

# Magical Marketing - Houdini's Tricks for Entrepreneurial Success

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Harry Houdini, born Ehrich Weiss in 1874, dazzled American and European audiences with spectacular magic and illusion feats until his death on Halloween, 1926. Adapting his name from his hero, J. E. Robert-Houdin, a French magician, Houdini quickly established himself as the top entertainer in the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While everyone knows about his marvels as a legendary magician and escape artist, few know that much of his success was due to superb marketing.

Here are five marketing lessons learned from Houdini that you can apply to your entrepreneurial venture (and you don't need to wear a strait-jacket or be handcuffed to pull off this marketing magic).

1. **Always be prepared!** Houdini always had a plan and was very resourceful. He was ready for any physical or mental challenge. While Houdini clearly took chances, he believed in managing risk. He used his superior intellect to conduct research and obtain knowledge of all situations and always had the right tools to get the job done. It was not uncommon for Houdini to spend up to 10 hours a day practicing challenging escapes.
2. **Leap-frog the competition.** Houdini constantly studied the market and prepared for imitators and new competitors. He dissected strategies used by his rivals and never let his competitors know what he would do next. He read every book that was published on magic acquiring a personal library of more than 5,000 volumes on the subject. While rivals were content to break out of handcuffs, Houdini did this while suspended upside down from skyscrapers, on top of bridges or immersed in water.
3. **Fine-tune your positioning strategy.** Houdini understood the sheer power of a brand name a century before this became all the rage in marketing. Quality was at the heart of his value proposition, always exceeding customers' expectations in his live performances. He knew that perception was reality and had every detail worked out in advance to provide a superior customer experience. While other magicians made rabbits disappear, Houdini vanished a full-grown elephant in plain sight. To extend his brand, Houdini went global and conquered Europe, as well as America.
4. **Build a world-class product.** Houdini carefully guarded his trade secrets and invested in his product. He diversified to build his product line and product mix. An advocate of the kaizen approach (continuous improvement), Houdini regularly sought incredible new offerings while enhancing his existing repertoire of tried and true stunts. His three minute water torture escape from a steel-encased cabinet was world renowned. This was one of his several signature acts that could not be replicated.
5. **Be creative and never stop promoting.** Houdini was the consummate sales pro as well as the master showman and publicist. He stimulated word-of-mouth promotion in every city he visited by promising unimaginable events that he later successfully

executed. Houdini often dropped in on local police stations during the day in the cities he was visiting and challenged them to keep him from escaping their most secure chains/restraints, handcuffs, jail cells, or locks (his arsenal of four hidden keys/picks always got the job done). The publicity gained from these teaser appearances drew huge interest to his evening shows. The word spread nationally and internationally in an era that had no television or internet!

*Suggested reading:* Cannell, J.C. (1989), *The Secrets of Houdini*, NY: Bell Publishing Company.

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