCA/DMN

Shouldn't there be something in his hands? Andy Cohen, founder of advertising agency Exposed Brick and a pioneer in marketing and idea generation, tells people to question assumptions.

Spinning

One of Mr. Cohen's favorite case studies that he used in the book is Florida entrepreneur John Osher, who was looking for a slam-dunk product to help sell his toy company. Someone brought him the idea for a lollipop that spun around.

Mr. Osher immediately saw the potential for SpinPops, which he introduced in 1993. The lollipops cost more to make, but he could charge three times as much because they were the first interactive candy.

Six years later, Mr. Osher challenged another assumption: You couldn't manufacture a battery-operated toothbrush cheaply enough to be disposable. What's the big deal? Mr. Osher figured. He'd done it with a sucker.

"He needed to manufacture it for \$1.40 tops to meet a price point of under \$5," said Mr. Cohen. "And he did it."

Then Mr. Osher vetoed Procter & Gamble Co., which was his marketing partner at the time. P&G wanted an advertising blitz for SpinBrush. Instead, Mr. Osher created packaging that allowed consumers to push a button and see the toothbrush in action before they bought it.

"He and his friends spent \$1.5 million developing SpinBrush," Mr. Cohen said. "Eighteen months later, they sold it to P&G's Crest for \$475 million."

Today Mr. Osher is quite taken with Mr. Cohen's magical metaphor.

"I have made my living my entire life by following the other hand," said the 59-year-old serial entrepreneur.

"It takes tremendous patience and discrimination to find the coin in it. You have to know most of the time the hand you think it's in is empty."

E-mail cherylhall@dallasnews.com