126 Next Practices Not Best Practices

Perspective Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/126-next-practices-not-best-practices/

No matter what your business issue is, you can find best practices to study. Survey the most successful operators, identify what they have in common, and pattern your own decisions after theirs. It sounds logical. It is built on a logical fallacy.

You cannot predict how effective any business practice will be by examining its past successes unless you also examine its past failures. The study that finds 90% of successful coin tossers flipped with their right hand has not discovered a best practice. It has studied only the people who got heads — which tells you nothing about the practice and everything about the sample.

The guru who catalogs ten operators who bet the company on a disruptive strategy and succeeded has written a compelling book. They have not told you about the ten operators who made the identical bet and closed. Without the failure universe, the success universe is not data. It is a highlight reel.

Best practices are documented by survivors. Failures are not documented at all. The operator who patterns their business after the industry's best practices has studied half the data set and drawn conclusions from the half that had something to sell. The practice may genuinely work. It may be a coin toss. The documentation alone cannot tell you which.

Best Practices Are a Starting Line

If your strategy for running your restaurant is to study what everybody else is doing and then do the same thing — only better — you have already lost. You just don't know it yet.

Every operator I have ever worked with who was slowly becoming invisible had one thing in common: they were following best practices. Not bad practices. Not lazy practices. Best practices — the ones the industry told them to follow. The result was a restaurant that looked like every other restaurant following the same playbook. Same Caesar salad. Same burger. Same brunch with the same eggs Benedict and the same bottomless mimosas. The operator wasn't lazy. They did what the industry told them to do. And they were becoming invisible because of it.

Best practices are a reference guide based on the aggregate experience of lots of different businesses. They are a starting line. Not a strategy. By the time everyone is doing something, it no longer differentiates you from anyone. It makes you competent. Competent is the floor, not the ceiling.

Best practices can make you transactionally proficient. They can help you run a clean kitchen, turn tables at a respectable pace, and keep your food costs in a reasonable range. But transactional proficiency doesn't make anyone's heart beat faster. It doesn't create a memory. It doesn't give a Guest a reason to drive past three other restaurants to get to yours. Context matters. Your context is unique — and your approach should be too.

What a Next Practice Actually Is

Next practices are different. A next practice is any practice that propels you and your business to the next level — not the industry's next level, yours. It's the decision, the shift, the commitment that moves you from where you are to somewhere you've never been.

Because every business is at a different level, every business has different next practices. There's no list I can hand you. There's no industry report that identifies them. They come from an honest assessment of where you are, where you want to go, and what's standing between the two.

Next practices are not about being different for the sake of being different. They're about being intentional about what makes you yours. The answer might be a sourcing commitment. A service philosophy. A menu structure that doesn't exist anywhere else in your zip code. The way you train your cast or welcome a first-time Guest. The point is that it comes from you — rooted in your values, your identity, your specific vision. It can't be copied. Not because it's complicated, but because it requires being you. And nobody else can be you.

I had a client in the Southwest who was doing what a lot of operators do when they don't know what else to do: copying. Whatever was trending in the culinary world, he was chasing it. His menu was enormous — a collection of every idea he'd absorbed from every direction — and it was drowning him. Debt piling up. The operation bloated. None of it was his.

We didn't fix it. There was nothing to fix.

We jettisoned the entire operation. Built a new restaurant on the other side of town with a completely revised concept, a focused menu, and a clear point of view that was actually his. Not the culinary zeitgeist. Not what someone else had done successfully somewhere else. His.

From day one the new place thrived.

The old restaurant wasn't killed by bad food or bad location or bad luck. It was killed by the absence of a genuine identity. He had spent years building something that belonged to everyone else and wondered why it didn't feel like his — and why Guests couldn't connect with it.

The Trap of Doing It Better

It's tempting to see something a competitor is doing and convince yourself you could do it better. More care, more attention, more of yourself. And maybe you could.

But here's the uncomfortable truth: you'll care more, and it's unlikely the market will notice.

If your strategy is "better burgers than the guy down the street," you're competing on a dimension the Guest can barely perceive. Most Guests are not running blind taste tests. They're choosing between experiences — and when two experiences look and feel the same, they default to convenience, price, or habit. You lose on all three if you're the newer, less established option trying to be a slightly better version of the same thing.

What if instead of doing the same thing better, you turned the question upside down? What if you did it backwards, sideways, or in a significantly more meaningful way? Not different for the sake of being strange — different in a way that matters to the Guest.

Success often starts with the way you choose to solve a problem, not the problem itself. The operators who win aren't the ones with the best solution to a common problem. They're the ones who redefine the problem entirely. They don't ask "How do we serve food faster?" They ask "What if speed isn't what our Guest actually wants?" That's next-practice thinking. It's not optimization. It's reimagination.

Commodity Is a Death Sentence

Walk into most casual dining concepts today and tell me what's different. The logo? Interchangeable. The menu? Slight variations on the same dozen dishes. The building? Same exposed brick, same Edison bulbs, same reclaimed wood. The step of service? Greet, drink order, appetizer, entrée, check.

When everything about your restaurant looks, feels, and operates like everything else, you are not a brand. You are a commodity. And commodities compete on one thing: price. That's a race to the bottom, and nobody wins it.

Twenty-four percent of restaurants go out of business in year one. Seventy-six percent are gone by year three. The majority of restaurants that fail were commodities from the day they opened. They had no compelling reason for a Guest to choose them over any other option. They followed the playbook everyone else was using and wondered why they couldn't fill seats on a Tuesday night.

If your Guest can get the same experience somewhere else, you don't have a brand. You have a placeholder.

Own a Position or Fight Over Scraps

In whatever segment you operate in, you need to be number one or number two. Not in size — in distinction. In the strength of your concept, the clarity of your identity, the depth of your Guest's emotional connection to what you do.

When a Guest thinks of your category in your market, your name should be one of the first two that come to mind. Not because you have the biggest ad budget, but because you've carved out a position nobody else occupies. You own a space in their head.

If you're number three, four, or five in your segment, you're fighting over scraps. You're picking up the Guests who couldn't get a table at the places they actually wanted to go. And when the market contracts — and it always contracts — you're the first to go.

Being number one or number two isn't about ego. It's about survival. The operators who own a clear position in their market have pricing power, staffing power, and staying power. When you're truly different, there's no substitute.

What Changes Tomorrow

Do the science. Understand your numbers, know your costs, run tight operations. But create your own art. That's where your Guest falls in love with what you do. That's where restaurants that make it past year three, year five, year ten are built.

Best practices are a tool for driving commodity products. You didn't get into this business to be a commodity. Stop operating like one.