



Rodin's book is a primer on our lives

ROBERT Rodin has had many sleepless nights over the past decade. He didn't have much to worry about — just stuff like completely turning his company's structure topsy-turvy, overhauling its compensation system, getting rid of sales commissions. Oh, also throwing out its old technology, too, and changing every operating system literally overnight.

Gulp.

And you thought you had a nerve-racking week.

No, this guy isn't reckless. Anything but. He's a well-respected CEO of Marshall Industries, the El Monte electronics distributor. It's a \$2 billion business that has what is considered the best business-to-business Web site in the world.

Rodin has written a book that's just coming out called "Free, Perfect, and Now." Published by Simon & Schuster, it's, yes, a corporate executive's tale. But this is one that non-business types may want to read and use in their everyday lives. It has some esoteric business concepts that you must digest but also some revelations that will make you think about how you actually function in relationship to your job or even in personal situations.

Free, perfect, and now refers to what every customer demands in a product or service. Hard to supply but you gotta set it as a goal.

Obviously, neither Marshall Industries nor Rodin are perfect. But the book offers some guideposts and advice on how to stay on the road toward attaining customer satisfaction.

Like they all say, Rodin claims he never set out to write a book. And I believe him. But his experiences over the past several years at Marshall sure warrant one.

Back in the early '90s Rodin decided that if Marshall was going to survive he and all his colleagues at the company needed to change their thinking and the way they went about doing business. Competition would kill them eventually.

So he led a revolution. He and others literally changed Marshall inside out. They actually did what other company executives only talk about. They chucked the stuff that didn't work even though the corporate establishment and buzz-word inventors thought they were just fine.

Yes, they took managers off MBOs and incentives and got rid of commissions for 600 salespeople. The goal was to keep an eye on the company's goals, which include serving customers as best it can. Too much "stuff" that gives merely immediate gratification was clouding things for the company and keeping it from its goals.

It's all about "alignment to the voice of the customer," Rodin says.

There's a lot to digest in "Free, Perfect, and Now." Some useless business traditions are hard to break. But this book will get you thinking about how you might want to break them at your place.

It's one of those books where you nod your head sometimes while you're reading it. "Yeah, exactly right," you mumble to yourself when he hits a nerve. Rodin uses everyday experiences like eating at a restaurant to make his points.

"It would be a thrill if people saw something (in the book) beyond the business issues," Rodin says.

Jason Schaff is business editor of this newspaper.