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MEET THE NEW

MR. WIZARD

Steve Spangler teaches kids and adults how to be amazing

Steve Spangler, speaker, magician and media star

meet the new



MR. WIZARD



Steve Spangler knows his science and he loves his magic. By putting those passions to work, he's built an empire that teaches kids and adults how to be amazing.

BY TIM HYLAND

a little bit of magic can go an awfully long way. Just ask Steve Spangler.

Spangler, known far and wide as one of the true media stars of the science and speaking worlds, says his training as an entertainer began long before he even realized he was training at all. The training took place at corporate events and birthday parties all around Spangler's native Denver, and it occurred under the guise of wizardry, as a young Spangler accompanied his parents, both professional magicians, to all of their various gigs.

"Other families went to football games on the weekend," he says. "Our family got in the car and headed out to entertain for a scout troop or a local birthday party."

As a young magician, Spangler got the opportunity to ease into performing

by doing small bits during his parents' shows. All of those performances—all of those hours spent helping his parents make a few extra bucks on the weekend—made a huge difference.

"I got a chance to learn how to be a magician while watching my father," Spangler says. "Beyond that, those gigs taught me about performing, speaking and entertaining. It really paid off."

Paid off huge, actually. Because today, Spangler is without question one of the most successful, sought-after and unique speakers on the circuit. As a speaker, Spangler has grown an empire around his teacher training seminars—professional development programs that teach those educators "how to be amazing" (and entertaining, interesting—and engaging) in the classroom. His retail catalog company and the online store, www.SteveSpanglerScience.com, provide

educational toys and science supplies to parents and educators who want to create unforgettable learning experiences for their children. Spangler's wholesale toy company, the fittingly named Be Amazing Toys, has established itself as an innovator in its industry, introducing nearly 150 products, including the award-winning Mentos Geyser Tube and Spangler's Big Bag of Science.

As an entertainer and media star—and someone who has made it his mission to convince kids that learning about science can be fun and, yes, even magical—he is well on his way to becoming the Mr. Wizard of the 21st Century, a status that was only further cemented earlier this year, when YouTube made Spangler one of just a handful of celebrities to be given his own YouTube channel. Spangler, who was inducted in the CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame® in 2010, has drawn plaudits from the *Wall Street Journal*, *Inc. Magazine*, *Time* and *Wired*, and is a regular guest on "*The Ellen DeGeneres Show*."

It's pretty heady stuff for a guy who got his start in the speaking world by doing magic shows for birthday parties and later carved out a niche as an educational science speaker. One of the most important lessons he learned from his early speaking experiences is that practice

YOUTUBE 'BE VISIBLE'

When Steve Spangler first started posting his often-wacky, always interesting science experiments on YouTube, he was absolutely certain he was doing the right thing—even though most people thought he was nuts.

"I was chastised a lot for putting my content up there for free," he recalls. "I remember people telling me, 'You should have a membership-driven site. You should sell this.' But today my YouTube channel has 440-some videos and is getting 8 to 10 million views per month. Yeah, it's free content and yeah, I didn't get paid for it—but now I am, because [the popularity of my channel] is what YouTube saw when they offered me the deal."

Indeed, if Spangler has any advice for speakers (particularly young speakers) hoping to make a name for themselves, it would be this: "Be visible."

Especially for up-and-coming young speakers, Spangler says, it's not necessarily getting paid that's important. It's getting *seen* that's important. Jobs won't come unless people know what you're about, where they can find you and, well, that you even exist at all.

YouTube offers a wonderful platform from which one you can reach, quite literally, the entire world, provided you have a message to share and a unique way to share it.

It's not money one should want from YouTube. It's *notoriety*. It's *identity*. That's what Spangler understood as soon as his Mentos-and-Diet Coke video went viral.

"When I saw that hit counter reach 1,000, that was huge," he says. "Then it was at 10,000, and then it was 2,000,000. What I learned then was this: There is real value in giving things away for free. Because if you can provide value to people for free, and if you can draw them in to your message, they can make a much more educated decision about [who to hire]."

