

# Readers' Choice

[PLAYBOOK]

[THE BUSINESS BOOKS PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT]

By Charles Decker

## CLUED IN:

How to Keep Customers Coming Back Again and Again

By Lewis P. Carbone (*Financial Times Prentice Hall, July 2004*)

Focus on the customer. You've heard it so much, it's practically a cliché; yet too few businesses use the experience of buying a product or service to engage every customer, and the result is first-time customers don't come back. Because businesses have so fundamentally ignored customers' needs, consumers "have become unpredictable free agents: increasingly disappointed, disgruntled, devalued, and ultimately disloyal." To win them back, Carbone, the founder and CEO of the consultancy Experience Engineering Inc., writes with authority about those "clues"—rational and emotional, human and environmental—that lead to the cash register, whether the customer realizes it or not. Managers charged with increasing their business—and who isn't?—will no doubt enjoy this research-laden tour of the buyer's mind.

**BACKSTORY** The author has studied the building blocks that constitute customer experience since the 1980s, and his firm has worked with companies such as General Motors, Avis, and Office Depot.

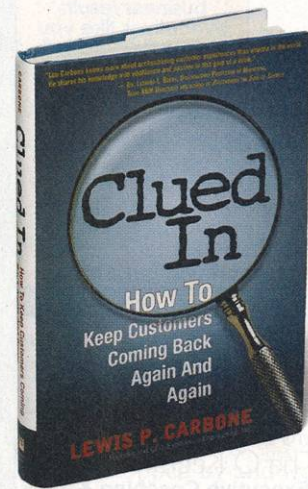
**TAKEAWAY** A framework to understand customer needs and desires, and to design and implement an experience management system. Most important, as in writing a good mystery novel, you learn how to develop and insert clues into a narrative story that customers follow, from anticipating your products to recollecting them.

**WHAT WE LIKED** Most business books rise or fall based on their exam-

ples. Carbone doesn't disappoint. From his uncle playing music in an early A&P store to how first-class hotels are making high art of toilet-paper folding, the book offers unusual real-world instances of how to turn a simple transaction into a business lovefest. He also delivers stories of companies learning from failure, such as Howard Johnson.

**WHAT WE DIDN'T** Some readers may find the whole proposition overly simplistic. Though the author's writing style is for the most part crisp and engaging, he peppers the book with jargon such as "experience topography" and "value proposition management" that are really too-fancy ways of saying "put the customer first."

**WHAT TO SAY TO SOUND LIKE YOU'VE READ IT** In this hypercompetitive age, if you suspect your customers are complaining about you, you're a punch line, or worse, roadkill. Factor experience into your planning or else.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

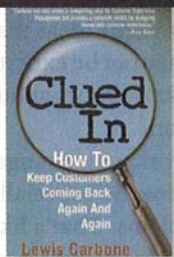
- 1 How much does the experience you receive when buying a cup of coffee, for instance, play into how much you are willing to spend on that coffee? Why?
- 2 How often does your company communicate with its customers about making their experience of buying from you more pleasurable?
- 3 Can you recall times when you vowed you would not do business with a company because of a poor customer experience? Did you tell the company?
- 4 Discuss some things companies have developed to encourage customer loyalty. Have they made a difference in your own life?

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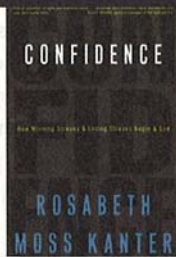
Charles Decker is a publishing consultant and author based in New York. His newest book, *Lessons From the Hive*, has just been published.

December Nominees

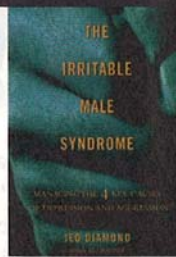
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Want a Customers First award next year? Learn the silent clues that contribute to a successful customer experience and reap continued profits and success.



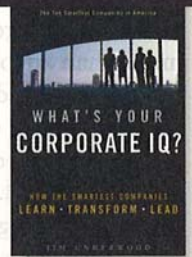
Rosabeth Moss Kanter studies the role confidence plays in winning and losing—in sports and business. Learn how to be a winner if you're not and how to stay on top.



Nasty bosses or cynical teammates may not just be jerks. They may have irritable male syndrome. Seek solace from that state of anxiety, depression, and anger.



Invention isn't a magical mystery tour. Take a peek inside the minds that have produced many of the biggest eureka moments of our time.



The smartest companies have the best people policies. The author of *More Than a Pink Cadillac* examines the practices of such smart outfits as Agilent, Costco, and Dell.

FAST COMPANY'S Readers' Choice selection is up to you. Go online to read excerpts from these nominees, then vote for your favorite. We'll review the winner in December.