



Ristretto

Leadership, customer
service and small business
lessons in 15ml shots.

Troy Forrest

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From the author

Stand behind the counter and watch.

Listen.

Think.

Then do.

Ristretto is a concentrated cup of lessons every successful professional, boss and business owner knows work. May the quirky brew inspire you to sip them once more to serve your goals.

Enjoy.

Dedicated to my clients.

Special thanks to the creative bods at J6 design and the coffee shops I wrote this in most days: Bar 9, Cibo, Bocelli's, Bravo, Vileroy... mighty long blacks.

Morning 1

Alone

You can tell he wants to entertain.

"Morning Toby! Ahmmmm, we'll have two flat whites, a long black, Mike, what was yours again? A cappuccino? You want anything to eat? No? OK. That's it, Toby. Thanks. Here's the card", handing me a dog-eared piece of cardboard. I stamp it 4 times with my ink logo and hand it back.

"Thanks John, coming right up - I'll bring them over". We don't do table service. Except when we do.

I watch my regular join the other suits at his favoured table, loudly gesticulating about who knows what. Two or three times a week, I listen to John, a realtor, entertain. I've seen him with people I guess are buyers, sellers, network contacts, sometimes with people he looks like he's known for years and others maybe he just met.

He's a story-teller, John.
I see him holding court,
his audience's eyes wide open,
smiling mouths agape.

He's a story-teller, John. I see him holding court, his audience's eyes wide open, smiling mouths agape. They must be fanciful war stories. How he slayed the real estate beast. Delivered the keys to the fair maiden. Made the commission to pay for the lease on the black BMW steed parked at the window. Always black.

I wish I had that charisma. Only sometimes. It's not in my bottle, but it's something to behold, a good frenzy-whipper. You get the tiniest sense of it in the picture on the billboards of the homes he's selling. They seem to be everywhere. The loud... it's a bit over top, maybe. I've seen him tone it down. But it bubbles just below the surface.

You can tell he wants to entertain.

Then I see him in here by himself. Always after 5. Always a mineral water. Three to four days a week. Alone, quiet, with paperwork, with laptop, with a mobile, making calmer, focused calls. I hear him use the words "following-up". He's setting things up for the next day. He's a list man, John. I've peeped at it when I clear his table, the rankings on his to-do list, the running a line through 'done' tasks.

He's remembered my name from the first time he came in here. Never Tony or Tom.

I see a few entertainers. Their shows, they suck in onlookers like a whirlwind, it's contagious. They seem to come and go.

I can only pick out a few sellers though.

Usually I pick them when they're by themselves.

I grab a tray, a bottle of water, 4 glasses, and load the coffees.

Lunch 2

Pre-game psych

Remove distraction barriers.

We have pharma companies coming in here all the time. It's our function room, it's set up just the right way for their "lunch and learn's". Quiet but warm and friendly. The industry traffic flow's eased a bit since they clamped down on the whole gravy train doctor junket thing. Some have found a way around the rules though. It's popular, they always get good numbers considering their clients are pretty busy people. I've watched them - seems to be not so much about selling on the day, but creating great follow-up opportunities.

"Toby hun, how do I turn this data projector on again?" Evelyn, she's the local boss of a big company that uses the room a lot. I think this is the third time I've show her. The cheat-sheet on the wall isn't working.

"No problems Evelyn, I'll do it for you. It's just this switch here." Give a fish, then teach fishing and make it look easy, my boss would say. Kieran, her rep, all shiny and neat, is standing in the corner running through his checklist.

He and I had a coffee after one of their sessions about a year ago. It was my treat. He spends a lot and talks us up to the doctors.

"I do 2 or 3 of these a week Toby. And I still forget something - brochures, or the spare data projector bulb - well, not here, because you've got one, but... and an old boss said "write yourself a checklist". I change it a lot, but it's saved my butt more than once."



Evelyn's now frou-frou-ing the table settings. She's got an eye for detail. Like one of those continuity people on movie sets. I'm sure no-one notices that the settings are perfect. But they'd never get distracted by an imperfect one. She removes distraction barriers, I guess.

"Evelyn, Kieran, would you like a coffee or mineral water before your guests start arriving?"

"Oh, you're a gem - thanks Toby". I watch their eyes meet and they go into a corner huddle. Kieran looks out at the empty room and rehearses his opening aloud.

"Hello and welcome - thank you for coming to this lunch and learn. I'm very pleased to introduce our guest speaker today, Doctor Manjoo... is it Manjoo, or Man-too?"

"Manjoo, you've got it," says Evelyn.

I'm watching Kieran get his game face set. He's breathing deeply. He stretches his smile muscles, rubs his hands together, runs his eye over the checklist one more time and double-checks the data-projector has synched with the laptop.

"Ev, can I see that delegates list one more time please?"

I've watched them – seems to be not so much about selling on the day, but creating great follow-up opportunities.

Afternoon tea 3

The nice sandwich

You're best sandwiching it between two slices of nice.

"Brent, you've not managed to resolve the situation with Arthur...".

I sit the two coffees on the counter and the pudgy mustachioed man in the polyester grey suit takes his without thanking me. Without passing the other full cup to the man whose performance he's deconstructing.

The other man, thinner, taller, maybe of a similar age, looks defeated. He takes his coffee with big eyes, nodding to me with a tight face in embarrassed thanks. They take a table in the middle, not a quiet corner.

"It's got to change Brent. I mean, what were you thinking on Monday - did you really think that would fix things?"

Too loud.