(and lots of it) can turn ordinary presenters into top-notch speakers.

But then again, magic—something Spangler both understands and uses to his advantage—is pretty powerful stuff.

Spangler would be the first to tell you that. Because once he figured that out, his life was changed forever.

MAGIC WITH A MESSAGE

Classroom politics turned the light on for Spangler. When he was in grade school, the magician-in-training decided he wanted to run for class president. Not long after he sat down to plot his campaign, though, he realized he needed to *do* or *say* something that would set him apart from the field.

He needed to be different. He needed to be remembered. And all at once, he realized he had precisely the skill to make that happen.

"I eventually realized that magic was a tool that could transfer to any number of other areas," he says. "When you're running for school president, what do you do to set yourself apart? Well, you do a magic trick, juggle fire or escape from a cool strait jacket. And that got me thinking about this idea of 'magic with a message.' I started to think about using this tool that I was given by my mother and father, this magic thing, to bring something else to the conversation."

In a way, that simple idea—using magic as an entrée to an exploration of something else, something bigger—has guided Spangler ever since. Indeed, from the moment his speaking career began, he used the idea of magic as a differentiating factor. And pretty much from the start, it worked.

Though he originally planned on a teaching career—"Watching my dad teach magic class to up-and-coming professionals gave me the bug for teaching, because when you're around a master teacher, it wears off on you," he says—and at one point even seemed to have to have a teaching job lined up, a word of

warning from a trusted mentor ultimately led Spangler to re-think his plans.

That mentor, a high school principal, basically told a young Spangler that the teaching world was changing, and not necessarily for the better, and that he ought to think outside the box.

"I remember her contacting me in 1990, telling me, 'Things are changing. I'd get out if I were you,'" he says. "So I basically reverted to what I had already been doing. I figured that I could maybe do a science show for school kids. For a few hundred dollars, I'd go into a school, and my whole mission was to find creative ways to make learning science fun."

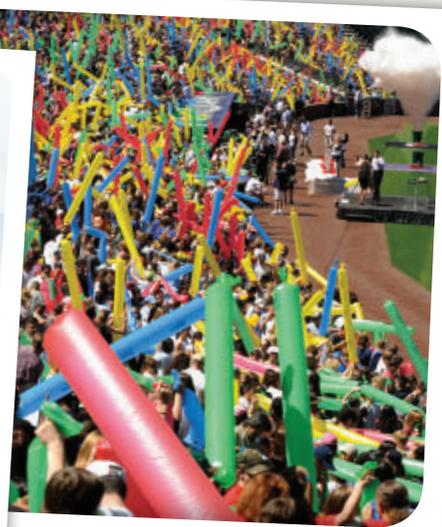
He devised a program that was built on the dual foundations of his teaching education (and his degree in chemistry) and all of the lessons he learned from his father, the magician. It was a little bit of magic, a little bit of science, and a little bit of learning. It was 45 minutes long, and to his mild surprise, the kids loved it. The schools did, too.

So even though Spangler didn't really see himself as a speaker at all, the speaking gigs kept coming. He kept taking them, too. And eventually, all the work paid off.

When he eventually wrapped up this part of his speaking career, Spangler had nearly 4,500 presentations under his belt ... and a slight nervous twitch. In retrospect, though, he wouldn't trade this experience for anything, because it helped him to hone the craft of speaking in front of an audience that wasn't afraid to provide their special brand of brutally honest feedback.

"Even a bad speaker gets to be good speaker when you're speaking five times a day for 120 gigs a year," he jokes. "And I did that for nearly 13 years."

But he could never have done this alone, he says. Spangler's wife, Renée, quit her job in the insurance business only two years into their marriage to manage his speaking career. Looking back, it was Renée's business savvy that



kept the business afloat in those early years. “I had the hardest time even getting Steve to remember to bring home the check after a gig,” says Renée. “That’s why this partnership has lasted for so many years—he creates and I make sure that we don’t go bankrupt.”

