

“This book will challenge your assumptions and inspire you to rethink the fundamentals of retail success.”

—Stefano Caroti, President and CEO, Deckers Brands

It's Not the BRICKS, It's the MORTAR

**Optimize Your RETAIL BUSINESS
for LASTING SUCCESS**

Mike Cosentino

The master in the art of living makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his information and his recreation, his love and his religion. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence in whatever he does, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing. To him, he's always doing both.

—JAMES MICHENER

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Preface

If I'm honest, even I would ask myself this question: Has not enough been written about brick-and-mortar retail and the imperatives necessary for such bold and benevolent enterprises to thrive? To me, it seems the volume of content is already overwhelming. From bestselling books to barely read blogs, this is a theme drowning in commentary.

Equally intimidating, there are regular cold splashes of reality that reinforce concern. In 2021, the retail industry soberly endured the permanent closure of ten thousand doors while overall consumer spending grew at a booming 8 percent. More recently, UBS (a top-20 bank in global assets) shared its belief that it will be lights-out for another forty to fifty thousand stores in the United States by 2026. Whether confirmed or prospective, these types of casualty rates leave a scar on both Main Street and Wall Street—but the dismal headlines no longer seem to surprise either consumers or investors.

Yes, I'm certain I could find a less crowded topic with more momentum to study and editorialize on . . .

Nonetheless, I'm bothered. More specifically, it bothers me that everything I've recently and regularly heard or read in this critical service sector

is perspective and guidance from people who likely mean well, *but*—they’re not actually doing it. They are not doing retail. They are not tangibly tied to the daily operations of the more than four million brick-and-mortar retail establishments in the United States. They are not fully immersed in on-site or online selling. They are not directly dependent upon their own provision of hospitality. Or customer service. Or procurement. Or anything that is observably linked to the business of providing these *real* services that *really* matter.

Simply put, they are *not* in the arena.

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.”

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT, FROM SPEECH AT
THE SORBONNE, PARIS, APRIL 23, 1910

The irresistible resolve in this presidential quote presents an opposing side to my dilemma. Its spirit inherently defies popular speculation and can be invoked to dismiss the notion that content promoting retail-related prosperity is either dated or saturated. Even better, it is on this side where we find those who already represent an industry that perpetually proves it is greatly resilient and generationally relevant. Standing together, it is all of us who consciously choose pursuits that result in honest commerce, beautifully illustrated through our personally connected service propositions. Every day. We are living it. Breathing it. Betting on it. And betting so much on ourselves.

And, man, so many of us are doing it, oh, so well! We know the retail industry can be a dazzling storefront window into the societal importance we assign to service and serving others. It is legacy work that deserves to be preserved, sustained, continued, and consistently improved.

Despite the naysayers and the negative prospects frequently associated with retail as a discipline or an industry, I've resolved my hesitation as to whether more should be published about this profession . . . I guess you could say I care too much to share too little.

But! Hear this, too: The consequences of our decisions and actions are our constant companions. And there are times when we want or even need to step away from our occupational role. In chapter 1, I share how these lessons unfolded for me. Through the most uncertain season of my life, I learned it is only when we reduce or even unfasten our involvement that our example, our delegation, our training curriculum, and our operational processes are materially tested. The success of our enterprise—and the sum of our previous efforts—becomes fully dependent upon how well we have intentionally prepared others for what we may have initially felt only we could do.

It is this hard-realized awareness that guides this manuscript. As researcher and university professor Brené Brown assertively suggests, “Regret is a fair, but tough, teacher.”¹ I too have found this to be true. In fact, it was this otherwise icky condition that influenced me to greatly adjust my approach to leadership in my retail business. I will refer to this specific adjustment on the pages that follow as “Uninvolved Optimization.” Like much that is difficult at the onset, it has led to an upgraded version of myself and an improved future for others.

Just as importantly, this approach has a prerequisite: “Involved Maximization.” Both concepts underlie a syllabus that goes far beyond basic business survival tactics. Let’s formally define them, remembering that the process of Involved Maximization precedes that of Uninvolved Optimization as a critical frontload:

Involved Maximization (Task-Oriented): The conscious decision and concerted effort of a leader to approach a project, department

or enterprise in a manner that combines the pursuit of results with an intent to transition future iterations of the effort to others.

Uninvolved Optimization (Target-Focused): The condition in which a project, department or enterprise is operating effectively without direct involvement or instruction from a senior leader and/or key predecessor in the effort.

To be direct, this should be the pervasive approach for motivated leaders with meaningful targets. Whether pursuing new-and-improved products, ambitious goals, undeveloped possibilities or enduring contributions, the ever-shifting demands of change and growth mandate leaders to be on the move without stagnation, lethargy or collapse in their wake. The earned latitude with Uninvolved Optimization is *not* a systematic hack or shortcut to less work or responsibility. If anything, it is the opposite, as the pursuit of potential is perpetual—and consequential. For top performers, seasons of personal-time poverty are necessary with Involved Maximization to ensure a target-rich future through Uninvolved Optimization. The continuous transition from IM to UO requires the best retail leaders to achieve mastery of both. They consciously remain devoted to Uninvolved Optimization while strategically—and visibly—engaging in Involved Maximization.

So let us delay no longer. The bricks have arrived—and the mortar is being mixed. We will start with a foundation that ensures peak performance in the most critical aspects of our craft and close only when we have a level of confidence that matches the potential impact of our passionate endeavors.

—JULY 11, 2024 (BLUE RIDGE, GA)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As a former national-class endurance athlete, Mike Cosentino has more recently put his persistence to work in the retail industry and as the founder of multiple service-sector businesses. His Big Peach Running Co. and Big Peach Ride + Run concepts are among some of the sporting goods industry's most awarded and most successful privately held retailers. He has consulted with hundreds of other business leaders in various channels and has been a keynote speaker for numerous organizations, including Cox Enterprises, Nike, Inc., Sports Distributors of Canada, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Sporting Goods Association. Before his entrepreneurial ventures, he was employed by The Coca-Cola Company and the Atlanta Braves National League Baseball Club. He and his wife, Inge, live on a poultry and alpaca rescue farm in Blue Ridge, Georgia. They have two adult children, Campbell and Monica, who remain the inspiration for this book and for much they do.

“Mike Cosentino establishes the importance of ‘filling and sealing gaps’ to achieve Uninvolved Optimization. Learn that term and master it to withstand the inevitable. Mike’s experience, leadership and deep knowledge of retail makes this a must-read for retail leadership.”

—Dan Sheridan, CEO, Brooks Running

Brick-and-mortar retail faces unprecedented challenges. Many might suggest this is when growth-minded leaders have no choice but to personally tighten their operational grip and take complete control of their endeavors. But business mentor Mike Cosentino believes otherwise.

As a successful retail entrepreneur, Cosentino knows now is the time to strive for Uninvolved Optimization—the ultimate destination for total team empowerment. His new book arms leaders with relatable examples and critical formulas to create and maintain processes that raise organizational potential to its peak.

Through a battle-tested blend of both soft and hard skills, readers will come away with proven concepts such as Experience by Committee, Environment and Interaction, the Service Quotient, and the Immutable Laws of Resource Acquisition.

Whether you’re striving to scale your business or navigate unforeseen challenges, Cosentino makes clear that when service and performance matter most, it’s the mortar—the enduring skills, ever-improving systems, and empowered teams—that truly hold the bricks together!

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