084 Be As Unreasonable About How You Make People Feel

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Will Guidara co-owned Eleven Madison Park when it was named the best restaurant in the world. When asked what it actually takes to be the best in the world at what you do, he didn't talk about product, process, or strategy.

He said three things.

Invest as much of yourself in building the right team as you invest in anything else. Inspire your team every single day to be the best version of themselves. And be as unreasonable in pursuit of how you make people feel as others are in pursuit of their product.

That third point is the one worth sitting with.

Most operators are reasonable about the Guest Experience. They care about it. They work on it. They try to improve it. But they apply their unreasonable standard — their obsessive, uncompromising, never-good-enough standard — to the product. The food. The recipe. The consistency of the plate. The pursuit of the technical perfect.

The Guest Experience gets what's left.

Guidara's argument — and the argument this playbook is built on — is that the feeling is the product. Not the byproduct of the product. The product itself. And the operator who applies an unreasonable standard to the feeling — who refuses to accept "good enough" in how the Guest experiences every moment of the visit — is building something that the product-obsessed operator can never replicate.

Because the product can be copied. The feeling cannot.

Danny Meyer built Shake Shack on this premise. The hot dog cart that became 250 locations around the world wasn't built on a better hot dog. It was built on the experience of getting one. The warmth of the interaction. The feeling of being in a line that was worth waiting in. The sense that the people serving you actually wanted you there.

"Business, like life, is all about how you make people feel. It's that simple, and it's that hard."

Simple because the principle isn't complicated. Hard because applying an unreasonable standard to something as invisible and intangible as feeling requires a different kind of discipline than applying it to something you can taste, measure, and photograph.

The product standard has visible feedback. The plate either looks right or it doesn't. The temperature is either correct or it isn't. The consistency either holds or it breaks. You can see the failure and address it.

The feeling standard has invisible feedback. The Guest who didn't feel taken care of rarely says so. They simply don't come back. The cast member who delivered technically correct service without genuine warmth produced an experience that looked right and felt wrong — and the operator who isn't measuring feeling will never know the difference.

This is why the unreasonable standard is harder to hold. Not because operators don't care about how Guests feel. Because caring isn't the same as applying an unreasonable standard. Caring is the floor. Unreasonable is the ceiling the operator who wants to be the best in the world has to hold themselves to every shift, every table, every interaction.

The question worth asking before every service: are we as unreasonable about how every Guest feels tonight as we are about how every plate looks?

If the answer is yes — consistently, genuinely, not as an aspiration but as an operating standard — the product-focused competitor has no answer for you.

Because they're competing for the plate. You're competing for the feeling.

And the feeling is what brings them back.

The Commercial Case

The argument for holding an unreasonable standard on the Guest Experience is not philosophical. It has a commercial record.

Brand performance research tracking multi-year results across consumer categories confirms the mechanism: operators who invest in the experience rather than discount toward it produce higher Guest retention, lower acquisition cost, higher lifetime Guest value, and stronger organic advocacy. The ones who trade experience investment for promotional spend train their Guests to look for promotions — and when the promotion stops, so does the Guest. The feeling that produces a return visit is not manufactured by a discount. It is produced by an experience that was worth having.

"Make loyalty an experience problem, not a discount." That is not a hospitality principle. It is a commercial conclusion from twenty years of performance data across every category where a Guest can choose to return or not. The independent restaurant operator who treats loyalty as a discount problem is paying to acquire Guests who will leave when the discount stops. The operator who treats loyalty as an experience problem is building the relationship that makes the discount unnecessary.

The unreasonable standard is the commercial advantage. Not the aspiration — the advantage.

→ See also: Fundamental 3: People — 3.X Leading People vs. Using Them

The operator who holds an unreasonable standard for the Guest Experience can only sustain it if the cast is developed to deliver it. The feeling standard requires people who internalized the standard — not people who are managed to it. The development work that produces that cast is the subject of the People fundamental.

→ See also: Fundamental 2: Product — 2.X The Right Friction at the Right Moment

The feeling the Guest experiences isn't separate from the product design decisions — it's produced by them. Pricing structure, menu friction, service pacing, and experience design are all levers that determine how the Guest feels at every moment of the visit.

What Changes Tomorrow

Tomorrow, pick one Guest interaction on the floor and ask if you are being unreasonable about how that Guest feels, or just competent about what they're served. Competent gets the plate out correctly. Unreasonable makes them feel something they'll talk about. Choose one table and go unreasonable.