

C93
N553

教育科学出版社
图书发行部

My Secret Life on the McJob

Lessons from
Behind the Counter
Guaranteed to Supersize
Any Management Style

华南理工大学
图书馆藏书

Jerry M. Newman



E2010000456

McGraw-Hill

New York Chicago San Francisco
Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City Milan
New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore
Sydney Toronto

Copyright © 2007 by Jerry M. Newman. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Except as permitted under the United States Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a data base or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 0 9 8 7 6

ISBN 10: 0-07-147365-3

ISBN 13: 978-0-07-147365-1

Interior design by Lee Fukui and Mauna Eichner

McGraw-Hill books are available at special quantity discounts to use as premiums and sales promotions, or for use in corporate training programs. For more information, please write to the Director of Special Sales, Professional Publishing, McGraw-Hill, Two Penn Plaza, New York, NY 10121-2298. Or contact your local bookstore.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

My Secret Life on the McJob

Acknowledgments

My seven fast food jobs led to three herniated discs. Thanks to Terrie, Erinn, and Kelly for not saying “I told you so.”

Thanks to Bob Black at Kimberly-Clark for the insights that helped guide this book.

To the seven store managers who endured my ineptitude, forgive me!

Thank you, Dean John Thomas and SUNY Buffalo, for giving me time off to work in the fast food industry.

Finally, thanks to the McGraw-Hill team and to Neil Levine who helped make this book possible.

Contents

	Acknowledgments	vii
	Introduction: Would You Like Fries with That Condom?	1
1	The Rules of the Game	11
2	The McJob Isn't McEasy	35
3	The Great Cheese Wars and Other Culture Tales from Behind the Counter	59
4	Will Work for Whoppers!	99
5	Training the Utterly Confused	127

6	Diversity, Discrimination, and Lap Dancing	147
7	I Blame It on Henry Ford	163
8	Reflections on Fast Food	181
	Index	195

Introduction: Would You Like Fries with That Condom?

Why would a distinguished management professor ever contemplate working undercover in a string of fast food eateries? I wish I could give you a single, concrete answer to that question. But there is no one moment of epiphany to explain why I spent 14 months doing just that. I can tell you that the reasons behind this unusual journey began long before I first donned my Arby's cap and extra-tight shirt in December 2003.

Infiltrating the fast food world grew out of a single question: "What goes *on* here?!" This is a question I'm sure many fast food patrons find themselves asking on a regular basis—and probably for the same reasons I did when a breakfast run with my daughter back in early 1998 went terribly wrong. Now, I'm sure there have been countless individuals who have had experiences similar to mine, and they didn't choose

to embark on a life-altering, one-person mission. They weren't driven to uncover how this industry survives and even thrives despite a host of challenges ranging from shifting consumer trends, to commoditized products, to rapid turnover. No, they didn't take 14 months out of their lives to travel around the country to the extreme annoyance of their significant others—they let the incident *go*. This brings me to the second underlying cause for my actions. I'm an academic, and the very same proclivities—I'm highly inquisitive and need to get to the reasons behind general assumptions—that serve me so well as a professor drove me on my quest.

In this book, you're going to get *me* at full throttle (you've been warned), so let's begin with a personal assessment. Working in the academic arena for as long as I have, it's natural for me to seek scientific explanations for everyday phenomena. For better or worse, as a management professor who specializes in compensation and other human resources issues, I am constantly ferreting out the reasons behind and solutions for issues that frustrate managers every day, from leadership to operations to customer satisfaction. With these character traits firmly in place and having taken root over the course of decades, I was almost driven to understand just what goes on in fast food after a defining experience transformed me from a mild-mannered, though sometimes trying, university professor into a secret agent, undercover employee working behind fast food counters in seven restaurants spread across the Midwest, East, and South.



Now that you have a sense of my own personal makeup, let me describe the experience I shared with my daughter, Kelly, which since its occurrence in March 1998 has gone down in the annals of Newman-family lore.