TURNING THE SPOTLIGHT

By the late 1990s, Spangler was established. He knew his formula worked. He knew that the school gigs would always be there.

But then the moment arrived that not only fundamentally changed the way Spangler worked, but also changed the way he viewed his career. It was the moment that Spangler first realized that he could be so much more than just the wacky science guy; it was also the moment that began his transformation from ‘speaker’ to ‘entrepreneur.’

The year was 1997, and Spangler was doing a school gig in a Denver public school—a pretty rough one, he recalls. The students enjoyed the show, laughed and clapped at the appropriate moments, but Spangler noticed a middle-aged teacher sitting at the back of the room didn’t seem quite as pleased.

As Spangler worked his way through his program, the woman scowled.

“She was looking at me the same way your mom looks at you when you’re goofing around in church,” Spangler recalls. “I checked my fly. I thought to myself, ‘What did I do?’”

Spangler couldn’t figure out what went wrong. So he approached her.

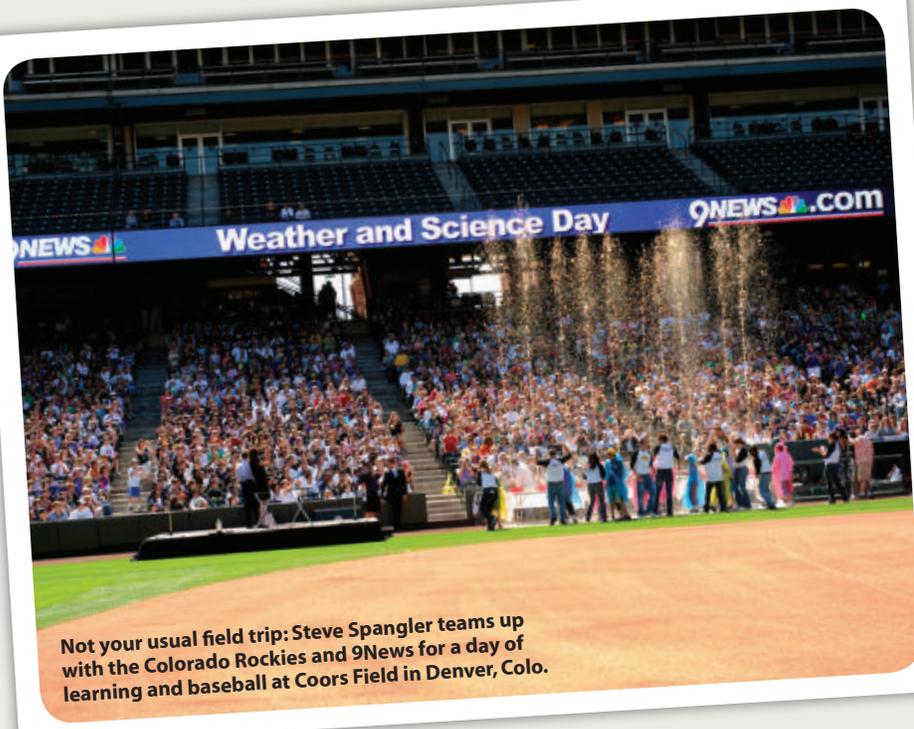
“I said, ‘I think I may have offended you. I’m very sorry. But can you tell me what I did?’” he says. “She turned to me and said, ‘I’ve been teaching for 22 years and nobody has ever stood up and cheered for me at the end of class.’ And that’s when I had a moment of clarity. In my mind, I thought, ‘What if I could teach her to do this?’ I realized, instead of worrying about me being amazing, I could teach *other* teachers how to be even more amazing and effective in the classroom. That’s the secret that makes the company today.”

