

BIG IDEA *Free, Perfect, and Now: Connecting to the Three Insatiable Customer Demands: A CEO's True Story*, by Rob Rodin with Curtis Hartman (Simon & Schuster, 1999). Rodin, CEO of Marshall Industries, understands that survival in a fast-paced economy rests on one thing: giving customers what they want. His book tells you how to do it. **BEST PRACTICE** *Profit Patterns: 30 Ways to Anticipate and Profit from Strategic Forces Reshaping Your Business*, by Adrian J. Slywotzky (Times Books, 1999). The author of the cover story in the February:March 1999 issue of FAST COMPANY refines his take on how winning companies achieve the sweet spot of profitability. **SLEEPER** *The Entertainment Economy: How Mega-Media Forces Are Transforming Our Lives*, by Michael J. Wolf (Times Books, 1999). Wolf, who built Booz, Allen & Hamilton's entertainment-consulting practice, invokes Disney, MTV, and Martha Stewart to make his case: that "the line between entertainment and the rest of the economy [has] disappeared." **KEEPER** *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (Viking, 1999). From the team that brought us the classic *Getting to Yes* comes a user-friendly guide to mastering the talks that we dread—from asking for a raise to ending a relationship to just saying no.

So why not charge for it? "That would force the company to stage a much better experience to attract guests, especially on a repeat basis," the authors write. "The merchandise mix would need to change more regularly—perhaps daily, even hourly. Demonstrations, showcases, contests, and a plethora of other experiential attractions would complete the sharpened experience of a visit to Sharper Image. . . . And as a result, the retailer could very well sell more goods."

Ditto for a place like NikeTown. Instead of waving in potential shoe buyers for free, that store ought to charge guests "to go at it one-on-one with past NBA stars or play a game of H-O-R-S-E against a WNBA player." On sale would be shoes, yes, but also items like customized commemorative T-shirts and photos of little Sally draining one against Rebecca Lobo. Retailers, in other words, should begin to

sell memorabilia—the artifacts of various memorable experiences. (Just imagine the souvenirs: "My parents went to Wal-Mart, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.")

Acting Up at Work

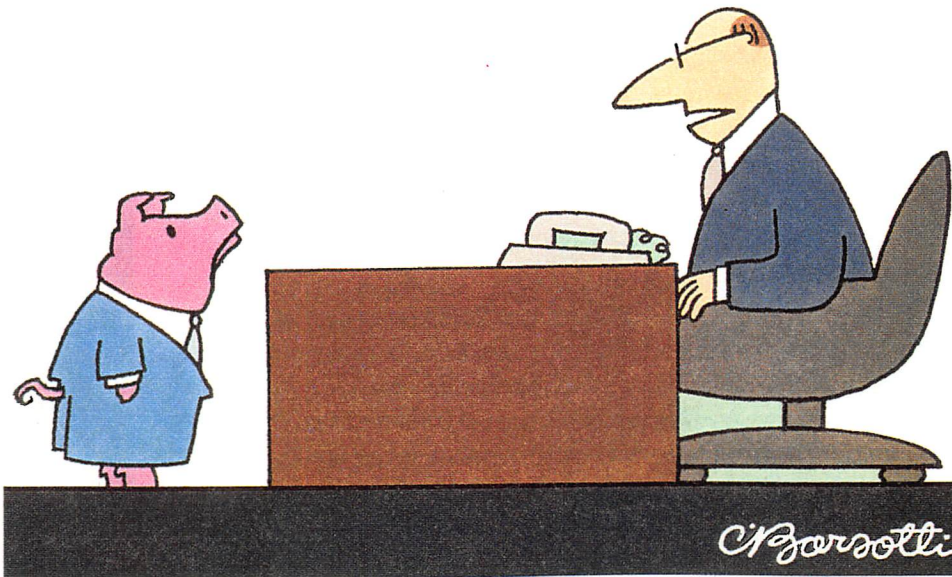
The Internet explosion has ignited a fiery demand for programmers and engineers—workers with technical skills. But those talented folks may soon confront an altered landscape. In the experience economy, Pine and Gilmore state, "Work is theatre."

Disney, of course, is a master of the work-as-theater proposition: Employees at its stores and theme parks are called "cast members." But the proposition has spread to industries that are less obviously performance-oriented. At a Ritz-Carlton hotel, Pine and Gilmore report, you're likely to see "a bellman . . . warmly welcoming guests back by name—accomplished by reviewing a daily printout of expected . . . guests and their distinguishing traits (much like a soap opera actor learns new scripts on a daily basis)."

This kind of practice liberates people and allows them to be more creative. It also helps businesses distinguish themselves from their competitors. Southwest Airlines, for example, encourages flight attendants to dish out comic one-liners along with roasted peanuts. And is there any American worker so beloved as the brown-suited stud in the boxy brown truck? Your UPS route driver "performs an act of theatre with every package he delivers," Pine and Gilmore explain.

Maybe all of this just goes to show that business is the most compelling drama of our time. "A two-hour performance of *King Lear* and the overnight performance of FedEx both compress time," the authors note. "Both also help us see the world differently—arguably one more than the other. But which one?"

FUNNY BUSINESS CHARLES BARSOTTI



"You're being hired on a trial basis. If, after six weeks, it hasn't worked out, you'll be butchered."

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