As with all teenagers, Kelly found her daughterly manners when she turned 17 and yearned for a driver's license. I'd like to say that she had come to the end of a "phase" when she asked for my help in getting her learner's permit, but that was not the case: It was the call of the open road that prompted Kelly to ask for my assistance in her quest for that teenage Holy Grail. That's how we happened to be out on a cold March morning, inching our way over snowy Buffalo, New York, streets.

Thinking to avoid traffic, I suggested an early start on a sunless Sunday. Reluctantly, Kelly agreed to get started at 6:30 a.m. And, naturally, my logic prevailed: Learning with no diversions like behemoth 18 wheelers and geriatric grandmas made sense to her. If we survived (I actually think I said "When we're finished!"), I agreed to a little breakfast at one of the local fast food chains to celebrate her first driving experience.

I'll skip the driving stories. I'm alive to write this, so nothing too serious could have happened—at least until we sat down at a table in the fast food restaurant. Kelly is a finicky eater. How that's possible in a fast food restaurant I don't know, but she likes to inspect and rearrange what she eats

before diving in. Me? Not so much. My breakfast sandwich was good. I like bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches. My joy was short-lived. I heard Kelly screech, “OH MY GOD—WHAT IS THIS?” Not even daring to touch it, she showed me an open sandwich with what looked to me like the tip of a condom sticking out between the egg and the bacon.

Now, I don’t typically think of myself as the overprotective fatherly type, but this sight instantly outraged me. I’m not sure what made me madder: a foreign object that was moments away from being eaten by my baby or the prospect of my having to explain what a condom was and speculating about how that condom got in the sandwich in the first place.

Maybe today, as an experienced fast food worker, I would recognize the condom as part of a rubber or plastic glove. Maybe today, I would see that it was the sliced-off tip of an index finger of that glove. At that moment, though, I thought it was a condom. A red condom to be precise because that was the color I was seeing as I barged to the front of the line at the food counter. “Where’s the manager?!” I bellowed. Seeing my face and hearing the tone of my voice (I’m six feet four inches tall and a big guy—sometimes the big bear bites!), the counter worker wisely chose to summon the manager. As the supervisor approached, I unknowingly channeled the voice of professorial authority. My family says that they don’t know how to define it, but they would tell you that it sounds a little like Beaver Cleaver’s dad on steroids—loud, authoritative, and willing to challenge any opposition.

Holding the sandwich aloft, the unknown object dangling

obscenely over the side, I said, "My daughter found this condom in her sandwich. Do you want to explain to me how this could possibly happen? And what are you going to do to ensure it never happens again?"

By this time I had the attention of everyone waiting to order breakfast, everyone waiting to receive their breakfast, and everyone behind the counter who should have been handling the orders and distribution. For the price of a sandwich on a cold Buffalo Sunday morning, the whole group was getting a tragic comedy in one act.

Looking at the sandwich, the manager said, "Sir, that appears to be a piece of sanitary glove, not a condom." "Well, maybe that's what it is," I continued, undaunted by the correction, "but can you imagine my daughter's face when she bit into this and found what we thought was a condom?" (And actually it was still of concern that this inedible object was included in my daughter's sandwich. Refuse is refuse, after all.) The manager's face visibly moved up one notch of concern. I think the hamburger colleges across the nation must be teaching managers how to cool the mark off. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't know how this happened, but I will gladly refund your money for the sandwich." This minimal response only angered me even more. What was going *on* here?!!! There was no intense inquisition of his employees, no sleuthing to look for the glove with only four and a half fingers, no comp of the whole meal and maybe a few coupons for future meals gratis. Ballistic by this point (to the embarrassment, no doubt, of Kelly), I launched back into verbal

assault mode, “So that’s it? Because of incompetence or worse—sick pranksters—my daughter has a picture frozen in her brain that will probably never leave her.”

