Szostek, A. (2020). *The umami strategy. Stand out by mixing business with experience design.* Amsterdam, Netherlands: BIS Publishers.

The Umami Strategy is written on the premise customers ultimately buy or return because of the experience and not the product or service. To design experiences requires leaders who have a vision and who seek to create an umami, or ‘deliciousness’ in this experience. The author provides a toolkit to build the unique strategy and experiences that drives customers to amplify the stories of these well curated thoughtful experiences. April K. Mills, author of *Everyone is a Change Agent* states “Blending insights at the leading edge of experience strategy with detailed implementation tactics, Aga shows you how to think and act your way to your unique experience.” This book finds the intersection of leadership, creativity and experience and anchors it in metrics, showing the value of crafting memorable moments. The content and context are drawn from twenty years blending academia and industrial research applied to practical business design with proven significant positive results across a range of industries.

To understand the impact of experiences begins with understanding the nature of expectations and their naturally conflicted state between the experiencing self and the remembering self. All experiences are a cognitive illusion as we compare the ideal to the real world. We face our own real worlds with some Optimism Bias where our Remembering Selves seek out and recall positive interactions which may or may not come to pass for our Experiencing Selves. These selves come with an innate Zone of Tolerance and when we get our minimum expectations met and nothing special is connected to the brand, we do not develop a relationship with the brand. This understanding led them to developing the Experience Equation that tries to reflect the potential chemical reactions of our brain to create the positive memories that align customer with brand, and its product or service.

Impressions of the

Experiencing self = Memories of the Remembering self

Expectations

Chances are you recognize this feeling, from the anticipation whether going to the bank or planning a vacation, and how different touchpoints along the way led you to have a positive, mediocre or negative experience. How we remember and share that experience with others is the key for organizations. There are many concrete examples shared in the book, from the customers who connect to Tom’s Shoes founder Blake Mycoskie starting his One for One program which delivers one pair of shoes to a child in need for each purchased, to stories of managing unhappy customers with true empathy. Every story resonates and offers context for allowing creativity to flourish and ultimately deliver the most engaged employees and customers. As an experience designer I found myself linking each of these ideas back to a concrete positive experience outcome and consider a way in which an experience, from a line-up to style of chair suited to its specific function could enhance an experience and create a strong customer story that encourages them to amplify their interaction with a brand moment.

Practical tools fill the final two-thirds of this book, taking us deep into challenging our own assumptions and taking a deeper plunge as a leader to enable your team and differentiate your brand from ‘just above average’ in your competitive set to truly remarkable on its own. It starts with data and setting an Umami Baseline based on what your customers share about your brand. It moves into defining an aspirational Umami vision and then the critical step of defining what the author refers to as the ‘Edges’, the key differentiators that make your brand stand out. Finally, metrics, knowing if it cannot be measured it does not matter. Knowing what people are saying about your brand is critically important, for celebrating and equally to detect and fix fail points as rapidly as possible.

A key principle is Positive Adaptation and the truth that all organizations will require some level of innovation or adaptation to survive. It can feel hard to keep up and one suggested method to slow down positive adaptation is delivering alignment between customers and your brand purpose. The BIG example organization is Patagonia, and in 2020 when this book was written there was no way to imagine their founder Yvon Chouinard would take the massive step he did recently to move all profits to a trust that will fund sustainable initiatives going forward, a giant step for those who buy based on a cause connection first. While there are many opinions on this as a strategy, we can agree it is clearly an Umami Differentiator.

It would not be possible to talk about change and how we address it without recognizing we live in a time of deep complexity and the author addresses this reality and encourages us to continue to practice experimentation, being sure to monitor the impact and adapt your strategy based on data and focus on success that is your own and not easily replicated by others.

This is truly a cookbook for building the secret sauce that will make each business seek greater awareness about their uniqueness and learn to embrace and lean into the power of this. This is where Creative Problem Solving comes in. No matter how great the product or service or plan you have, the reality is we need to continue to evolve and respond to changing consumer needs and adapt strategically. Clearly, developing the skills to ask questions and encourage curiosity and develop open spaces where it is possible to nourish a feeling of positive adaptation is a core competitive differentiator. As we grow our skills in facilitation, we can feel comfortable knowing we have the opportunity to be in high demand and can affect positive outcomes. This book will be another in the arsenal of excellent resources that allow us to build our own toolkits and practices going forward and I believe you will enjoy the reading and associated reflections as much as I did. It sounds as you gained much from this book. I’m glad.