

# CHOCOLATES ON THE PILLOW AREN'T ENOUGH

*Reinventing  
the  
Customer Experience*

JONATHAN M. TISCH  
WITH KARL WEBER



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



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For PRT . . . you could take the boy out of Brooklyn,  
but you couldn't take Brooklyn out of the boy.



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IN AUGUST OF 2004, MY DAYS WERE FILLED WITH EXCITEMENT, TREPIDATION, and just a bit of fear. In just a few short weeks, my first book, *The Power of We*, would be shipped to bookstores all over the country, and the preorders at web sellers like Amazon.com would start to be filled.

Over the next four months, I had a variety of hard-to-get TV interviews planned, commencing with *The Today Show* the first week of September and including sit-downs with Larry King, Charlie Rose, Harry Smith, and the nationally syndicated radio host, Joan Hamburg. And I was fully prepared for the grind of a 12-city book tour and speaking engagements that would take me from Toronto and Chicago to Seattle and Los Angeles.

But everything changed with one phone call.

Bob Tisch, my father, and the man who, with his brother Larry, created what is today Loews Corporation, had been diagnosed with a stage 4 brain tumor.

Like every family that is touched by the dark shadow of cancer, we grew closer than ever as we dealt with my father's diagnosis, prognosis, and care.

Over the next 15 months, my father was afforded the chance to live, experience, and love, thanks to a dedicated team of physicians, nurses, and caregivers. And during this period, he never complained or whined.

Of course, I offered to scale back my commitments to my day job and the book tour, but my father wouldn't hear of that. He was pleased that I had fulfilled my dream of putting some of my thoughts into writing, and he insisted I go on the road and talk about *The Power of We*.

On October 1, 2004, when the book hit the *Wall Street Journal's* best-seller list, he was as proud of me as I had ever seen him.

On November 15, 2005, exactly two years to the day after his brother had passed away, my father lost his battle with cancer.

Three weeks later, amid the first snow storm of the year, some 2,500 people from all over the world gathered at Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center, to pay their respects to Preston Robert Tisch, or, as many referred to him, PRT.

The service was a celebration of a life well lived. In addition to my brother, sister, and me, the speakers included New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg; Beverly Sills, the famed opera singer and a childhood friend of my father's from Brooklyn; and my dear friend, Tiki Barber, the great running back of the New York Giants. We heard from other individuals whose lives my father touched, such as Evelyn Houser, a housekeeper at the Loews Regency Hotel, and Sammy Arthur, from Ghana, who came to work as my father's driver in 1986, and quickly became one of his closest friends and confidants. And our spirits were buoyed by musical performances from Michael Feinstein, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Ronan Tynan, and Steve Tyrell, all backed by a 50-piece orchestra and a choir of some 30 students from New York University.

Perhaps a few sentences from my remarks that day will give you a clear sense of who Bob Tisch was, and how fortunate I have been to have him in my life:

Bob Tisch was not only my father, he was my mentor. And for the boy who idolized his dad and followed in his footsteps, nothing could have made me happier. I was able to learn the great art of hospitality from one of the industry's founders and pioneers. And while the business of hotels has become much more complex over the years, the hotel business has remained the same.

At its core, it's about making people feel welcome and comfortable. And nobody did that better than Bob Tisch. Whether you were a guest in his hotel, an employee, or a friend, Bob was the embodiment of hospitality. He could walk into any room, of any hotel and know the names of everyone who worked there. He knew to follow the basics and not be swayed by the trends. He had a laser like focus on the bottom line, but it was his natural understanding of the human side of the business, that really set him apart.

And what I learned from my father really became the starting point for much of what we write about in this book. Hence its dedication to his life and memory.

Through these difficult months and years, I have been blessed to have my family available to provide love, support, and encouragement. My mother Joan, my brother Steve, my sister Laurie, and their families have been remarkable during this time of loss and change.

And the same is true of my kids, who are always there for me, and who I hope will forge a life based on generational values, hope, and caring for others. Laura and Stafford, I thank you for all your assistance in this part of life's journey.

With the publication of my second book, I can't hide behind the notion of making rookie errors any more. Fortunately for me, most of the individuals who supported me so well a few years back are involved in this book as well, starting with my cowriter, Karl Weber, a man of intelligence, humor, and fine literary style. Our second collaboration was an effort of pleasure and one that hopefully the reader will find interesting and helpful. Thank you, Karl, for your hours and hours of research, writing, and editing.

Jeffrey Stewart, the senior vice president of communications and public affairs for Loews Hotels and a dear friend, was once again there with me every step of the way, offering insights and counsel, and making the writing and editing process fun.

