

# Bosses hang out at fast-food joints for invaluable tips

## Business or Pleasure

JOB SWAP

CEOs who make the beds or flip burgers can gain customer insights, says Rhymer Rigby

**M**y intention," says Nigel David, "was to work as a member of staff, and I wanted as real an experience as possible."

So the chief executive of the online room-booking business Eviivo went to work in a 15th-century bed and breakfast for a couple of days.

"I got up at a ridiculous hour and did breakfast," Mr David recalls of his time at Strand House in Winchelsea, near Rye on the UK's south coast.

Then the reality of daily life for his customers – managers of hotels and B&Bs – dawned on him. "While I'm [cooking] the phone rings and I take a booking and write it down in a diary; then it needs entering on the system. Next, I had to do the checking out, so you have to prepare bills and check bars. Then you have to clean rooms. It just goes on and on."

He finished, he says, "at the end of dinner service, absolutely knackered" and went straight to bed.

Mr David's reason for toiling at a B&B was simple – he wanted to see how his company's frontdesk product worked in a real-life environment.

Many executives have spent time working with their own employees at the sharp end. But it's unusual for managers to spend time on a customer's shop floor to see how they grapple with their products and services.

Such arrangements are, however, routine at Summersault Communications, the contract publishers. Sam Tame, managing editor, says: "Before any of the team work on a publication, we go and do three days at the coal face. The key thing is to be able to put yourself in the reader's shoes."

One of her more memorable stints was working in a McDonald's, where she flipped burgers, cleaned surfaces and worked the tills.

Her time working in the restaurant taught her a number of things. First, it showed her the kind of person she was aiming at. "Your target audience are busy 15-to-24-year-olds who eat their lunch in under



Undercover: Nigel David at work at the sharp end

45 minutes and will be chatting to their mates. That's the environment the magazines have to work in."

Second, it helps when writing the actual articles. "You really understand that when you call a restaurant and they have a huge queue of customers at the tills and the drive-through, answering your questions may not be the top priority."

Kuljit Kaur, head of business development at P&MM, an employee incentives company, agrees that there's no substitute for immersion. She has worked undercover in call centres and car dealerships and values the experience because it reinforces the fact that the shop floor and company headquarters are often miles apart.

"You can say that you're going to incentivise call centre operatives to give 100 per cent information. But if you're on the phone to a [customer] who is really shouting at you and won't listen to a word you say, you really have to ask yourself how you manage the quality of that call. And if you've been called everything under the sun is a £5 reward worth it?"

She adds that the experience can curb the tendency to stereotype professions. "In the automotive industry, people live and breathe their jobs and have some amazing stories. You need to get out and see that.

"If you just sit around a boardroom table, you don't have a clue. In fact, we often find that many of our clients don't really understand what motivates people at the sharp end."

And this, perhaps, is the real point. "It's always different to how you imagine it will be," says Ms Tame. "Working there brings home just how different."

Mr David says that seeing how the system worked on the ground prompted him to make a number of changes at his booking business.

Apart from this, there is something to be said for getting out of the day-to-day routine and having a bit of fun, says Ms Tame. She found working for her clients exhilarating, while Ms Kaur says it was exciting.

"I love meeting people and I want to do it more often," she says.

Those who spend their working lives at the sharp end have no complaints about their visitors. Mary Sullivan, the owner of Strand House, says she asked Mr David to try the experiment when they met at an awards dinner: "He couldn't get his head around us still having a paper reservations book.

"Now he understands why I carry it everywhere and sleep with it under my pillow," she says.

It has been good for their working relationship, she adds: "I know I can call him any time and he can sound me out on ideas. Besides, he looked very nice in an apron with a feather duster."