107 The False Strategy Trap

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Most operators don't avoid strategy because they don't care about it. They avoid it because they've convinced themselves they already have one.

What passes for strategy in this industry almost never is. It's a list of operational activities with the word "strategy" attached to make them sound bigger than they are.

Marketing strategy. Cost control strategy. Sales strategy. Profit strategy. Staffing strategy. Location strategy. Social media strategy.

Every item on that list sounds legitimate — because every item is a real thing a real business has to manage. But none of them are strategies. They're decision points. They're operational functions. They answer the question of how. They have nothing to do with what.

What is your business actually trying to become? That's the strategic question. And most operators have never answered it — because they've been too busy managing the how to ever stop and define the what.

Here's what happens when the what is missing. Your cost control strategy becomes an exercise in cutting rather than a discipline in profitability — because it isn't connected to a bigger-picture outcome. Your staffing strategy becomes a series of desperate hires rather than a deliberate upgrade of talent — because it isn't connected to the culture you're trying to build. Your marketing strategy becomes noise — because it isn't connected to who you're actually trying to reach and why.

Disconnected from an overall strategic outcome, every item on that list becomes a dysfunctional business activity. Motion without direction. Work without progress. Busy without building.

Strategy is what you say no to.

The operator whose strategy is a list of things they are doing has not made a strategy. They have made a schedule. The strategy lives in the decisions on the other side of the list — the daypart they will not open, the catering inquiry they will not take, the second location they will not sign, the trending format they will not chase. Those are the decisions that protect the core. Every yes that doesn't strengthen what already works is a no to something that does.

The concept that tries to be everything to everyone is a commodity before it opens. The operator who knows exactly what they are — and exactly what they are not — has a competitive position. The one who keeps saying yes to opportunities that pull them sideways has a schedule full of activity and a concept that is slowly becoming unrecognizable.

Focus is not a limitation. It is the mechanism that makes everything you do mean something.

A real strategy answers one question: what is this business trying to become, and how does every decision we make move it in that direction? Everything else — the marketing, the cost controls, the staffing, the social media — flows from that answer. Without it, you're not operating strategically. You're just operating.

What Changes Tomorrow

Before you call your next marketing push or staffing fix a 'strategy,' ask if it's actually just an operational function — a how, not a what. Real strategy is what you say no to. Name one thing you're going to stop doing in order to be more of what you actually are.