And my agent, Wayne Kabak, from the New York City office of The William Morris Agency, has been invaluable with his guidance, knowledge, and support.

So many individuals and organizations have provided partnerships, like those that I wrote about in *The Power of We*, which have enabled me to spend time on this book. They include my cousins Jim and Andrew Tisch, with whom I am fortunate to share the responsibility of managing Loews Corporation, as well as the superb team at Loews Hotels, headed up by our president and COO, Jack Adler. Also, as part of my team in New York City are two people who help hold my crazy life together—my assistant Vicki Alfonzetti and her assistant, Susan Shannon. And then add to that the 7,500-plus individuals who make me so proud every day at Loews Hotels—my colleagues who

make staying at a Loews Hotel a memorable experience for thousands of guests every year.

Also, I want to thank the team at John Wiley & Sons, including my publisher, Joan O'Neil; my editor, Debra Englander; my production manager, Mary Daniello; Peter Knapp and all the hard-working people in marketing and events; and to all others who contributed to this book. My thanks also to Mark Fortier who did a superb job of promoting my first book and with whom I'm pleased to be working again, as well as my good friend Don Epstein and the wonderful group at Greater Talent Network, who help me spread the message to groups of all kinds.

Thanks, too, to the people who shared their insights, stories, and experiences with us as we researched and wrote this book. And thanks to Alex Kassl of New York University, who helped us with background research on many of the organizations profiled in these pages.

Finally, my thanks to Lizzie: I deeply appreciate your listening to my whining, ravings, and crazy ideas . . . and thanks for the constant support through it all.

In the hotel industry, our goal is to turn customers into guests. My hope with this book is that, whatever you do with your life, you will be able to arrive at a similar place, touch people in a positive way, and create personal success for yourself and the people in your lives.

J. M. T.

**CHOCOLATES  
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## INTRODUCTION

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# The Hotelier's Secret

WHEN MY FIRST BOOK, *The Power of We: Succeeding Through Partnerships*, was published in 2004, the reception it received was very gratifying. The book sold well around the country and the world, and appeared on national best-seller lists. To this day, I get calls and e-mails from readers eager to tell me how much they enjoyed learning about the power of partnerships from the book. They also share their stories about how they've put some of the ideas into practice in their own lives and careers.

Perhaps most enjoyable for me, the publication of the book gave me the opportunity to speak before a wide range of audiences. The traditional author tour, which some writers describe as an ordeal, turned out to be great fun. As the CEO of Loews Hotels, a midsize chain of luxury hotels that is a subsidiary of Loews Corporation, I was invited to speak to many organizations and individuals involved in the hospitality and travel industries—airlines, restaurants, travel agencies, tour operators, cruise lines, and my fellow hoteliers. But even more interesting, I had the chance to speak with thousands of people from many other lines of work, from bankers and teachers to retailers and service professionals. I gave talks before groups of concrete manufacturers and suppliers of rubber hose, and at companies like Microsoft and Amazon. Employees and leaders of not-for-profit groups invited me to speak with them, as did many people connected with government agencies large and small. And countless students, both in business schools and in undergraduate colleges and universities, wanted to know how they could apply the lessons I had learned to their own work lives.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

Naturally enough, most of the stories I told in *The Power of We* and during the book tour that followed were drawn from my experiences as a hotelier. At the start of my tour, I was a little concerned: Would audiences from varied walks of life find my tales of the hotel business interesting and meaningful or would they seem boring and irrelevant? To my delight, I received an amazing response. It turned out that people like hearing about the adventures, challenges, and triumphs of a hotelier, and they find the lessons I've learned over the years not only relevant to their own work but extremely useful.

There are probably several reasons for the widespread interest in the hotel business. One factor is that everyone knows (or thinks they know) the hotel business: we've all stayed in hotels, experienced great and not-so-great service in them, and developed strong opinions about what we like and don't like. Another is the intimate nature of the services hotels provide: hoteliers get to know and cater to some of the most personal needs of their clients, which creates some daunting challenges (and generates some colorful stories). People come to hotels for many of the most important moments in their lives, from bar mitzvahs, sweet-sixteen parties, weddings, honeymoons, and anniversary celebrations to crucial business meetings, family reunions, and once-in-a-lifetime vacations. The sheer drama of what goes on in a hotel makes the life of a hotelier inherently interesting.

However, there is another more basic reason why my work in the hotel business is interesting, and perhaps even important, for people in many walks of life.

