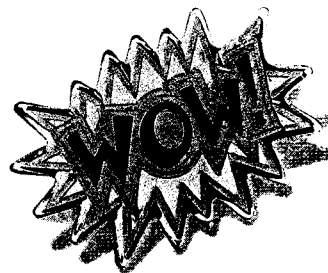


Now That
We Live in A
Tom Peters World ...



Has Tom Peters Gone Crazy?

*Once a counsel to
business titans, guru
Tom Peters now lobbs
exclamation points
at middle managers.
How did he get here?*

BY MARK GIMEIN

IF YOU KNOW ONE THING ABOUT TOM PETERS, YOU KNOW about his first book, and if you know two things, the second is that he hasn't written a book as good as that since, and if you know three things, the third is that sometime in the 18 years since that first precious book, he's gone bonkers.

That's the line on Tom Peters. That somewhere along the way, somewhere between telling business people that they had to face up to the need for a management revolution and posing for photographs in his boxer shorts, somewhere in the movement from Thomas J. Peters, McKinsey partner, to Tom Peters, business guru at large, to "!"—the ever present red exclamation point logo that identifies him as he barnstorms through the shiny new convention centers of America's edge cities—Tom Peters has lost his mind.

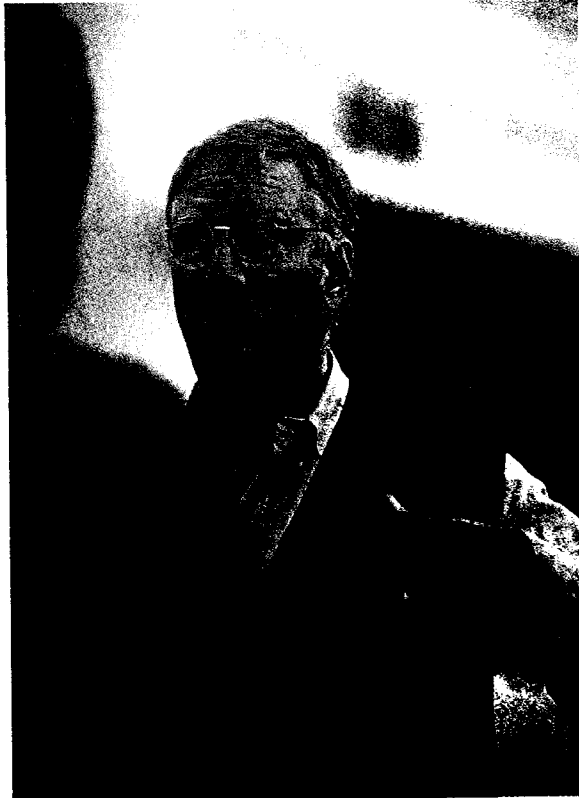
You hear it in the reviews and the biographies, in the invariable verdict that the latest book has yet again failed to live up to the legacy of the first. You hear it in the awkward pauses of the corporate chieftains who profess to be influenced by Peters. You even hear it echo quietly in the elaborate compliments of his closest friend and mentor, Warren Bennis: "Tom is the incarnation of the Emersonian celebration of the American insouciant self—he is Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman." Sure, it's a beautiful line, but in the vocabulary of American business, Peters' chosen milieu, doesn't "Whit-

INSPIRATIONAL?

Peters promotes "Wow" projects. And sells the pins (above) too.

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JESSICA WECKER



MARK RICHARDS (4)

A ROCKIN' ADVENTURE Tom Peters barnstorms America's convention centers (shown here in South San Francisco) spreading the word.

manesque" sound awfully close to a euphemism for "crackpot"? Indeed, there is no shortage of evidence that can be adduced to make the case that the man who was at one time perhaps the most insightful critic of American corporations has fought his way to some isolated isle of irrelevance. Where once Peters told American executives to emulate Hewlett-Packard and 3M, his models now are as likely to be "DeeeeMarvelous" De-Mar plumbing of Clovis, Calif., or Khouri's corner deli in San Francisco. There are the incessant exhortations to turn your latest accounting initiative into a "Rockin' Adventure." There is a profusion of exclamation points lined up like guideposts along the road to self-actualization, a heap of exclamation points that would put Tom Wolfe, the great exclamer of American letters, to shame. And most of all there is The Act, the Tom Peters Seminar, a seminar in which Peters lobbs ever more exclamation points at his terrified audience of accountants, salespeople, and IT managers. A seminar at which Peters discharges

