2010 Product The Experience You Design or Default

Product Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/2010-product-the-experience-you-design-or-default/

Product is not your menu, your decor, or your tech stack. Product is the total experience your Guest actually lives — the lived outcome of whichever architecture you built.

That architecture is either designed or defaulted. There is no third option. The experience design is where Product lives or dies — not in the kitchen, not in the dining room, not in the service sequence in isolation. In the deliberate decision about what the Guest is going to feel, see, hear, smell, and taste — and what they are going to remember long after the check is paid.

Get the experience design right and everything downstream amplifies it. Get it wrong and everything downstream compensates for it — shift after shift, until the accumulated cost of compensating shows up as a cover count that stopped growing and a brand that stopped compounding.

What Product Actually Is

Product is not your menu. Product is not your decor. Product is the total experience your Guest actually lives — the lived outcome of whichever architecture you built.

The restaurant was never a food delivery business. The word itself is the argument. From the French *restaurer* — to restore. Boulanger's original 1765 establishment served restorative broths to people who needed restoration. Escoffier systematized the kitchen and professionalized the craft — but even his vision was hospitality at the highest level of execution, not food delivery at scale. The premise of the restaurant from its inception was not to put a plate in front of someone. It was to restore them. The food was the mechanism. The restoration was the product.

The industry that forgot this reduced itself to food delivery with tables. The operators who remembered it built the institutions that still exist — the ones Guests describe not by what they ate but by how they felt.

Product is how you restore the Guest. Everything else — the food, the drink, the room, the cast, the sequence — is how you deliver the restoration.

Experience Design Is Not Interior Design

The interior designer makes decisions about what the room looks like. The operator makes decisions about what the Guest feels from the moment they form an expectation to the moment they render a verdict. Those are not the same job. They do not end on the same day.

The interior designer's work is done before opening. The operator's experience design work never stops — because the Guest keeps changing, the cast keeps changing, the market keeps shifting, and the experience that produced [Earned Trust] last year is the experience that produces [Static Decline] next year if the operator stopped designing and started maintaining.

Every sensory input the Guest encounters is an experience design decision. Sound. Scent. Light. Temperature. Texture. Taste. The visual field from the door to the table. The spatial flow from arrival to departure. Every one of them is either designed deliberately or defaulted to whatever happened to end up there — the landlord's choices, the previous tenant's choices, the equipment vendor's choices, whatever the cast prefers to listen to at 4pm when they are setting up.

Every one of them is [By Design Or By Default]. None of them are neutral. All of them are producing an emotional response in the Guest whether the operator made a decision about them or not. The operator who has never examined their sensory architecture has not avoided making experience design decisions. They have delegated all of them.

The Guest Cannot Name It. They Feel It Completely.

The Guest's job is not to diagnose the operation. It is to have an experience. The operator's job is to design the experience the Guest cannot articulate but cannot stop feeling.

The Guest who says "I don't know why but I always come back here" has given the operator the highest possible compliment — the experience design worked so completely that the result felt inevitable rather than engineered. The Guest who says "something was off — I can't put my finger on it" has given the operator the most important diagnostic available — the experience design failed at a level below articulation, which is exactly where the most durable decisions get made.

The [Arational Guest] decides before they think. The feeling lands before the analysis begins. By the time the Guest can articulate what was wrong, the verdict is already rendered and the [Trust Arc] has already closed or broken. The operator who waits for the Guest to name the problem has

already lost. The Guest does not file a diagnostic report. They file a verdict. Return or don't. Refer or don't. Trust or don't.

The Guest's inability to articulate the experience design is not a reason to stop designing. It is proof that the design is working when it does.

Every Concept At Every Price Point

The fast casual operator who believes experience design is a luxury for concepts with higher margins has it exactly backwards. They have 8 minutes to produce [Earned Trust]. The fine dining operator has 90. The constraint does not reduce the requirement — it intensifies it. Every sensory input, every human touchpoint, every design decision has to do more work in less time.

The $14 check average Guest is running the same [Trust Arc] as the $150 check average Guest. The expectation gap is calibrated to the price signal. The [Price Signal Contract] runs at every price point. The fast casual Guest who paid $14 and felt like a number is not less likely to disappear quietly than the fine dining Guest who paid $150 and felt ignored. They are more likely — because the relationship had less depth to draw on when the arc broke.

Every concept at every price point is an experience design business. The operator who defaults the experience design to speed and accuracy is not making a rational trade-off. They are making a [By Design Or By Default] decision — and the default is producing an experience the Guest feels completely and cannot articulate, rendering a verdict the operator will read as a cover count problem three months from now.

Who You Design For

Nobody designs for all Guests. You design for your Guest — the specific human being your concept was built to serve, in the specific emotional state they arrive in, with the specific need they came to fulfill.

The Guest does not come to complete a transaction. They come to live a moment. A first date. A last date. An anniversary. A new job. A lost job. A birthday. A Tuesday night where someone just needed an oasis from a chaotic week. You either add to that moment or you subtract from it by what you do with it. The experience design is how you add to it — deliberately, consistently, for the Guest your concept was built to serve.

Experiences designed for everyone satisfy no one. That is not an argument against experience design. It is the argument for why experience design requires a specific Guest as its target. The concept that knows exactly who its Guest is has the most powerful design brief available. The concept that tries to be everything to everyone has no identity — which is not the result of refusing to design. It is the result of defaulting the design to a Guest who does not exist.

The H-Ladder Is A Product Design Chart

The H-Ladder is not a personality chart or a training rubric. It is a Product design chart — the architecture that determines which experience the Guest actually lives.

H^{-} — Transactional: The Guest is a ticket. The system subtracts — indifference, friction, small cruelties. No claim to hospitality, no pretense.

H^{1} — Service: Technical delivery. Food and beverage arrive mostly on time, mostly correct. The Guest is processed. This is where most of the industry lives while telling themselves they do hospitality.

H^{2} — In Transition: You deliver hospitality; the business doesn't yet. Warmth and connection show up when you or your best people are in the building. Road 2 with training wheels.

H^{3} — Force Multiplier: The system delivers hospitality even when you're not there. Connection, recognition, and recovery are built into the roles, sequences, and standards. Hospitality is baked into how the place works, not stapled on by whoever cares the most that day.

The climb from H^{-} to H^{3} is the climb from Road 1 to Road 2 in Product. The question is not "How do I get my cast to care more?" The question is "How do I design the Product so that caring is the work and the system multiplies it?"

What's In This Fundamental

The sections that follow address the architecture of experience design — the specific decisions that determine whether the Guest lives a moment worth returning for or a transaction they forget before they reach the car.

The Connection Floor. The sensory environment. The service arc. The role of tools and technology. The design of the Guest's journey from expectation to verdict. Each section is a specific application of the same underlying discipline: designing the experience your Guest cannot articulate but cannot stop feeling.

The experience design is never finished. The Guest keeps moving. Your job is to keep designing.

What Changes Tomorrow

Walk through your building before your next service. Not to inspect — to experience. Enter through the front door. Notice what hits your senses before your brain catches up. That first unfiltered read is what every Guest experiences before they can name it. That is the experience design your building is currently running. Is it the one you intended?