In today's world, organizations of every kind—not only businesses but also government agencies, cultural institutions, and not-for-profit groups—are experiencing huge difficulties in attracting and retaining clients. Competition is intensifying, consumers are becoming more demanding, and old ways of creating customer loyalty have lost much of their impact. And with the communications media becoming ever more interactive and fragmented, it is becoming harder and harder for organizations to convey a strong and convincing message to the general public.

In this difficult environment, offering a good product or a useful service is no longer enough. Today's consumers are looking for some-

thing more—a relationship with an organization that will truly enrich their lives. As a result, organizations are discovering that the only sure way to establish strong and lasting connections with their clients or customers is by providing them with experiences that are unique, memorable, delightful, comfortable, and deeply rewarding. *And this is exactly what the best hoteliers have always specialized in doing.*

Just consider a few of the unusual characteristics of the hotel business:

- Whereas most organizations address a single, often narrow human need, hoteliers are responsible for their clients' total well-being—physical, emotional, psychological—from the moment of check-in until the visit ends. We have to find ways to make everything about our guests' stay enjoyable, which calls on a wide range of skills, talents, and processes.
- Unlike most organizations, a hotel is open for business 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. There are no down times for retooling our systems or recharging our batteries; changes and adjustments to the business must be handled on the fly, even as more customers are arriving to be cared for. Being a hotelier may not be quite as demanding as, say, being the chief physician of a busy emergency room or president of the United States—but believe me, it has its moments.
- Hoteliers must nurture people who are in a vulnerable situation. They are on the road, far from their homes and often from their families, totally dependent on the hotel for safety and security as well as basic physical needs: a fine meal, a good night's sleep, a well-appointed bathroom. People literally put their lives in our hands, which is a sobering, daunting challenge.
- Hotel guests bring an incredible range of expectations to their encounters with us. For the business traveler, a state-of-the-art service center with high-speed Internet access, a conference room, and the availability of specialized services like language interpretation may be the most essential requirements for a successful stay. For a honeymooning couple, a magical atmosphere of romance, indulgence, and privacy may be the key. And a vacationing family

## 4 INTRODUCTION

may need a concierge with the local knowledge to suggest a week's worth of fun activities for everyone from a grade-schooler to an octogenarian.

Driven by these customer requirements, we in the hotel business have developed a unique expertise in the art of creating great experiences—not just now and then but consistently, over and over again. Call it the hotelier's secret. And in today's ever-more-demanding, ever-more-competitive arena, this secret is not just relevant but potentially extremely valuable for leaders of every kind of organization.

This book is my opportunity to offer insights into the art of creating great customer experiences based on my years in the hospitality business as well as to share stories and lessons I've gathered from my colleagues and mentors here at Loews Hotels and around the industry. However, the ideas in these pages extend far beyond the hotel business. My coauthor, Karl Weber, and I have sought out examples and stories from many industries as well as from the worlds of nonprofit and government work to illustrate how great organizations of every kind are discovering powerful new ways of forging lasting customer connections. We also depict the challenges and pitfalls they've encountered along the way.

Leaders and aspiring leaders of organizations everywhere are invited to draw on the lessons in these pages and to share with us your ideas, experiences, problems, and experiences as you seek your own ways of providing customers with unforgettable experiences. Here's hoping you'll enjoy exploring the ideas in this book as much as we've enjoyed developing them for you.

PART ONE

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# **The Problem and the Solution**



# What Happened to My Customers?

IT IS PROBABLY NORMAL FOR PEOPLE TO ASSUME THAT THE PROBLEMS they face are tougher than those encountered by past generations. Perhaps it is a way of consoling ourselves for the difficulties we encounter and of fortifying ourselves psychologically for the challenges to come.

It is an especially tempting attitude for those of us who help to run organizations. We look back at the business world our parents participated in a generation ago—or, for that matter, at the worlds of education, health care, social engagement, or politics—and we wax nostalgic. Those were simpler times, we think, when the United States was on the rise, cities and neighborhoods were safe, incomes were growing, families were strong, and technology seemed to promise endless progress. By contrast, today's world—troubled by terrorism, international discord, increasing social and economic inequality, and hyperpartisan politics—feels like a much less friendly, secure place.

Pessimism isn't my thing. I've always been a great believer in the opportunities available to all of us, not just here in the United States but increasingly throughout the free world. Having seen how my own family rose from modest working-class status to success in the world of business through hard work, creativity, attention to the needs of others, and a bit of good luck—and having seen many others achieve just as much or more—I remain a partisan of the American dream. And being an optimist who believes that people armed with determination can overcome almost any difficulty goes with that territory.

