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B-SCHOOL Q&A March 22, 2007, 7:28PM EST

Learning on the McJob

Buffalo B-school prof Jerry Newman talks about going undercover as a burger slinger to find out more about fast-food workers and managers

Jerry Newman, distinguished professor at University at Buffalo (N.Y.) School of Management, traded in his blackboard for a cardboard hat for 14 months in the name of research. He went undercover to work behind the counter at seven fast-food restaurants, including McDonald's ([MCD](#)) and Burger King ([BKC](#)). What he discovered is that the world of drive-through windows and fries is full of hard-working, honest people trying to make ends meet.

In his recently released book, *My Secret Life on the McJob* (McGraw-Hill, 2007), Newman focuses on the tips he gleaned from fast-food managers. But, he says, his book isn't your traditional leadership bible à la someone like Jack Welch. This book, rather, is about what Newman calls "followership," a look at management from the perspective of the workers. If you ever wondered what your staff thinks about you, then this is a must read—if you can stomach the good with the bad.

Already, many of the fast-food companies featured in the book have Newman traveling in the U.S. and Europe to give speeches about what he unearthed on the McJob. He recently discussed his discoveries with BusinessWeek.com reporter [Francesca Di Meglio](#). Here are edited excerpts from their conversation:

What motivated you to write this book?

When my youngest daughter was 16 years old, we were out on a Buffalo street on a Sunday morning for a driving lesson, and I survived. As a reward, we went to a fast-food restaurant for breakfast sandwiches. She opened up the sandwich and sticking out of it was what appeared to be a condom.

I brought it up to the counter, and the manager came over. I said, "What's this condom doing in the middle of the sandwich?" He held up his pinky finger and said, "Sir, that's not a condom. It's the tip of a sanitary latex glove." I replied, "I don't care what it is. What's it doing in my sandwich?" Then, he said, "We'd be glad to give you a coupon for 10 sandwiches." I said, "Wait a minute! You gave me a sandwich with what looks like a condom in it and then you tried to bribe me with 10 more of those same sandwiches." That launched this whole project.

Did the experience meet your expectations?

I was trying not to have expectations, but that's really hard to do. Fast food is under attack right now. If you listen to Eric Schlosser [author of *Fast Food Nation* (Harper Perennial, 2005)], everything in the world is the fault of

fast food. What really surprised me the most is that this brush that's painting fast food as evil is also painting fast-food workers as bad. I really object to that.

These folks are intelligent and hard working. An executive from a pharmaceutical company once told me that when he sees fast-food work on somebody's résumé, he views it as a plus. He knows the applicant is reliable, because if he's not reliable, he would have gotten fired from a fast-food place. He knows the applicant can handle pressure because lunchtime at a fast-food restaurant is sheer insanity. If you can survive and do that job for six months, you have good skills to launch any career.

There's something to be learned from fast food. McDonald's, Burger King, and A&W all launched in the 1950s, which gives them lots of experience (see BusinessWeek.com, 2/5/07, "[McDonald's 24/7](#)"). They've been thinking about ways to manage with low costs for much longer than most places.

What can people learn about business from this book?

What most people know of fast-food work is people singing, "Have it your way," or Kevin Federline dreaming about being a musician in commercials. They don't see that behind the counter, there's a lot of hard work. The first thing to learn is that good managers lay things out for employees, and they're honest about the reality of the job.

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