

PUNCHING IN: THE UNAUTHORIZED ADVENTURES OF A FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEE
BY ALEX FRANKEL
BOOK SYNOPSIS

Curious to know just what happens behind the "employees only" doors of large companies, journalist Alex Frankel embarked on an undercover reporting project to find out how some of America's best-known companies win the hearts and minds of their retail and service employees. Frankel knew the only way to find answers was to go native.

During a two-year urban adventure through the world of commerce, Frankel applied for and was hired by a half-dozen companies: he proudly wore the brown uniform of the UPS driver, folded endless stacks of T-shirts at Gap, brewed espressos for the hordes at Starbucks, interviewed (but failed to get hired) at Whole Foods, enrolled in management training at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, and sold iPods at the Apple Store.

At the heart of *Punching In* lies Frankel's quest to find out how some of the giants of commerce turn thousands of average job applicants into loyal—even fanatical—workers. How do they identify and recruit workers who will best fit their companies? How do they indoctrinate employees into their corporate cultures and make them perfect messengers of their brands? Along the way Frankel pauses long enough to wonder why he is so often immune to corporate attempts to win employees over.

In this lively and entertaining narrative, Frankel takes readers on a personal journey into the land of front-line employees to discover why some workers are so eager to believe and which companies are best at creating loyal employees. *Punching In* examines the notion of "corporate culture" and what distinguishes an authentic culture from one that is more talk than substance.

Punching In: The Unauthorized Adventures of Front-Line Employee is a book of business adventure in which Frankel set out to work undercover in the service industry and become the critical face of five companies. You can only learn so much about front-line employees as a customer, or even as a reporter. Frankel knew that to find out how the best companies train and indoctrinate employees, he would have to become one himself. In what wound up as a two-year undercover project, he took a series of entry-level retail jobs and in the process came to understand the world of commerce and the corporate cultures that drive it.

Now, more than ever, people are a stronger strategic weapon used by companies to attract customers, often more important than the service or product a company is selling. In recent years many companies have realized how critical their people are as a means to present a cohesive experience for customers and *Punching In* explains this in detail. Through the jobs he had and the research he conducted, Frankel is able to show the way in which some leading companies train and indoctrinate employees so that they can help the company succeed. Frankel explains new levels of efficiency that include feedback loops that allow external evaluators to judge store staffing abilities.

Punching In tells the story of Frankel's interest in the subject matter, an interest that began when he met a UPS driver who described the level to which the delivery giant studied its service employees so as to improve their efficiency. Following a

long-time interest in working at UPS, Frankel was hired to serve as a driver's assistant for a hectic December delivery season. After his experience "living the brand" at UPS, Frankel went on to apply at a dozen other jobs. *Punching In* is also a personal journey in which Frankel comes to terms with what kind of worker he is. After taking career analysis tests, he knows, going in, that he is a person who "needs the stimulation of constant change" and jobs in which rigid rules are not present. He finds that each workplace matches a person with specific character traits (his happen to match UPS most of all).

Punching In highlights include:

- Working alongside Gap's then-CEO Paul Pressler.
- A group "audition" at The Container Store.
- Wearing the brown UPS uniform.
- Learning the Starbucks drink language by practicing with custom dice.
- Providing roadside customer care for an Enterprise Rent-A-Car customer.

Punching In moves through Frankel's two-year experience, beginning with the hurdles he overcame in applying and interviewing for the many front-line jobs, including group interviews and high-tech online questionnaires in use by many of the most respected retailers. Once he began to receive job offers, Frankel was able to serve roles on the retail front-lines that showed him what it was like to wear a uniform and participate in the collective spirit that drives a company. Frankel embarked on the project convinced that each of the jobs where he would be working would be soulless and the people he would work with would be somehow plastic, but he found these preconceptions were wrong. At every company where he worked, there was always a person on staff that believed unflinchingly in the given enterprise: A superstar barista at Starbucks, a top Mac seller at The Apple Store.

Punching In is filled with many lessons that other companies can apply. Among these lessons:

- 1) Find the right people: Frankel started the project with a feeling that all the front-line jobs he was applying to were jobs that drew from a similar talent pool, but found out otherwise. Someone who elects to work at Starbucks is a very different person from someone who gets hired and stays on for ten years at UPS. There's a self-selection process in play.
- 2) Hire for passion: When you can attract customers to work for your company who arrive as fans of the company before they even start work, you are in good shape. The Apple Store is lucky enough to have a huge group of Apple fans from whom to choose its workers, as is The Container Store. If you don't have a fan base, the next best thing is to match a corporate culture as close as you can to the types of people who will end up working at your company or stores. Enterprise Rent-A-Car is filled with hard charging young achievers and training is catered to that group specifically. But even companies that have devotees don't always look as hard for passion as they should. On its hiring application, Starbucks asked briefly about Frankel's interest in coffee ("What do you like about coffee?") but left it at that.
- 3) Train well and treat new hires like adults: Many companies fail from the start by talking down to their new hires and using training materials geared for the lowest

common denominator. Gap started Frankel's employee orientation on the wrong foot by showing a video about the perils of employee theft. Companies are quite different when it comes to training their employees. Starbucks gears its on-the-job training to the lowest common denominator of employee and presents materials that talk down to new hires. Training at The Apple Store shows a level of respect by treating new hires as peers and having them shadow veterans. Enterprise Rent-A-Car sends new groups of workers off for a week of in-depth classes.

4) Share, don't sell: The best employee/customer relationships are built on trust, which means that the employees must be passionate and knowledgeable enough to share information that they believe in. Customers respond favorably to this honesty and the company benefits. (Apple Store employees share information which is good, but Enterprise Rent-A-Car employees sell largely unneeded insurance "products.")

5) Dress for success: Uniforms that match a job and an employee population are critical. The clean lines of the UPS uniform create an esprit de corps among workers and produce a defined and clear image to customers. Dress codes at a place like Gap can be stifling whereas Starbucks fairly simple look creates a relevant uniformity. Apple requires staff to wear tasteful company-issued T-shirts and lanyards and employee hand out business cards as in high-end clothing stores, an act that calls them out as individuals in a way not typical of traditional retail.

6) Gain a new view: *Punching In*, written as it is from the perspective of a front-line employee, inspires readers to gain their own new views of the companies they work for. Experiencing a corporate training is a lot more insightful than watching it and working with customers is more enlightening than listening to customers in focus groups. An executive who goes through training in a retail store and works a few shifts will return to headquarters wired with new insights on store layout, customer needs, merchandise, and employee satisfaction. More companies should take a cue from the UK's Pret a Manger, which regularly sends out newly hired execs to work in the trenches. You get a different view from the ground floor than from the corner office.