

Entrepreneurship
and the Experience Economy

Daniel Hjorth and Monika Kostera (Editors)

Entrepreneurship and the Experience Economy

Copenhagen Business School Press

**Entrepreneurship
and the Experience Economy**

© Copenhagen Business School Press, 2007
Printed in Denmark by Narayana Press, Gylling
Cover design by BUSTO | Graphic Design

First edition 2007

e-ISBN 978-87-630-9993-6

Distribution:

Scandinavia

DBK, Mimersvej 4
DK-4600 Køge, Denmark
Tel +45 3269 7788
Fax +45 3269 7789

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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Senada Bahto
Växjö University
senada.bahto@vxu.se

Frederic Bill
Växjö University
frederic.bill@vxu.se

Daniel Hjorth
Copenhagen Business School
dhj.lpf@cbs.dk

Marjana Johansson
Stockholm School of Economics
marjana.Johansson@hhs.se

Ulla Johansson
Växjö University and Göteborg University
ulla.johansson@gri.gu.se

Jerzy Kociatkiewicz
University of Essex
kociak@kociak.org

Monika Kostera
Warsaw University and Växjö University
monika.kostera@vxu.se

Katja Lindqvist
Stockholm University
kli@fek.su.se

Hans Lundberg
Växjö University
hans.lundberg@vxu.se

Entrepreneurship and the Experience Economy

Lovisa Näslund
Stockholm School of Economics
lovisa.naslund@hhs.se

Marcela Ramírez-Pasillas
Växjö University
marcela.ramirez-pasillas@vxu.se

Marja Soila-Wadman
Växjö University and Royal Institute of Technology
marja.soila-wadman@vxu.se

Lisbeth Svengren Holm
Stockholm University
lisbeth.svengren@fek.su.se

Dr. Richard Weiskopf
University of Innsbruck
richard.Weiskopf@uibk.ac.at

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The editors special thanks go to Lena Olaison (University of Essex/ Copenhagen Business School) for her work with bringing this manuscript into its published form. This work has been invaluable to us in finalizing the process.

Daniel and Monika

(BE)FORE WORDS

In the academic context the economy used to be presented as an arena for simplistic exchange where supply directs demand or demand advises supply. Economists, lead by Edith Penrose, have only slowly realized that the economy, as much as the social world at large, is genuinely relational. Early Scandinavian researchers pointed out that industrial markets should be considered as relational constructs and Manuel Castells later advised us to imagine the economy as generally networked. These invitations to a relational viewpoint suggest that both the supplier and the customer will change as their partnership evolves. As a management concern, however, this mutual learning has only been recognized as an organizational rather than an embodied phenomenon. According to Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, the authors of the pioneering but also colonizing work *The Experience Economy*, the producers of dramatic and individualized offerings seem to stand above those experiencing, as if the suppliers' minds resided over the bodies of their customers. Customers are identified as helpless clients that are told to expose themselves so that the producers can make them experience. There is obviously a need for another perspective on the experience economy, one that invites producers as well as consumers to jointly make the economy into also an arena for aesthetic and emotional encounters. This present volume seems to meet such expectations, but its different contributions also extend our understanding far beyond received knowledge of the economy.

As a point of departure for their organizing of this book, its editors, Daniel Hjorth and Monika Kostera, succinctly present their understanding of experiences: they are always embodied and immediate; there is always a subject experiencing something, space for play and new openings is always there; and experience is always about enacting, making dreams come true. These statements may well reflect wishful thinking in a world populated by human beings who are disci-

plined by standards and routines embedded in gravity. There is, though, a large group of citizens and consumers who acknowledge that every market resides in an experience economy that is created in order to serve them. I have the children in mind. The toys they are given, as well as the common things that they construct as toys, become part of their play and integrated into their own, always emerging worlds. Children spontaneously absorb the experiences that adults stage as education or entertainment, which, in turn, crafts their identities. While adults as producers and consumers have a need to present themselves as providers and recipients of “experiences”, children treat everyday playing, spontaneous socializing, as well as educating, imposed experiences in similar ways.

Children do not only practice the saying “make an experience” and create their world out of experiences, they also epitomize entrepreneurship as social organizing, as they work on their own identities and realize the potentialities that an emergent world offers. Children spontaneously take initiative and intuitively stage the work/play needed to make imagination turn into real social projects or artifacts. Whatever the context, whether an institutionalized formal setting or a natural or manmade catastrophe, children soon establish an arena for playing. A place of refuge is spontaneously created, sometimes amidst the structure and order imposed by the adult world, sometimes when facing the disorder produced by a catastrophe. Today the information and communication technology has expanded the children’s and adolescents’ possibilities to create their own worlds into which elder generations then are guided. Because of their “enculturation”, grown-ups lose their ability to impulsively affirm and expand upon situated experiences. Sometimes, however, people locally enact entrepreneurship in the face of an apocalypse as in the story about the Sarajevo Film Festival being told in this book. Events such as film festival, usually staged in order to cause a rupture in everyday life, thus may appear, or be experienced, as stabilizing in a world that is in physical, mental, and social disorder.

