

# **Making Meaning: How Successful Businesses Deliver Meaningful Customer Experiences**

Steve Diller, Nathan Shedroff, and Darrel Rhea. Berkeley, CA:

Peachpit Press, 2006. 140 pages.

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A BROADBAND COMPANY combines Internet, telecommunications, and cable television to “deliver your world to you.” A home appliances company advertises its new washer and dryer as products beautifully designed not only to carry out their basic uses but also to decorate the home and function with minimal environmental impact. These companies do more than simply mass produce products and make a profit; their intention is to create meaningful experiences for their customers. According to *Making Meaning* by Steve Diller, Nathan Shedroff, and Darrel Rhea, a meaningful experience with a product does not occur when a consumer uses a product; a meaningful experience occurs when a product becomes part of and improves the consumer’s life. For a teenage girl, a meaningful experience might occur when a new service lets her and her friends download and listen to music together, thus developing a sense of community for her. A meaningful experience is apparent when, for example, a man talks about his relationship with a soft drink in the same way he talks about his wife.

*Making Meaning* establishes that the practice of creating meaningful products and services should be a deeply rooted corporate belief and that the practice should be pervasive throughout all departments of a corporation. In other words, a commitment to making meaning should be real, not just part of an image that is projected to the

outside world of consumers. The authors then provide a blueprint for developing such a commitment.

This book is an interesting read for people looking for meaning in their work and the products or services that their work produces. However, because the book establishes that providing meaning should start at the top of the corporation and weave throughout all of a corporation's sectors, it is aimed at decision makers and visionaries who have the capacity to instill a change in how a corporation functions. *Making Meaning* explains the values in offering meaningful experiences for customers and then illustrates the path to implementing the vision successfully. The book broadly overviews this process; however, it is not a specific how-to guide.

"The Road to Meaning" and "The Value of Meaning" (chaps. 1 and 2) are persuasive in tone and maintain that over time only those corporations that provide meaningful experiences that appeal to customers' emotions will prosper and grow. Meaning is defined as the sense we make of reality and the impulse to translate our experience, be it belonging to a particular community or using a certain product, into something that is essential to our being (p. 24). The authors invoke examples from real companies and product campaigns as well as personal experiences to illustrate their successes and failures to deliver meaning. Lending weight to their experience is Diller and Rhea's work with the Cheskin consultancy, which was founded by Louis Cheskin more than 50 years ago and was based on Cheskin's quest to understand the meaning embedded in the relationship between companies and their customers.

The authors go on to establish "Finding a Starting Point" (chap. 4) and "Designing Meaningful Experiences" (chap. 5). The starting point that the authors suggest is assessing and defining the company's innovation culture. The authors outline types of innovation cultures that exist across U.S. companies, based on a study Cheskin recently completed, and recommend ways to structure change. They touch briefly upon each corporate department, such as design, development, and marketing and research, to explain how each role has to align with the goal of delivering meaning to the customer experience (pp. 47-53).

The core of the book is the authors' overview of the process of creating meaning, a process that consists of "Identifying the Opportunity for Meaning" (chap. 6), "Framing the Experience" (chap. 7), "Shaping the Concept" (chap. 8), and "Delivering Reality" (chap. 9). The authors delve into more detail and provide methodologies for

practical implementation, such as using ethnographic methods to understand the customers' needs and environment (p. 73). In a useful matrix, they outline a framework for delivering meaningful experiences that takes readers through the life cycle of the product from conception to fruition (p. 99). To illustrate the process further, the authors employ a fictional company as an example and follow its process from start to finish. This approach facilitates understanding of how abstract concepts can be translated into practice.

*Making Meaning* is clearly and persuasively written. The authors' examples of corporations whose products improve people's lives may spring readers into a different mode of thought about their work. For example, the authors discuss how the Las Vegas Hilton goes beyond typical service by providing a Star Trek attraction so that guests—particularly those who are Star Trek fans—experience something more during their stay. Such examples inspire readers to create more meaning in their own products and services instead of simply churning out products and making a profit.

In sum, *Making Meaning* first establishes the importance and need for corporations to provide meaningful experiences for their customers and then acts as a blueprint for successfully implementing those experiences. Diller, Shedroff, and Rhea speak from experience and seem earnestly to believe that such business practices, as opposed to simply profits and gains, are what ultimately matter most. Nothing can be more meaningful than seeing someone succeed by example, and the authors of *Making Meaning* certainly practice what they preach.

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