The manager notched up to concern level 4, skipping 3: “Would you like to fill out a complaint form, sir?” By now I suspect that talking to the early morning shift manager on a Sunday is not likely to be my best course of action. I asked for the name and phone number of the district manager: “Maybe it is time to go to your boss. I don’t feel this incident is being treated with the seriousness it deserves.” In retrospect, this sounded pompous. But I’m a professor at a research university, and that’s what we do when we don’t know how else to make a point.

On Monday I called the district manager and described the events with, I’m afraid, a bit less of the righteous indignation I had mustered the day before. While he promised to look into the situation, it sounded more like “manager speak” than an actual call to action. I wondered at the time if this was a regular scenario. Recent events at a Wendy’s in Riverside, California, suggested that even stranger finger follies are possible; remember that customer who falsely claimed to find part of a finger in her chili?

In retrospect—particularly now that I know what goes on behind the counters of fast food stores—perhaps I should have considered my daughter lucky that it was only the glove tip she discovered in her sandwich. In any event, at that time, the district manager was only mildly interested in my story, offering somewhat unconvincingly to investigate the incident, plus graciously to give me one month of free

sandwiches. This was his suggested solution? I found his offer humorous in its irony. “So we find a condom in our food, and your solution is to offer me more food?” Hearing the sarcasm in my voice—note to self: sarcasm is not a good negotiating strategy—he replied, “Well, sir, again I’m sorry. And we will investigate. And we are offering you a month’s worth of sandwiches. I’m not sure what else we can do for you.” This is administrativese for “Get lost, this is as good as it’s going to get.” As a last desperate attempt to inflict a small cost on this billion-burger-a-year corporation, my final parting words were these: “Well, I guess you know this means my family will never eat at your restaurant again!” Our acting on that threat lasted about six weeks, and the restaurant seemed to survive just fine during the hiatus.



Yet, for all of its visible flaws, spending time in this world

of fast food restaurants proved to me that the industry often produces good workers, strong managers, and future leaders. How did they get there? What went on behind the counter? Were glove-cutting pranks the norm? What is it about fast food restaurant policies and practices that would spur such sick behavior? In the course of 14 months, even though I didn’t find the answer to the last question, I did become a fast food restaurant convert.



In the next chapter, I’ll explain in detail just how I was
able to get hired at not just one but seven restaurants. I’ll

tell you now that I did have a bit of help in the form of life experience, so I wasn't as much of a newbie as many of my fellow crew members. During my daughter's later teenage years, I began a long stint as volunteer supervisor of a concession stand for Aunt Rosie's Fastpitch Softball Tournaments. Aunt Rosie's runs the largest girls' tournaments in the Northeast, with summer weekends almost always attracting several hundred girls, parents, and fans—many of whom descended on our concession stand after games ended. For the first few years we cooked only hot dogs and hamburgers. Limited menus made lunch rush relatively easy. Over time, though, I expanded the menu, and as the menu lengthened, so did the lines. As both the cook and the supervisor, I found the job a lot less fun with customers yelling at me for delayed orders, incorrect orders, or poorly cooked food. As my small concession stand became more like fast food restaurants, my curiosity about those restaurants grew even more intense.



So now you see how a number of factors influenced my interest in learning more about the fast food restaurant business. Then opportunity turned my musings into reality. One of the pertinent things about my university job is that I focus on issues facing modern managers particularly as they relate to hiring, retaining, and compensating workers. So in the fall of 2003, I applied for a sabbatical to research management trends in fast food restaurants. My hypothesis was that the fast food industry is a pioneer in managing when

INTRODUCTION

cost control is imperative. In my research, I would focus on those management practices that were found to be both cost-effective for the business and beneficial to the employees and determine if it was possible to apply these findings generally to other businesses to improve productivity, keep turnover down, and control labor costs. In a nutshell, I yearned to understand how management practices are altered when margins are low and cost control becomes the most critical element in sustaining a business.

I believe my findings are valuable, although ironically not in an academic sense but as a string of astute man-on-the-street observations. The following chapters detail my story, full of hard-knock experiences in what it takes to be successful in a cost-conscious business—as both an employee and a manager.

