

AS SEEN IN JANUARY 2003

**Twin Cities**  
 BUSINESS MONTHLY

## Clued In

**EXPERIENCE ENGINEERING HELPS ITS CLIENTS MANAGE THEIR CUSTOMERS' EMOTIONAL RESPONSES.**

**A**t times, the work done by Experience Engineering sounds as though it's straight out of a detective novel.

At this Minneapolis-based firm, researchers often use tiny cameras hidden in neckties, hats, or wristwatches to uncover and document how customers react to a company's products, services—even its surroundings. The objective: to help companies build customer preference and loyalty by managing the type of experience they deliver to those consumers. According to Lou Carbone, Experience Engineering's president, founder, and "chief experience officer," an experience is how people respond emotionally to what an organization gives them. "It's beyond product and service," he says. "It's the total experience. It's the way that all of the pieces come together."

Carbone, who spent many years in marketing, advertising, and brand management before he began to focus on the customer experience, stresses that customers always have an experience—whether it's neutral, negative, or positive. "What experiences are all about are the clues that we absorb and look at," Carbone says. "And those clues create our experience." According to Carbone, clues that might affect a customer's experience can range from an employee's tone of voice and demeanor to the shape of a restaurant's tables. Often, they're things customers don't even realize they're reacting to.

So it's up to businesses to consciously create and manage those clues—and the experience—they provide. That's where Carbone's company comes in. Experience Engineering has developed a "Total Experience Management™" methodology to help businesses assess, audit, design, and maintain the type of experiences they deliver to their customers.

First, Experience Engineering staff members assess what type of experience a client company wants to create. Then they conduct an audit to determine the type of experience the client currently delivers. The audit consists of information gathering—using those hidden cameras as well as other tools, such as in-depth customer interviews. Carbone and his staff analyze body language, verbal cues, and other factors to identify the clues customers are picking up on. Then—working with the client—they design a new set of clues that will alter the customer experience.

One of the results of this process is an "Experience Blueprint™," which resembles the blueprint for a building and shows how the client should communicate those new clues. Experience Engineering goes on to help clients implement the plan, showing them how to monitor and maintain the new experience they've created for their customers.

Implementation of those redesigned experiences can happen in an almost infinite number of ways. Working with a car dealership, for instance, Experience Engineering developed a chair that would cut off the salesperson's telephone as soon as a customer sat down—thus making it harder for the seller to ignore his or her customer.

Carbone, who started his company in 1996, began working with the concept of experience in the late 1970s, when he realized that experience was the real value proposition customers received. He also became interested in building true customer loyalty—that is, meeting customers' emotional and rational needs.

Experience Engineering has 22 employees at offices in Minneapolis, Denver, and South Carolina; its client list includes Avis, Office Depot, and Royal Bank of Canada. Near the end of 2002, Experience Engineering was on track to increase its 2001 revenues of \$3.5 million by more than 50 percent.

Carbone believes that companies will have to be much more aware of how to leverage experience in order to stay competitive. "You can no longer survive without understanding [experience]," he stresses, noting that many people still equate customer experience with customer service. "But [experience] is considerably deeper and broader and richer than most people think." Like the plot of a good thriller, perhaps. ■

—Tracy Baumann



**President Lou Carbone draws up "experience blueprints" for improving the customer experience.**

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