

MANAGING

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COFFEE WITH: LEWIS CARBONE

Position: CEO of Experience Engineering, an Edina consulting firm that specializes in "managing the customer experience." • **In the news:** His book, "Clued In: How to Keep Customers Coming Back Again and Again" was given the Reader's Choice award by Fast Company magazine, which highlights companies that are "inventing the future and reinventing business."

So how did you become an "experience engineer?"

Through evolution. I had been the police beat reporter and the school board reporter [for a small newspaper in Pennsylvania]. My city editor tossed me a bone on a Friday afternoon and said: "I've got this gentleman coming into town that's sort of a local boy makes big who's coming back to get married tomorrow. Would you mind doing a feature interview?" He was an "imagineer" at Disney, and I was so into everything he had to say because he was one of the designers of the people-mover and had designed a rocket ride and Jules Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea. I was so impressed with this man. That was the first piece of what got me into thinking about experiences in a different way.

What else got you to thinking about the customer experience?

The most moving was back in the late '70s or early '80s, in the final days of Howard Johnson's restaurants. I was with an ad agency in Detroit but based in the New York office, and we had landed the Howard Johnson's business. What we learned was the experience was so bad that the advertising we were doing was bringing customers in and upsetting customers. So we started looking at that, and at the same time I was working with them, I was the official liaison with Disney for the agency. So I'd be in Boston in the beginning of the week with Howard Johnson's, and I'd be listening to them talk about how they were going to move from 28 flavors to 13, how to move from a four-ply napkin to a two-ply napkin, and then I'd fly down to Disney, and we'd be talking about the temperature and velocity of the air blowing in your face in Spaceship Earth ... creating experiences that were so bonding for customers, so distinctive, so different, that they'd come back again and again and again.

By this time you had escaped journalism and were working with ad agencies?

After I left the newspaper, I actually did some work with companies realizing that the product you made was only half of the value proposition, that there was so much more in terms of what people valued.

What is Experience Engineering?

The company is an evolution from a sole consultant to about 11 full-time people and about 27 people in our network that we call contract employees. The company is the only company I know of in the world that is fully dedicated to the holistic experience that customers have and the management of that in a systematic way.

You're hired by companies to counsel them on creating positive experiences?

On identifying what that experience would be, designing that experience with them, both in terms of the human elements in the experience and the physical elements and how they come together, how to begin to implement that and then how to continue to sense and respond to the customers in a way that is different than make-and-sell. Everything we did in the past in the way business models were structured was product manufacturing.

How is what you do different from traditional market research?

We deal in the unconscious mind. Ninety-five percent of what we process in an experience happens in our unconscious. There's a professor up at the Harvard

Business School who has developed a whole series of techniques that allows people to be interviewed in such a way that those thoughts they weren't even aware of become surfaced in that type of research. So what we work with is beginning to understand customers in ways customers don't even understand themselves.

Do you do focus groups?

We do one-on-one interviews that explore the unconscious thoughts and feelings that people have about experiences they have with a particular company, a brand, a category.

Can you name a company that gets the idea of experience?

Target's starting to get it. We met with Target three years ago. They were, like, "People love us, but we're not quite sure why." What we said is you have to codify and understand the essence of whatever that magical thing is. If you find what that sweet spot is and hit it over and over again and all of the clues support that, that's what an experience value proposition is all about.

What is your understanding of the Target experience?

The Target experience is you feel good. You don't feel cheap. You almost feel like you're smart. You're with it. My wife went in two days ago and said it just feels so good compared to the other places she'd been over the holidays. They're extraordinary visual merchandisers.

What's the difference between what you do and customer relationship management?

Customer relationship management was written by numbers jockeys that were looking at numbers and no understanding of relationships and emotions. Relationships are all about emotions.

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