Nonetheless, as a hands-on manager of a business (the Loews Hotel brand), as an active participant in the direction of that business's parent (Loews Corporation), and as a deeply engaged leader of one of

the world's largest and fastest-growing industry sectors (travel and tourism), I've been well placed to see the changes that the past two to three decades have brought to the business world and, more broadly, to the relationship between organizations of all kinds and the people they serve. And what I've seen has convinced me that, in some ways, today's business world is perhaps the most challenging in recent history.

Don't misunderstand me, we have plenty to be grateful for: the spread of economic and political freedom around the world in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire; the technological advances that have made both business and daily life far more productive, varied, and enjoyable than our parents could have imagined; the expansion of opportunity to American women, young people, and racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; and the steady increase in innovation that has created many kinds of new businesses, not-for-profit groups, and political and social organizations, all working to expand individual choices and advance human welfare. In many ways, the early years of the twenty-first century are an incredibly exciting time to do business.

But this is also an extraordinarily difficult time, filled with the challenges that come from change. In fact, some of the remarkable, positive developments mentioned in the previous paragraph are contributing to the strains that most organizational leaders are experiencing as they try to adjust to life in a rapidly evolving environment. Change is good, especially when it creates new freedoms. But change is also stressful.

Most leaders will quickly recognize the symptoms of the organizational stresses that have been caused by the economic and social dislocations of recent decades. They include:

- *Shrinking brand loyalty*: A generation ago, iconic American brands—from Coca-Cola, Ford, and Levi's to Sears, Zenith, and Kellogg's—ruled the world and commanded the lifetime loyalty of tens of millions of consumers. Today, customers seem to be ready to jump to the competition at the click of a mouse.
- *Increased price sensitivity*: Brand loyalty once commanded a price premium: Customers were willing to pay a little more for the

higher quality they associated with their favorite goods and services. Today, trained by years of price wars and discounting, customers are exerting intense, unyielding pressure on their suppliers to meet or beat competitive prices or lose the business.

- *Heightened competition:* Globalization, new media, technological and strategic innovation, and a global flood of capital seeking investment opportunities have spurred the emergence of new competitors in almost every business sphere from around the country and around the world. New kinds of competitors have multiplied—for example, if you run a local hardware store, you are now competing not just against other hardware stores but against Internet web sites, big box retailers, giant discount outlets, and individual sellers on eBay.
- *Increasing customer knowledge, skepticism, and power:* Today's consumers are more sophisticated than ever before. Raised in the world of Ralph Nader, *Consumer Reports*, and the Internet, they are accustomed to comparing products and prices, scrutinizing quality claims with a jaundiced eye, and demanding satisfaction when products or services fall short. And these attitudes aren't applied only to business. Citizens have become just as demanding and hard-nosed (some might say cynical) about government, social and civic organizations, and not-for-profit institutions.

As a result of these trends, it is getting harder and harder for businesses, not-for-profits, and government agencies, to understand, attract, satisfy, and retain their customers.\* In fact, the basic connections between organizations and customers—once relatively powerful, long-lasting, and mutually beneficial—are increasingly breaking down. This disturbing trend is making itself felt in a host of ways.

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\* Those who are served by not-for-profits and government agencies are commonly referred to by terms such as *clients*. Throughout this book, however, I use the word *customers*, no matter whether for-profit businesses or other kinds of organizations are being discussed.

## Desperate Companies: When the Old Connections Break Down

Launching successful new products has always been difficult. But the evidence shows that in recent decades it has become more challenging than ever. An authoritative 1991 survey by the Product Development and Management Association found that just 1 in 11 serious new product ideas is developed and brought to market successfully.<sup>1</sup> A more recent study by the respected Doblin Group, a Chicago-based firm that is a leader in innovation strategy, found that some 96 percent of all attempts at innovation fail to meet their companies' target rates for return on investment.<sup>2</sup> Thus, meeting your organization's growth objectives is no longer a relatively simple matter of developing a few spin-offs from already successful products or launching an exciting new brand. With store shelves already overflowing with thousands of goods and service offerings that jockey for attention, it is getting harder and harder to break through the new-product clutter.

For generations, organizations turned to traditional techniques of advertising and marketing to connect with customers. Now those tried-and-true business tools are losing their potency.

