120 Know Your Guest

Perspective Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/120-know-your-guest/

If you are trying to sell bagels to an audience that prefers breakfast tacos, it doesn't matter how good the bagels are.

The only competitive advantage a restaurant has is the knowledge it has of its Guests. Not demographic profiles — behavioral knowledge. What this specific Guest orders, when they come, what occasions bring them, how they describe the operation to others, and what they value beyond the food. The operator who knows their Guest at that level markets to a specific person, not a demographic category. Every message lands differently when it was written for someone real.

Replace classic demographic segmentation with behavioral segmentation — based on what your Guest does at the individual level in your business and in their life outside it. The demographic tells you who they are. The behavior tells you what they want. Only one of those produces marketing that works.

The GX research is unambiguous on this point. Decisions made inside operations will almost always reflect the frame of reference of the operator, not the Guest. Bruce Temkin calls this self-referential design — the natural drift toward building the experience around how the operation wants to work rather than how the Guest wants to live. The menu is sequenced for kitchen efficiency. The service flow is designed for table turn. The check is presented when the operator is ready, not when the Guest is. None of that is wrong in isolation. All of it, together, produces an experience that was built for the operator and delivered to the Guest. The Guest feels the difference. They cannot always name it. They feel it. (Temkin, Six Laws of Guest Experience)

The operator who builds the GX around how their Guest wants to live their life is doing the opposite. They know what the Guest is celebrating. They know what occasion brought the party of four in on a Tuesday. They know what this visit means in the context of a day that had other options. That knowledge does not come from a demographic profile. It comes from the discipline of knowing the Guest at the level of their life, not their transaction.

That is the distance between a good operator and a great one. Both can execute service. Only one designed the experience for the person sitting at the table.

Every marketing decision in this arc — channel, message, timing, investment — is only as good as the operator's read on who is actually walking through the door. Not who the operator assumed would walk through the door when the concept was designed. Not the demographic profile from the trade area study done before opening. Who is actually there, right now, visiting with what frequency, spending at what level, returning or not returning, coming from which neighborhoods, showing up at which dayparts.

The operator who markets to an assumed Guest base is amplifying a fiction. The spend is real. The audience may not be.

The Guest You Have vs. The Guest You Intended

Most operators opened with a Guest in mind. The target demographic was built into the concept — the price point, the menu, the environment, the neighborhood. Some operators hit the target exactly. Most discover, over time, that the actual Guest base has drifted from the intended one — different demographics showing up than expected, different dayparts performing than planned, different occasions driving the traffic.

That drift is not a problem. It is information. The operation that reads its actual Guest base honestly and markets to who is actually there — rather than continuing to market to the Guest who was intended but never fully arrived — is using the most valuable market research available: its own transaction data.

The gap between the intended Guest and the actual Guest is the first marketing planning question. Before any channel is selected, any message is crafted, any budget is allocated — the operator has to know who they are actually serving.

The Read Is Already Available

The data required to know your Guest is already in the systems the operation is running.

The POS surfaces visit frequency, average check, and daypart distribution by Guest. The payment processor ties transactions to card fingerprints — building Guest profiles without a loyalty program or email capture. The billing zip codes on every card transaction map the trade area accurately, showing where Guests actually live and work rather than where the operator assumed they would come from. The review platforms surface who the Guest is through what they say — which occasions they came for, which aspects of the experience they noticed, which cast members they mentioned by name.

None of this requires a marketing research budget. None of it requires a consultant. It requires the discipline to read what is already there and the honesty to act on what the data actually says rather than what the operator hopes it says.

The Guest Read Is Not Segmentation

Reading the Guest base is not the same as segmenting it. Segmentation is the corporate marketing move — divide the Guest base into tiers, identify the high-value segment, focus resources on the top tier, deprioritize the rest.

The book's position on segmentation is the same as its position on [The Regular]: the moment the operator divides the Guest base by economic value, they have introduced Road 1 logic into the read. The Guest is no longer a person — they are a segment.

The Guest read is different. It is the operator learning who is actually in the building — their rhythms, their occasions, their neighborhoods, their patterns — so that every marketing decision serves the actual Guest base rather than a theoretical one. It is not a ranking exercise. It is a knowing exercise.

Know the Guest. Market to the Guest. Not to a demographic projection of who the Guest should be.

What Changes Tomorrow

Pull one report from your POS or payment processor today — visit frequency distribution, top zip codes by transaction volume, or average check by daypart. Read it as a description of who your actual Guest is rather than a performance metric. Name one thing the data tells you about your Guest base that your current marketing is not reflecting. That gap is your first marketing planning adjustment.