093 Strategy vs Tactics

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If you had to build this restaurant all over again — knowing what you know now, with the market where it is today — what would it look like? Most operators never ask the question. And the ones who don't are running a business that was designed for a moment that has already passed.

There are two questions every operator must answer. Most never answer the first one.

What kind of business do you want to be? That is the strategy.

How will you become it? That is the tactics.

The sequence is not interchangeable. You cannot answer the second question honestly until you have answered the first. Everything — the menu, the cast culture, the marketing, the pricing, the physical environment, the Guest Experience — flows from the answer to the first question. Without it, every tactical decision the operator makes is unmoored. It may produce activity. It will not produce direction.

The False Strategy Problem

Walk into any operator conversation about their business and you will hear strategy language applied to tactical decisions. Marketing strategy. Cost control strategy. Sales strategy. Profit strategy. Staffing strategy. Social media strategy.

These sound like strategy. They are not. They are operational decision points — answers to how — that have been elevated to strategy language without earning it. Each one describes a domain of activity. None of them answers what kind of business you are building.

The operator who has a social media strategy but no business strategy has confused the instrument for the destination. They are posting content for an audience they have not built, amplifying an experience they have not designed, marketing a relationship they have not earned. The social media strategy is not wrong — it is simply disconnected. And disconnected tactics produce exactly what the source of this chapter describes: a never-ending cycle of disjointed, unrelated activities which never yield the desired outcome.

The false strategy is not a character flaw. It is what happens when the pressure to do something — to show activity, to respond to a slow week, to match what the operation down the street is doing — precedes the clarity about what the operation is trying to become. The doing fills the vacuum the thinking left empty.

What Strategy Actually Is

Strategy is the answer to one question: what kind of business do you want to be?

Not what do you sell. Not what is your price point. Not what is your concept. What kind of business — what does it stand for, who is it for, what does the Guest experience when it is working correctly, what does it produce in the community it serves, what does it mean to the cast who runs it?

That answer is the architectural anchor for every decision that follows. The menu either expresses it or it doesn't. The cast culture either reflects it or it doesn't. The marketing either amplifies it or it doesn't. The pricing either honors it or it doesn't. The physical environment either embodies it or it doesn't.

This is not a branding exercise. Research confirms it as a structural requirement: the value proposition, the profit proposition, and the people proposition must align. When they don't — when the brand says one thing and the pricing signals another, when the culture the operator describes differs from the culture the cast produces — the strategy is not incomplete. It is nonexistent. Three disconnected propositions are three separate tactics, not one strategy.

Ask the question the strategy is designed to answer: how can we make our Guests feel? Not what can we sell them. Not how can we fill covers. How can we make them feel? I don't. The Guest does. That's the entire point. That question — answered honestly, before the lease is signed, before the menu is written, before the first hire is made — is the entire work of strategy. Answering it for your Guests is what marketing is about. Answering it for your cast is what culture is about. Answering it for your business is what strategy is about.

When the strategy is clear, tactical alignment is visible. The operator who knows exactly what they are building can evaluate every decision against one question: does this advance what we are building or does it pull away from it? That question is not complicated. But it requires the answer to the first question to exist before it can be asked.

What Tactics Actually Are

Tactics are the specific, executable moves that advance the strategy. They are the how — the daily, shift-level, decision-level expression of what the strategy demands.

Tactics without strategy produce motion. Strategy without tactics produces intention. Neither alone produces a business that compounds.

The operator who has the vision but never built the tactical infrastructure to deliver it is running the most expensive version of [By Design Or By Default] — the what was designed, the how was left to default. The cast delivers whatever they individually understand the operation to be. The Guest experiences whatever the default produces. The vision stays on the wall and never makes it to the table.

The operator who executes tactics brilliantly against no strategic anchor is the one who runs one event after another, one promotion after another, one platform after another — and looks up after three years of constant activity to find the business is exactly where it started. They were not lazy. They were not uncommitted. They were tactically excellent in service of nothing in particular.

