



Showbiz class acts

Learning Annex is luring high-profile teachers

By LILY OEI

Speed-flirting. The power of vibrational energy. An evening with Harvey Weinstein.

It all sounds like the setup to a Catskills joke, but these are all actual names of courses offered last spring at the Learning Annex.

The well-worn org, which started in 1980 as seminar series tilted heavily toward self-help, is now in active pursuit of bigger industry names.

While it has always had a steady stream of authors in promotional mode dropping by, names like Wayne Brady, Jerry Lewis and music honcho Strauss Zelnick also have been featured recently in the catalog. Oh, and then there's this class being taught by Lizzie Grubman (no, not in driving).

"The techniques that get people to say yes work at every level," says Learning Annex national director Steven Schragis, sounding like someone steeped in the "can-do" philosophy of his own catalog. "If you ask, 98 out of 100 people know the Learning Annex," he says. "Now we're using that awareness on peo-



ANNEX BUILDER: Steven Schragis is luring industryites to teach at Annex locations.

ple with bigger drawing power."

(Disclosure 101: Schragis was a former marketing exec at Cahners, the parent company of *Variety*. Learning Annex guests have included *Variety* editor in chief Peter Bart and Reed Business exec Tad Smith.)

This "think bigger" mandate was handed down from Annex founder Bill Zanker, who sold the company in 1993,

only to buy it back in 2002 after making another fortune opening the Great American Back Rub Store. Clearly this is a man who can spot a trend.

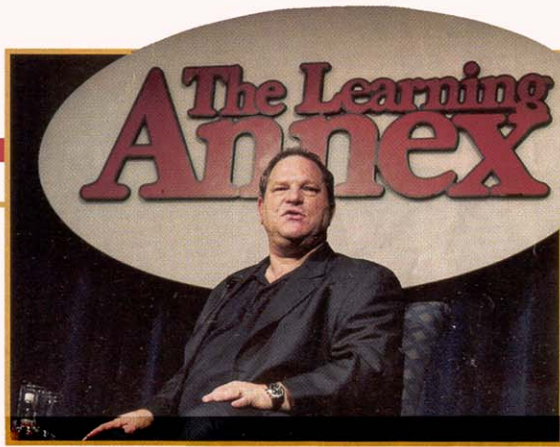
The Learning Annex has five locations (Gotham plus L.A., San Francisco, San Diego and now Minneapolis), 800 classes a month and 120,000 students each year. Sneer if you will at those yellow boxes that clutter every supermarket entrance and Gotham street corner — combined with direct mail, they reach a circulation of 2.5 million.

Schragis, who can instantly data-mine attendees for demos and feedback, says the crowd generally is 60% female and single.

Given that *Spy* magazine co-founder Schragis is based in Gotham, the new-model Annex is gaining particular notice there. But he is also actively sprucing up the other sites, mindful of regional tendencies.

West Coast classes still skew toward self-help, Schragis says. Industryites Ron Shelton and Steven J. Cannell are among those who have taught in L.A., and Joe Pantoliano and "12 Monkeys" producer Robert Kosberg are set for this fall. CAA lit agent Laurie Horowitz presided over a class in San Francisco.

Gothamites, meanwhile,



HARVEY SCHOOLIN': Miramax co-topper Harvey Weinstein recently held forth about the industry in a Gotham Learning Annex session.

prefer business courses. Showbiz falls in the overlap between the two topics. So it is not surprising that industry events tend to be populated by eager wannabes.

One of the Annex's biggest coups in Gotham was Miramax honcho Weinstein, filling almost 700 seats. More than \$12,000 was raised at the door for charity, which the Annex matched.

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An evening with a truculent Jean Doumanian (billed as "Woody Allen's producer partner") garnered an arch writeup in the *New Yorker* and got wide circulation around town.

Publicist and *schadenfreudojenne* Grubman will "teach" in New York on Aug. 5, an appearance in the works before her arrest last summer. She was approached because the Learning Annex also was hoping for access to her clients.

Weinstein and Donald Trump were once at the top of Schragis' wish list, and they've both made appearances. Now he's got his eye on Madonna, Julia Roberts, Ray Romano — "people that are perceived to be approachable, like regular people," says Schragis. "And Michael Eisner: Will we ever get them? Who knows? But we'll try."

Although most participants earn a percentage of the door, Schragis has found that most, like Weinstein, are happy to forgo any financial gains. "Stars usually put that aside because they're teaching," Schragis says. "But if you didn't get them directly, there'd be speaking fees."