After The Book, it was impossible to talk about business the old way.

a six-hour, 135-word-a-minute fusillade composed of equal parts clever aphorisms ("There is no future for the person whose identity is 'Desk 163'"), well-worked-over chestnuts ("I don't think education has a lot to do with the number of years you're incarcerated in a brick building being talked down to"), and seriocomic provocations ("Fire all male salespeople!"). A seminar in which this maestro of efflorescent public fury tends to unload on targets as big as the stupidity of American business and as puny as the "putrid" L.L. Bean Website.

It can seem, to the casual observer, that Tom Peters has chosen a self-imposed, borscht-belt exile. Here is Peters at 57 (finally looking just a bit professorial in his characteristic sweaters and vests), the onetime darling of American business, a brilliant analyst of the culture and structure of the corporation, preaching a message of New-Agey self-reliance, of "Wow projects" and personal "branding." Here is Peters—who could have been a high priest of the corporate world, could have comfortably spent

his days communing with nobody below the rank of executive vice president—squandering his analytical talents on a long-running sideshow for the managerial masses. A peculiar exile for a man who avers, with his characteristic withering contempt, that “walking on coals with Tony Robbins is about as attractive to me as going and having my wisdom teeth out for the second time,” and yet having abandoned his project of transforming the American workplace in favor of transforming the American worker, teeters ever so perilously close to the dark well of Robbins’ evangelical self-improvement. How did we ever get here?

To figure that out, we need to go back to the beginning, which in the case of Tom Peters Inc. is the publication of *The Book*. It’s an exercise carried out reluctantly because *The Book*, *In Search of Excellence*, is almost two decades old, and almost everything of value there is to say about it has already been said. So let it be stipulated that *In Search of Excellence*, which Peters co-authored with McKinsey colleague Robert H. Waterman, created the modern business bestseller. By the time *Search* was published, Peters had annoyed and ignored his McKinsey partners enough to get himself fired. But no matter. *Search* invented Peters as the first celebrity of the business speaking circuit, once anointed by no less an authority than the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world’s highest-paid management consultant. Its success unleashed upon the world a profusion of well-heeled business gurus. Let it also be stipulated that many of the examples of corporate excellence that *Search* presented, such

as Intel and Johnson & Johnson, have stood the test of time, while still others, such as the videogame pioneer Atari or Digital Equipment, have conspicuously flamed out.

Let it finally be stipulated that *Search* was influential, though exactly what its influence consisted of is still, after all these years, open to question. In some cases its “influence” seems accidental, a lucky collision of circumstances in which Waterman and Peters’ message of fanatical devotion to customers paralleled and reinforced the principles of Total Quality Management and Six Sigma perfectionism then starting to grip American business.

But even if it were to have done nothing else, *Search* irrevocably changed the language of American business, suffusing it with the soft rhetoric of individual achievement. The fact is, you don’t even need to have read Tom Peters to be living in Tom Peters’ world. The precepts of *Search* are now so much a part of the conventional wisdom that it is hard to see why that mattered at all. “Six or seven years ago,” Peters says, “I had this wonderful exchange with *The Economist*, which said, ‘Tom Peters got rich by saying listen to your customers. Isn’t that a joke?’ Yuk, yuk, yuk. I sent a letter back, which they were kind enough to publish, and I said, ‘I agree it’s old news now, but you can’t believe how many arrows I had shot into my back by my McKinsey partners back in 1982 when strategy was everything and the plan was everything, and suddenly Waterman and I humanized the damn thing and said customers are important, people are important, and so on.’”

Search was not just a business book, it was Peters’ cultural and moral critique of business. His own moral voice is particularly evident in the savagery of the book’s attack on “by the numbers”



THE BOOK that launched a thousand gurus. Peters and Waterman celebrate the success of *In Search of Excellence* at a 1983 book party.