The Alignment Discipline

Strategy and tactics aligned produce [Outcome By Design]. Every move advances the answer to the first question. Every tactical decision is evaluated against the strategic anchor. The operation knows what it is building, builds it deliberately, and compounds over time because everything is pointed in the same direction.

This is not a planning exercise done once at opening and forgotten. It is a standing discipline — the operator who revisits the strategic anchor regularly, who measures every new tactical idea against it, who asks "does this advance what we are building?" before committing resources to anything.

The operator who has answered the what finds that most tactical decisions make themselves. The menu item that fits the strategy is obvious. The marketing partnership that aligns is easy to recognize. The cast member who belongs is clear from the first conversation. The tactical noise that does not advance the strategy is equally easy to identify and decline.

That clarity is the competitive advantage strategy produces. Not a better plan. A better filter.

Strategy is not one more restatement of goals and plans. It is the permanent adoption of new behaviors you are going to live your life by.

David Maister spent thirty years watching professional service firms produce elaborate strategic plans and then fail to change a single behavior as a result. His conclusion was precise: "I'm all for strategy. I'm just against strategic planning, which is nothing more than a diversionary device to avoid addressing strategic issues."

The operator who has a strategic plan has a document. The operator who has a strategy has a set of behaviors he will not compromise regardless of short-term pressure. The plan describes the destination. The strategy describes how the operator will behave on the road to it -- and more importantly, what he will not do regardless of how much money it appears to offer in the moment.

The distinction matters because strategic planning feels productive. It produces output: slides, documents, frameworks, goals. Strategic discipline does not produce output. It produces refusals -- the vendor relationship that does not fit the concept, the daypart that dilutes the experience, the Guest that the operation is not designed to serve, the opportunity that looks like growth and produces drift. Strategic discipline is the accumulation of those refusals, built into the operator's daily decision-making until the refusals are automatic and the strategy is real.

The most expensive strategic decisions are not the ones that go obviously wrong. They are the ones that look like opportunities.

Martin James, Managing Director of Celsius Research in Australia, built a firm around strategic focus -- heavy-duty quantitative market research with a strong predictive component. The positioning held. The firm grew. Then Microsoft sent a request for proposal for a $2.2 million contract to build and manage panels of gamers in twenty countries. The work did not fit the mission of either company James ran. His team knew it. In their meeting, someone said: "Maister would say we shouldn't pitch on this work because it does not fit into the mission statement of either company." They pitched anyway. They won. They lost $250,000, their attention, and their focus. Nobody enjoyed the work. James wrote to Maister afterward: "You were right."

The lesson is not that large contracts are dangerous. The lesson is that the strategic discipline exists precisely for the moment when a large contract arrives that does not fit the model. The operator who has built a relational GX does not take a high-volume catering contract that runs through his kitchen at the expense of the service standard his regulars depend on. The operator who has built a late-night culture does not chase a breakfast daypart because the numbers suggest an opportunity. The discipline is tested not when things are slow and the model is easy to maintain -- it is tested when something arrives that looks like money and requires the operator to betray the model to get it. The answer to that test is always the same. You already know what it

is. The only question is whether you have built the discipline to give it.

What Changes Tomorrow

Write one sentence that answers this question: what kind of business are you building? Not what you sell. Not your concept. What the Guest experiences when you are operating at your best, and why that matters to the community you serve.

If you cannot write that sentence in one try, the strategy is not yet clear — and every tactical decision you are making is operating without an anchor. Write the sentence first. Everything else follows from it.

Cross-fundamental note: connects to 1.1 — Two Roads (the operator who answers the strategy question correctly has already chosen Road 2 — the answer to "what kind of business do you want to be?" is always a relational answer, never a transactional one) and 2.X — Product (the strategy anchor determines what the Guest Experience is designed to produce — every element of the GX either expresses the strategy or contradicts it).