

## The Ultimate Customer Experience

Savvy marketers and other industry leaders are always coming up with new, well-researched systems and business models to improve bottom lines. These methods are published in books that are eagerly devoured by people like you and me, and often become bestsellers. Some are better, more applicable than others, and one has taken hold and changed the very landscape of product management. The *Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (1999, Harvard Business School Press), by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, was first introduced to me by my oldest son who works at a cutting-edge interactive/communications company in Atlanta founded by a visionary entrepreneur before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Using the latest technology (interactive marketing, eCommerce, web development, enterprise portals), the company offers creative business “solutions” to high-end clients like The Home Depot, Sam Goody, Kimberly-Clark, Ciba Vision and Coca-Cola.

According to my son, every project they undertake (and some can take years to complete) begins with a lengthy disclosure process (translated: *research*) to assess what processes are needed, which are best. These processes are carefully planned and carried out by well-organized, collaborative teams. I’m always sobered when I hear this, because I’ve found it to be difficult to get clients in this market to invest in even the most basic research before developing a marketing plan of action. Many business owners know they *need* advertising and marketing, but feel they must have a cache of extra money tucked away before they commit to marketing. Marketing tactics & advertising programs are often viewed as a luxury items to be rolled out after everything else has been paid for, a wincingly-bad mistake because marketing is essential to the vitality of *any* business, large or small.

Using theater as a metaphor, authors Pine and Gilmore contend that consumers and corporate customers respond favorably to “engaging experiences” (theater) when they shop or otherwise do business. Companies can get a one-up on their competitors – even if the product or service is the same quality -- if they can create these memorable experiences. To set this “stage” for conducting business they contend, you must engage the senses – and the more senses you engage, the better. On a smaller scale, this was proven successful years ago when a major sports shoe retailer conducted an intriguing olfactory study. On days they infused the air inside their stores with periodic bursts of a lemon scent, their sales increased 50%.

Another example of sensory incentive is the tropical ambience at Rainforest Cafes that engages all five senses: jungle sounds, a fine mist on your skin; fresh, earthy smells; a visual feast of images (waterfalls, jungle foliage, etc.); and savory food. Barnes & Noble Booksellers and Starbucks understood the customer experience idea when they created relaxing, living room-like areas for their customers to read, meet and converse with friends, and drink coffee.

But theme restaurants aren’t exactly the idea Pine and Gilmore were talking about. They focus more on things like a retail shopper’s buying habits once they get into the store. After studying how their customers select apparel and move from one area of

the store to another, The Gap recently invested big money to revamp its flagship store in NYC. The redo redirected customer traffic and created more engaging (more lucrative) shopping experiences using a set-up to improve the traffic flow around the store and using visual props and other entertainments. If the redesign is as successful as they predict, other Gap Stores will be redesigned, too.

Creating customer-friendly experiences on a small business scale is as easy as assessing the ways your customers or clients buy from (or do business with) you, and optimizing that experience to make things easier for them and more lucrative for you. If this seems like a slam dunk, I'm hear to tell you you'd be surprised to know how many companies don't understand this concept and require their clients or customers to work like the dickens to do business with them. Keep in mind that creating an ultimate customer experience is one thing you can control in an erratic market. Those who understand its rich benefits will thrive in any market.