Indeed, while Spangler still gets a kick out of speaking to youth, it was the teacher training programs that really catapulted his speaking career to the next level. His professional development programs aim to give teachers all the knowledge and skills they need to get their students really interested in science; not surprisingly, the programs have been a hit for the last 15 years. He’s seen the world of

professional development for educators fluctuate greatly over the last decade. But these changes have given him the chance to create new training opportunities for teachers and school administrators. Learning from his NSA colleagues, Spangler launched a 12-city tour of public seminars. These hands-on science boot camps as they’re called draw impressive numbers and give him access to educators who might never get a chance to be part of one of his workshops. Spangler also hosts a more in-depth training in Colorado each year called Science in the Rockies. In 2008, he partnered with Holland America Cruise Lines to create a new program called Science at Sea—a week-long experience that explores the inside passage of Alaska with a special hand-picked team of naturalists.

“The moment I pushed the spotlight over to the teachers and refocused on teaching the teachers how to use simple science activities to create unforgettable learning experience, I realized that I could ultimately reach millions of students through the incredible work of teachers,” he says.

Spangler’s various projects may seem overwhelming, but to him, the diversity provides both growth potential *and*



Not your usual field trip: Steve Spangler teams up with the Colorado Rockies and 9News for a day of learning and baseball at Coors Field in Denver, Colo.

security—the latter being especially important in these tough economic times. He could get by comfortably by working as a speaker, but he says he feels compelled to capitalize on that speaking platform. He suggests other speakers think about things the same way—that they imagine what other opportunities might be seized by thinking in new and different ways about their message, their style and their brand.

“We’re in kind of a weird business,” he says. “I could be a speaker the rest of my life. But part of me thinks it’s a practice, not a business.” So I feel I have to do more than trade time for money. With the toy company, for example, we started making products, because that was a natural byproduct of the presentations, and this revenue stream only grew bigger and bigger because of the time on the platform.”

THE STAR OF THE SHOW

Of course, even though Spangler is now sharing the secrets of “being amazing,” it wouldn’t be entirely true to say that he’s out of the spotlight—and his recent YouTube deal proves it.

Spangler had been a presence on Denver-area television for 20 years,

servicing as a science education reporter and “science guy” for the NBC affiliate KUSA-TV. The TV work was always valuable, giving Spangler much-needed exposure and propping up his speaking business in the process. But in the end, it was YouTube—and one fateful experiment—that launched Spangler into a whole new realm of celebrity.

When his tried-and-true “Mentos and Diet Coke” experiment went somewhat awry on the KUSA airwaves in 2005—the experiment, which produces huge soda geysers, worked just fine; unfortunately, the news anchor joining Spangler ended up drenched—Spangler put the video on YouTube, a service that was only five months old. Within days, the clip had been viewed thousands of times, and would later spawn countless imitators.

“The term ‘viral’ never really existed back in the early days of YouTube, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that there was something to all of these thousands of views,” Spangler recalls.

Of course, he was right.

Spangler began posting his tricks and experiments regularly on the service, and before long, he was a bona fide YouTube celebrity. His first YouTube

channel, launched soon after the Mentos and Diet Coke experiment, now claims more than 67,000 subscribers, and his clips have been viewed nearly 35 million times. It’s no wonder, then, that when the Google-owned video site rolled out its first ever “original content lineup” in October 2012, Spangler was among the lucky few to receive an undisclosed deal to provide niche-oriented content to millions of loyal YouTube viewers.

The YouTube show is called *The Spangler Effect*, and a new episode is posted each week at www.youtube.com/thespanglereffect.

With the launch of the new channel, Spangler has come full circle from his humble beginnings as an itinerant science educator to a modern day Mr. Wizard who is using the latest technology to reach millions of science enthusiasts around the globe.

Suffice it to say, he wears lots of hats. He’s a teacher, an entertainer, a TV personality, a professional development coach, a business leader and yes, a speaker.

He says he has his father to thank for that last one, which is something he says he’s only recently come to realize.

“I know now that the speaking thing was a very common thread in my life, from the very beginning,” he says. “But I didn’t grow up thinking that I had a father who was a speaker, even though he was a speaker of sorts. He taught and he performed. In my eyes, my father was a rock star. And I realize that when the chips are down, I can always rely on the lessons I learned from him.”



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