Not so long ago, if you were launching a new product or a new ad campaign, you could run a 30-second commercial on any of the three major television networks and be assured that you'd reach a huge swath of the national consumer market. Those days are long gone. With the proliferation of cable networks and the fragmentation of the mass audience, "you'd need to advertise on 92 channels to reach that same audience today," says one media consultant.<sup>3</sup>

After years in denial, today even executives at leading ad agencies are speaking about the crisis their industry is experiencing. Douglas Atkin, a partner and chief strategy officer at Merkle + Partners, speaks gloomily about the waning power of advertising and the growing complications in reaching out to customers:

I used to be a brand manager at one of the most famous brand marketers of all time. In fact, they would claim that they invented brand marketing—Procter & Gamble. There was a time when there were just very, very simple ingredients to how you create a brand: You develop the best possible product; you have a great visual identity; you advertise the

hell out of it; you get distribution and the right price; and it works. The consumer saw the brand in advertising, bought it at the store, and used it in the washing machine. Nowadays, the brand is communicated everywhere through word of mouth, through the impression in a retail store, through advertising, through guerrilla activity. In fact, actually the biggest stimulant for someone to buy something is word of mouth. Advertising is increasingly retreating as a persuasive media.<sup>4</sup>

Even as advertising retreats, other forms of communication are growing in importance. Unfortunately for leaders, they are often forms that organizations have little or no control over. Blogs—those interactive Internet web sites that anyone with a personal computer (PC) and a web browser can set up in just a few minutes—have now acquired the power to make or break brands and even companies overnight. Take a blog like *Gizmodo*. It's a popular guide to new high-tech gadgets and toys that boasts 1.5 million visitors every month. A reviewer on *Gizmodo* endorsed the company DiscHub, which makes a simple yet ingenious soft neoprene gadget for safely storing CDs, DVDs, and similar items. Almost immediately, hits on DiscHub's web site increased from 20 to 10,000, and today the company founder Jonathan Bruck credits *Gizmodo* with making the firm successful. Similar success stories have been attributed to blogs such as *MoCo Loco* (which reviews modern design and architecture), *Dailycandy* (which features clothes and cosmetics), and *Treehugger* (which covers environmentally friendly products).<sup>5</sup>

When an organization runs afoul of the blogosphere, the results can be disastrous. In September 2004, a maker of bicycle locks named Kryptonite was blindsided by a series of postings on blogs frequented by bike lovers that claimed certain models of Kryptonite locks were vulnerable to picking simply by using a plastic pen. At first, the company disregarded the furor ("It's just a few techies, no big deal"). But soon Kryptonite found its products being pulled off the shelves of bike stores and its sales plummeting.

Kryptonite has since recovered, introducing a new line of locks with the design flaw remedied. And they have also made monitoring of the blogosphere—and participation in blog forums about biking—a regular part of their public-outreach efforts.

With advertising in decline and consumer-driven communications growing in stature, some marketing professionals are waving the white flag. Martin Puris, founder of Ammirati & Puris, one of Madison Avenue's most venerable agencies, is among many advertising executives who are defecting to nontraditional media. Puris spent 30 years driving huge sales through great TV advertising based on simple, powerful slogans; he's the man who dubbed the BMW the "Ultimate Driving Machine." Today he calls TV the "dead zone." In partnership with John Bernbach, another pro with deep roots in advertising history (his dad helped found the legendary Doyle Dane Bernbach agency), Puris has launched a new company called Not Traditional Media (NTM) to focus on everything *but* traditional advertising. NTM is linking clients to customers through such innovative—sometimes untested—channels as light boxes in subway tunnels, product samples given to guests at extended-stay hotels, even TV programming targeting bedridden patients in hospitals.

Many organizations are testing the new nontraditional marketing and advertising channels that consultants like NTM are flogging. Some are giving consumers the power to create their own advertising. The Converse sneaker company has created the Converse Gallery, a web site where thousands of fans have posted 24-second video clips lauding the company's footwear. Some of these amateur films have been chosen to appear in Converse's TV ads. Many consider these do-it-yourself advertising programs a new and promising way of connecting to the passion that customers feel for their favorite products.

But they may also make organizations vulnerable to embarrassing mishaps. During the 2004 presidential campaign, the Republican National Committee (RNC) created a web site titled "Make Your Own Campaign Poster." It was a great way to tap the political passions of an election year—but the RNC was forced to shut it down when Democratic partisans raided the site and created snarky ads for the Bush/Cheney campaign with satiric slogans like "Ending our nightmare of peace and prosperity."<sup>6</sup> Giving customers the keys to your company may be a tempting notion in an era when company-driven communication is losing its power, but it also reflects the increasing fear of being out of touch with customers that many organizations are feeling.