086 The Highest Uncommon Denominator

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Every operation runs the same moments. The birthday at table 6. The Guest who asks for a recommendation. The new cast member's first shift. The pre-shift before a holiday weekend. The menu description on the item that never moves. The P&L review on the last Tuesday of the month.

Every one of those is a common occurrence. And every common occurrence has a commonplace response — the industry default, the thing everyone does, the answer that requires no thinking because someone already decided it years ago and the decision never got revisited.

The birthday dessert is the cleanest example. Most operators run a free scoop of ice cream with a candle. Sometimes the staff sings. The operator's logic: it costs almost nothing, the Guest gets something free, everybody wins. The Guest's experience: sitting at a table on their supposedly special night, receiving the cheapest item on the menu, while the rest of the dining room watches. The gesture does not say "we celebrate you." It says "we did the minimum."

The operator thinks they added something. The Guest felt the default.

That gap — between what the operator believes they delivered and what the Guest actually received — is what [Highest Uncommon Denominator] is built to close.

[HUD] is not about doing more. It is about refusing the default. The discipline starts with a single question applied to every common occurrence in the operation: what is the commonplace response, and what is the uncommon one?

If the operator cannot name the uncommon response, they are operating by default on that moment — leaving a gap where differentiation could exist. The commonplace response is what every competitor is also doing. The uncommon response is what makes the Guest remember which room they were in.

Applied to the birthday: what would it look like if the operator actually designed the moment? Not a free scoop — a gesture tied to something the cast learned about this specific Guest during the visit. Not a candle in the cheapest item on the menu — something that signals this table was seen, not processed. The cost difference is often negligible. The experience difference is not.

[HUD] runs across all five fundamentals. It applies to how the P&L gets reviewed, how the menu is written, how the pre-shift is run, how a new cast member is onboarded, how a Guest complaint gets recovered. Every common occurrence in every fundamental has a commonplace response. [HUD] is the discipline of finding the uncommon one — not occasionally, not on the big nights, but as the default posture of the operation.

The diagnostic is two questions, run against every common occurrence in the operation:

What is the commonplace version of this moment?

What would an uncommon — but still deliverable — version look like?

The gap between those two answers is where differentiation lives. If the operator cannot answer the second question, they are running the default. The default is what every competitor is also running. Nobody in the market is winning that moment. The operator who can answer the second question and execute it owns it.

What Changes Tomorrow

Before your next predictable Guest request comes in tomorrow — a birthday, a special occasion, a routine ask — refuse the default response you'd normally give. Find the Highest Uncommon Denominator: the response that's still deliverable with what you actually have, but that no one expects. Do it once, on purpose, and watch what it does to the table.