As adults we generally welcome the label and practice of a (special) experience economy that is visited when everyday life becomes too dull. We deport spontaneous experimenting, and playing to special settings in time and space where our educated submission to socially constructed and self-imposed discipline can be relaxed. This book tells several stories about how producers on the market—from film-producers and designers of products and localities, to the organizers of sports events—stage such experiences in order to deliver their audiences from the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life. On the other

hand, the very mission of designed experiences is, sometimes, in the name of nostalgia, to offer, the possibility of return to everyday life where and when it used to be. Human beings seem to have an existential need for traveling in space and time, whatever the direction.

This book is obviously written by a team of dedicated authors, committed to a reporting on different images of entrepreneurship and the experience economy. Although the approaches used, whether discursive or empirical, only marginally challenge the norms of the academic community, they are but forward by authors who themselves seem to be moved by their research. Some authors have even experienced the very events that they report. Such close-up research certainly brings life to the stories told and inspires others to continue a much-needed inquiry into the interface between the experience economy and entrepreneurship as two promising fields. I see four reasons for this urge: First, the experience economy challenges, in a fundamental way, the view that entrepreneurial activity originates in innovation in physical space alone. Human ingenuity, with all its faculties, invites itself into every setting where human activity appears, establishing its own playgrounds for entrepreneurship. Schumpeter could explain why the introduction of railway technology radically changed the competitive environment for horse-drawn coaches but he obviously could not imagine the return of the coaches as exciting means of transportation within an experience economy. Second, intense human encounters, the hallmark of the experience economy, incessantly produce coincidences, which, through entrepreneurial initiative, will soon enough turn into opportunities, subsequently materializing into ventures. Third, the emergent experience economy brings promises in terms of bilateral learning and mutual identity formation. We already know that successful entrepreneurs especially appreciate critical customers as advisors on instrumental learning. What is more, entrepreneurship is as much about identity and sense making as about market and money making. The experience economy appears as a potential “democratic” arena where producers and customers are invited to jointly remake their identities and understandings of the world. Fourth, communication and information technology not only liquidates distances in space (and therefore) in time; interactive technology, in particular, promises a more dynamic and flexible stage for entrepreneurial activity.

This book itself is a meeting point for different contributors to the understanding of the experience economy. Some of them take the fine arts as their point of departure in while others keep a strong foothold in managerial, often industrial, contexts as they inquire into the world of

experience. This combination is captured by the idea of the “creative industries”. On one hand we are told how artists may dress as entrepreneurs and what someone with an aesthetic eye may generally have to say about entrepreneurship, while on the other we see how industrial designers, farms, and industrialized localities may combine managerial and rationalistic approaches with emotional attachment and commitment to place. The book chapters invite the reader to use her or his own eyes and mind to draw personal lessons from the readings.

Reading the different contributions to this book however also enforces my desire to see more (personal) experiences of the researcher included into entrepreneurship research generally and entrepreneurship research in the context of the experience economy in particular. Knowing that somebody interweaves a personal experience when telling stories from the experience economy, as in the chapter on sports, adds an extra dimension to the reading. From my own experience, I know the excitement associated with enacting a venture in the vicinity of the experience economy. The project that comes to mind was not just about getting closer to the unfolding of the process and thus being able to reveal its micropractices, but was also intriguing because it challenged the boundary between myself as researcher and (inter)active agent. The contributors to this book invite me to further consider how, exactly, entrepreneurship and the experience economy address experience as a genuinely relational phenomenon. For researchers this means, as I see it, not denying the importance of personal involvement as a means to insight and a recognition of the need for a “bodily turn” in the social sciences. As much as embodied, tacit knowledge provides the context that renders formal knowledge its meaning, our encounters and experiences as complete human beings of flesh and blood define what contributions we may make when we present ourselves as researchers. Considering the stakeholders in the experience economy itself, chiefly its providers and consumers, experiencing, and thus learning, should be recognized as a mutual and embodied exercise.

The majority of the authors of this book are quite closely associated with the Entrepreneurship Research Group at Växjö University. The minority consists of equally dedicated “external” contributors. The constitution of this diverse, yet collective, authorship adds to the promises about the future. Any contribution to an inquiry into the experience economy must provide a minimum of variety, or “requisite” with respect to external challenges as Ashby once stated, in order to be able to grant the views and the tools that make an ever evolving world bring adventure to everyday life. The reader will encounter images of the

experience economy that do not portray it as a temporary relief in the wake of a vanishing industrial economy but as a social setting where informed customers/consumers can share entrepreneurial practices with producers.

Considering the present achievement of a group of (mainly) social science researchers, the prospects for further elaboration on the ideas presented here are favorable indeed. Inviting humanities into the making of an entrepreneurial experience economy can easily be extended beyond art and media. Inquiring into experiences that encompass existential issues calls for a multidisciplinary approach across faculty borders as much as the practice of an experience economy needs cross-sectoral measures that usually thrive in a regional context.

Bengt Johannisson

Professor of entrepreneurship, Växjö University

