

# Sunday Business

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OFF THE SHELF

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## The Season of the Sage

**Y**OU can count on at least three things this time of year: baseball playoffs, pumpkins and a torrent of new business books.

Years ago, publishers started figuring that early fall is the best time to bring out the “big” management/leadership/commerce books, and for two reasons: no one reads business books in the summer, and people will be overwhelmed by the holidays later. And publishers have yet to alter that reasoning.

The fact that business executives are scrambling to meet year-end goals, while simultaneously trying to plan for next year — and so may not have much time for reading — apparently doesn’t get much thought.

So we have new books from the gurus Patricia B. Seybold and John Naisbitt and a lengthy work by Stephen M. R. Covey. Of the three, the most intriguing is “The Speed of Trust” (Free Press, \$26), by Mr. Covey, a Harvard M.B.A. who previously ran the Covey Leadership Center, which featured the work of his father, Stephen R. Covey, a guru in his own right as author of “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.”

The younger Mr. Covey, a potential guru himself, defines trust as a combination of character and competence. And while he never quite proves that trust “is the key leadership competency of the new, global economy,” he does manage to overcome two major flaws in most of the books on trust that surfaced in the aftermath of the Adelphia, Enron and WorldCom scandals.

First, he makes a compelling business case for trust. His argument can be summed up this way: The more that you or your company is trusted, the easier it is to do business and the faster that everyone can proceed.

Second, he explains step by step how to gain the trust of others.

At its heart, Mr. Covey says, being trusted is a function of four factors: Your integrity, your intent (do you have hidden agendas?), your capabilities and your results.

If you act in a way that is consistent with all four — by keeping your word, not trying to spin things when you present your arguments, and delivering what you say you will — people will trust you.

To help ensure that it happens, Mr. Covey devotes substantial space to showing you how to talk straight, correct mistakes and practice accountability and the like.

We will see if this book makes him a business sage. John Naisbitt is already there.

Mr. Naisbitt, the author of “Megatrends,” has, in essence, created two books in one with “Mind Set!” (Collins, \$24.95).

Oh, he is still in the prediction business. Here are two: in coming years, when it comes to globalization, it will be far less important where production takes place than who controls it. And China, he says, is “well on its way to becoming the world’s largest carmaker.”

But far more interesting is the shorter first part of the book, where Mr. Naisbitt explains his 11 key beliefs — his “mind sets” — which color the way he processes information and spots trends.

Perhaps the most interesting, given that most people associate the future with the concept of change, is his conviction that “most things remain constant.” He contends that the oft-quoted business wisdom “The only certainty in business is change” is just not true.

Most businesses “stay in a steady state, day in and day out, year in and year out,” he says. “Yes, products and markets have been altered, mostly for the better, and the tools we used have changed.” But “the basics of buying and selling, of making a profit as a necessary condition of survival — have remained much the same during my 40 years of involvement.”

What follows, he argues, is that change won’t be as fast as you might expect, and that it will ultimately happen only if the benefits of change greatly outweigh the status quo.

If a dramatic change is coming, how will you know when it will happen? Mr. Naisbitt says: “Basic change is the result of a confluence of forces, rarely because of just one force (especially when it is against the received wisdom). Always ask yourself if there are enough different forces at work pushing in the same direction, before you make a judgment.”

A simple example, he says, can be found in “Megatrends,” when he predicted that union membership, then about 25 percent of the work force, would continue to decline

and that “the labor movement was dead.”

He based this prediction on the fact that there was a profound “mismatch between the philosophy of the labor unions (‘treat everyone the same’) and the emerging individualism made possible by technology.”

“This was occurring,” he adds, “at the same time that companies were shifting manufacturing to nonunion states; automation was making fewer workers necessary, and there was growing affluence among workers who were seeking less organized protection.”

All of this, he says, “made labor unions look like dinosaurs waiting for the Mesozoic era to return.”

“It did not,” he adds.

As for Ms. Seybold, the good news is that she offers intriguing insights throughout her new book, “Outside Innovation” (Collins, \$26.95). Innovation occurs, she says, “when customers lead the design of your business processes, products, services and business models.”

For example, she argues, “you no longer win by having the smartest engineers and scientists; you win by having the smartest customers.” And she suggests that you “watch your customers as they do business with you; they will identify the pain points.”

But on the whole, readers who have been paying attention to the business literature — especially the business reviews — won’t find much new ground broken here if they are hoping to learn how to become even more customercentric.

**W**HILE Ms. Seybold is fine at providing a broad framework — identify and study your smartest customers, for example, and provide them with tools so they can use your product or service the way they want — specific “how to’s” are hard to come by, or are confusing. Consider: “For each group of customers you choose to serve, there will be several scenarios that are critical (read valuable) to them at any given point in time. A good rule of thumb is to focus on one to three customer-critical scenarios for each target audience. Then move on to the next scenario for that audience (since you’ve made it easy for them to accomplish their outcomes, they’re ready for the next transformational experience)

Sometimes what is clear to a guru isn’t clear to the rest of us. Unfortunately, that is as predictable as fall foliage tours this time of year. □

Authors are in an annual competition for the eyes of the busy executive.