

## Camps and the Transformation Economy

Sam Aboudara March 1, 2024

What do hibachi restaurants and summer camps have in common? Before I answer that, let me provide some context.

Earlier this year, I dined at a hibachi restaurant for the first time. I sat up at the bar and watched the chef perform his theatrics. You might be familiar with the drill — there was the heart-shaped rice, the cool flaming onion trick, and utensil juggling. It was truly a great show, and the food itself was decent enough. When the check came, I didn't bat an eyelid. We paid and went home.

Later on, it dawned on me that I had definitely overpaid for the quality of meal we had eaten, and yet I happily did so. Interestingly, I was not the only one. The place was packed, and I must have heard "Happy Birthday" sung no fewer than 15 times (including once for me). Why were so many people choosing to celebrate special occasions at a restaurant with relatively average food? What I had encountered was an example of the experience economy, which is where the summer camp comparison resides.

The experience economy was an idea first coined by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore in 1998. In their writings, they argued that the success of many future businesses would be measured by their ability to excite and amaze consumers through orchestrating memorable events, and that the memory itself would serve as the product. Sounds a lot like camp, right?

To explain the experience economy further, it's helpful to understand what it has evolved from. Many products begin as commodities. Take coffee, for example. Buying raw coffee beans is the cheapest way to make coffee. They sell for maybe a couple dollars per pound. We would call this the commodity economy. But most of us buy manufactured coffee products, usually already roasted, ground, or even in pod form. Here we might spend \$10–\$20 per pound as part of the goods economy. Then there are the cups of coffee that are made for us, perhaps from a local coffee shop or Dunkin Donuts. Here we're willing to spend a few dollars for a single cup. We are now operating within the service economy.

Pine and Gilmore suggest that the experience economy is the fourth and final evolution of economic growth, where businesses can charge the greatest amount for the most differentiated product. In our coffee example, this might be a unique kind of coffee shop with the perfect music, lighting, and ambience. It has a barista who makes wildly impressive art in the frothed milk on top of your latte. It produces the kinds of experiences that we feel compelled to share with our friends or take photos of to post on social media. It excites and amazes us in ways that elevate our mood beyond the typical day-to-day.

Camps are living and breathing examples of the experience economy. We have spent decades talking about our value in ways beyond simple childcare provision (service economy). We create thousands of special moments daily — through the way we welcome new campers on opening day, the atmosphere felt around a campfire song session, the facilitated moments of children conquering their fears or trying things for the first time, and the small, intimate bunk activities that happen right before bedtime. Every day at camp provides countless examples that firmly position it as a player in the experience economy, all of which help justify the price tag and support camp's value proposition.

Yet one further economy is perhaps even more fitting to think about for camps: the transformation economy. This is a much more recently discussed idea that follows on from Pine and Gilmore's model. The transformation economy suggests that rather than the product being the consumer's memories, the product is in fact a better and improved consumer (Van Der Peijl, 2020). Consumers who are looking for more than just an experience are

seeking meaning and authenticity. This idea draws from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which proposes that the highest tier of human need is self-actualization, the complete realization of one's talents and potential (Pichère & Cadiat, 2015). An individual who shops in the transformation economy is making choices that are extremely personal, which means the offerings must be customizable and provide a lasting impact. Some good examples of the transformation economy are life coaches, wellness retreats, CrossFit, lifestyle brands, and — you guessed it — summer camps.

We all know anecdotally that camp changes people's lives for the better, in profound but also very simple and routine ways. Thanks to longitudinal evaluations such as the American Camp Association's National Camp Impact Study, there is now empirical evidence to back up this assertion (2022). When we combine immersive and stripped-down experiences that focus on human connection and personal development over the course of multiple summers, the result is extraordinary, formative, and transformative growth.

How can we make sure that the way we are thinking and talking about camp matches its well-deserved membership in the transformation economy? How do we help our prospective clientele understand that camp is more than just childcare and transcends the experiential bucket?

### **Know Your Brand**

Every camp has a brand. Not solely a catchy logo and tagline, but a real brand, a sense of what they are and, more importantly, what they are not. Camps need to acutely understand what they do best, what they do differently from others, what their natural lane is (and isn't), and who their ideal audience is. Consumers in the transformation economy are looking for authenticity, and camps can only be authentic with a clear sense of self.

### **Communicate Authentically and Vulnerably**

We often believe that every external-facing business effort has to be polished and refined. That's not to say that sloppiness should be embraced, but there is a big difference between being sloppy and being real, honest, and vulnerable. Shoppers in the transformation economy understand the difference. As important as highly produced promotional videos are, a significant demand also exists for rough and raw content that feels more authentic and vulnerable. Camps should strive for a healthy balance of the two in an effort to build an image of professionalism and transparency.

### **Point to the Proof in the Pudding**

Nothing yells transformation quite like real, relatable examples. Build a bank of case studies and testimonials in written, audio, photo, and video form. Leverage your "camp-bassadors" so that they can spread the good word through their own authentic voice but in a way that is productive and supportive of camp. Strong storytelling is an invaluable tool in the transformation economy, and camps have great stories to tell.

### **Model Your Doctrine**

As purveyors of authenticity, we must live by our beliefs and stay true to our brand. Should a theoretical brand auditor visit your camp, they should be able to see clear examples of your brand running deeply through every aspect of your operations. It should inform how you prioritize spending, how you navigate personnel challenges, how you inform policy decisions — and even how you label and name programs, groups, and traditions.

Many examples of the transformation economy phenomenon are relatively new. Companies like SoulCycle, Airbnb, and Tesla have all leaned into the ingredients of transformation and found recipes for success. Meanwhile, camps have been operating in this space for generations, many unaware of it, but casually going

about their business and dramatically changing lives in the process. We deserve credit for the impact we make and the intention and design behind it. Now is our time to harness that.

*Photos courtesy of Ghostlight Theater Camp, Oakland, ME.*

## **References**

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*Sam Aboudara is the chief operating officer and executive director of NJY Camps, one of North America's largest collection of Jewish overnight camps. He has plans to visit a hibachi restaurant in the future and just enjoy the food!*