Excerpt from the book *"See it, Hear it, Experience it, Buy it!"*

The Better Customer Experience Wins

In every era of business, a new battlefield for corporate competition emerges. In one era, manufacturing prowess was the key to beating the competition. In another, creating powerful brands was the key. Today's global marketplace presents unprecedented choices to consumers. This makes it incredibly difficult for consumers to distinguish the differences between very similar products.

While delivering manufacturing quality and developing trustworthy brands are still important, in the eyes of consumers they've come to be somewhat expected. In many cases, quality and brand power alone are not enough to enable consumers to distinguish between one company and another.

Today's competitive battlefield has moved to the "total customer experience." If your product sits on a shelf side-by-side with your competitors' products, it's not always the better product that wins.

The product linked to the better total customer experience is the one that wins.

Bally's Total Fitness doesn't get customers because its workout machines are any different from the competitors' down the street. Bally's wins because the total experience of working out at Bally's is simply more enjoyable (or less of a pain, depending on your point of view) than working out elsewhere.

T.G.I. Friday's doesn't sell better beer than its competitors do. But it does offer a more captivating and compelling total customer experience when you drink that beer. In the eyes of the consumer, in far too many cases the "core" product from one company is just too similar to other products. In these cases, the total customer experience is the differentiating factor for companies. Even in cases where a company's products are unique—such as Bose, which focuses on amazing home entertainment in uniquely small, discrete packages— combining a unique product with an equally unique customer experience has been devastatingly effective in increasing sales.

The Five Rules for Creating More Compelling Customer Experiences

Here are five "rules" for creating more compelling customer experiences.

Rule #1:
Think Like a Customer

What you think about your company and product is irrelevant.

First, you are not your customer. Second, on a day-to- day basis you're way too close to your company, its products, and its services to automatically be objective.

It's important to step back and forget your natural enthusiasm for your company and products. Forget your own marketing. Step back and put yourself in your customers' shoes. Better yet, go out into the field and watch your customers shop for, buy, and enjoy your products and your competitors'. Just watch and see what they do and don't do. You might be surprised at how often your product gets ignored or how easily your customers get distracted by things completely unrelated to your product (salespeople, confusion as to what accessories go with your products, etc.).

Tucker McLane, principal of the consulting firm Black Diamond Solutions, says, "Always be looking at things from the customer's perspective." McLane should know. He worked at Bose for 10 years and was responsible for developing and rolling out over 100,000 electronic merchandising kiosks for the company. He used to spend hundreds of hours sitting in the stores of Bose's retail partners (now the retail partners of his consulting clients) watching how consumers interacted (or not) with Bose's products and electronic merchandising.

Here are the types of things to look for:

- Do customers ask for help from a salesperson? Are they successful in finding one or do they give up?
- What questions or concerns come up most frequently?
- Do they interact with the product without hesitation or are they intimidated by the product?
- Do they buy the product by itself or do they buy other products together with it?
- Do they look at products only from one company or do they look at products from multiple companies? Does this affect their likelihood of buying?
- At what stage of the process do customers get frustrated and give up?

Rule #2:
Compare Your Company's Total Customer Experience to Your Competitors'

You want to go beyond looking at your own products and the total customer experience your company delivers. You also want to compare how the experience you deliver compares to your competitors'—after all, this is precisely what your customers do.

For each company, evaluate the experience first from a visual perspective, then an auditory one, then from a tactile or touch perspective. Next, evaluate how the experience feels from a total experience and emotional perspective. Sometimes the combination of the parts is much more powerful and compelling than any of the visual, auditory, or tactile experiences alone would suggest.

When you compare the total customer experience your customers have with your company as compared to what they experience with your competitors, how do you stack up? Is it disturbingly similar? Is it remarkable better? Or are competitors delivering a far more engaging experience?

In short, you want to see, hear, and feel what your customers do. You want to know precisely how you stack up in comparison. Then you want to beat your competitors, or beat them by a wider margin.

Rule #3:
Engage More Senses More Deeply Than Your Competitors Do

A simple rule of thumb when trying to create more compelling customer experiences is to engage more of your customer's senses and do so more dramatically than the competition.

If you're a restaurant competing against another restaurant that serves equally good food, don't compete just on how your food tastes. Add music to the experience and deliver a more enriching and compelling total customer experience.

If a competitor uses printed signs to promote its latest sale, use digital signs to promote specific products on sale—and rotate what's featured every few minutes. The printed sign approach informs customers that a sale is going on. The digital sign approach shows what's on sale. It's a more compelling and useful customer experience.

If your competitor merchandises its products using cardboard signs to explain product features, you use electronic merchandising displays with eye-catching full- motion video and enriching sound to show customers what it feels like to use your products.

Rule #4:
Stimulate Your Customers' Senses Enough to Trigger Powerful Emotions

If your competitors already use sight, hearing, and touch at some basic level, use them in a more dramatic and integrated way in order to trigger customers' emotions.

For example, Joby Hirschfeld is the director of Creative Services for Sony Computer Entertainment. In this role, he was responsible for launching Sony's 27,000 electronic merchandising kiosks to promote the PlayStation line of video game consoles and games.

Each of these kiosks featured the latest cutting-edge Sony PlayStation products. He recalls that when the newer PlayStation products switched to a high-definition graphics format, many consumers had never experienced gaming in "high-def." While people knew high-def was coming, when they saw the high-def games and could play with them at Sony's electronic merchandising kiosks, they were blown away by the visual clarity.

During this evolution of Sony's product line, the single most common response to seeing live demonstrations of the PlayStation products at these kiosks after looking at the screen was to say, "Wow, that's amazing." Games that were meant to provide a dazzling adrenaline rush did exactly that. Games that were meant to be breathtaking were perceived as breathtaking.

The electronic merchandising kiosks changed buying a PlayStation from an abstract decision to a decision customers could fully understand and appreciate at a sensory and emotional level.

Needless to say, the amazed customers were far more likely to buy PlayStation products than customers who hadn't experienced the products personally. This was done deliberately by Sony, and the same lesson can be applied to your company too.

Rule #5:
Implement Rules 3 and 4 in a Return-on-Investment-Oriented Approach

The final rule is to pursue the creation of compelling customer experiences in a financially smart way. You want the customer experience to be not only effective, but cost-effective too. Whatever time, energy, and dollars you invest in creating the ideal experience should more than pay for itself. The return on investment needs to be as compelling as the experience itself.

When you can deliver compelling experiences that trigger emotional responses more cost-effectively than your competitor can, it gives you an enormous advantage.

A competitor can't keep up with you forever if it has to lose money to compete—especially if your superior cost-effectiveness allows you to sustain a more compelling experience on an ongoing basis.

For example, so many of Disney's customers are repeat customers—customers who visit Disney World multiple times because of the wonderful experiences they have and the emotions each visit triggers. For Disney, this means several things. First, the strong repeat customer base means the company makes more money per customer than its competitors do. The company can keep this additional margin as profits, or reinvest it to create even more compelling experiences that trigger the kind of happy feelings that get customers to come back time and time again.

You can see how this is a virtuous cycle. Superior experiences lead to greater margins, which lead to a customer experience competitive advantage, which leads to greater margins...you get the idea.

As you'll see in the last section of this book, the financial aspect of creating a customer experience plays a very real and practical role in these efforts.