Start with the positives,
then the chewy filling.

I see this difficult man often, someone who I've come to dislike without ever having had a conversation with him. Over a year coming in here, never mentioned my name (I wear a name tag). Never smiled, rarely says thanks. He brings his staff here for what I guess are their appraisals.

I try hard to be super-friendly to all clients - I mean, I know it's good for business, and I've got to set the bar for the rest of the team - but this guy's tough.

We debriefed about him a few months ago at our after-work drinks.

One of the girls suggested we play a game with these sort of people - the ones who suck the fun out of what's otherwise a pretty fun space.

She came up with a little code word, and when we hear it, we each go out of our way to be unbelievably nice to them. I'm not sure - I want my nicest, most loyal customers to get the nicest nice from me. But, he does come in a bit, and who knows what's going on in his world, and the hyper-nice is probably more about us feeling better and radiating it to others, so....

He's really giving it to Brent. Poor beggar. Sitting there taking it, offering sporadic meek returns. Doesn't moustache know you don't get the best from people that way?

An old boss once taught me about what he called the 'nice' sandwich. If you've got to deliver some tough love to a team member, some constructive criticism, you're best sandwiching it between two slices of nice. Start with the positives, then the chewy filling - and you can be direct and specific - and then just a bit more nice to leave them feeling like they want to do something about the criticism. I wish this guy would do that. Forget Brent - I don't think he'll last.

More for him. Surely you enjoy a role more when you put nice into it?

I put biscotti on two plates and take it to their table.

"Hi gentlemen, compliments of the house - a small thank you for being regulars!"

Brent looks at me almost confused. Grey suit - I've never heard anyone use his name - takes it in his stride without smiling. "Oh, look at that. Wonderful. Now, Brent,"

I'm smiling, at least.

Dawn 4

Time crumbs

All he's after is 2 minutes of time crumbs from my day to listen to him.

Rick forgot to take the bins out again, and the floor... I don't know what colour the water was he mopped it with. On a morning I'm already in late. A big group coming in for breakfast today, and one of the casuals, they're half a chance not to turn up. Great start.

There's a bang on the roller door. Miro. Great. "Morning Miro". Miro's our bread guy. Has been since we opened. Super friendly. Talk the leg off a chair. Kinda painful. Not up for it today.

"Heya Toby. Oh mate, did you see the Olympics last night? How about those women's hurdlers, huh? Oh my gosh, how about that woman that tripped? How gutted was she? When they train so hard, right? Now that must suck. Hey, have you got the TV on in there? Sally Pearson is running right now - oh wait... in 3 minutes! Let's have a look, huh?! Oh my friend, did I tell you my brother, right, he's got tickets to see the water polo..." And on and on he'd have gone.

Before the sun rises every day, serving his punters with a smile and a bit extra.

"Sorry Miro, flat stick today mate, short staffed and a big group coming in. Got the extra fruit loaf I asked for?"

Miro's eyes flashed momentarily, the split-second look of a surprised child hurt by a parent's inattention, who just realised grown-ups aren't perfect and, in that moment, hardened up against the world. Then, quick as a flash, the joviality returned.

"Ah, Toby, relax, you'll do great! You guys do a good job here, right?! Mate, if you work as hard as we do, you've got to chill a little, huh? You're pushing up daisies a long time, mate!"

I grabbed the tray of beautifully warm artisanal loaves from Miro and, despite myself, smiled.

"Of course I've got your fruit loaf, what am I, huh? On the top. We threw in an extra one, a new mix my Dad's been trying, right? Tell me what you think, huh?"

I stopped and looked at Miro. Really looked at him. Before the sun rises every day, serving his punters with a smile and a bit extra and all he's after is 2 minutes of time crumbs from my day to listen to him and engage in a bit of banter. To enjoy the process. He's a valuable part of my business. Geez I'm a selfish prat sometimes.

"Quick, come in, we'll have a look, and I'll make you a take-away macch."

Miro beamed. "There you go! Hey, my brother, right, he said that you wouldn't believe the atmosphere there right now. He goes, "Miro,...."



Breakfast 5

Working the networkers

It's a regular networking group.

Local small business owners and sales reps working the area. Once a month, sometimes 6 people, sometimes 20. Today's a good crowd - 18 expected, but there's always a few no-shows. No matter how many times you have them confirm.

I've got the filter coffee set up in the corner for the impatient or the frequent cup-toppers. They have about 20 minutes of general mulling and catchup time before they sit down, eat and listen to speakers. I use this PR time to go around and ask people if they'd like a 'special order' - a latte, or capp, or something with soy. We've built this into the fixed per-head price of the breakfast itself, but it has the feel of a bonus.

I could have Lina do this order taking for me - she's great with customers. But I figure it's a ready-made networking function for me too. I'm respectful of the network organiser's "Pappa Bear" role and make sure I don't try taking over, but I weave neatly through the group asking for special coffee orders, welcoming people, thank them for coming in. Ben, the organiser, has told me he likes this - it adds something nice to their function. For me, it's a rolled gold opportunity to inspire people to want to come back for coffee or lunch or just the feeling. I put the cafe's best foot forward. I do what I can to build Ben's forum and the feeling attached to it.

Lina comes out of the kitchen - she's holding two platters covered with toasty-hot buttered slices of the new fruit loaf Miro brought in. She hands one to me and moves with the other to the opposite side of the group. I offer free toast to three networkers huddled together.

"A little bonus, ladies, sir - our brilliant bread makers down at Dough Nuts have just created a new type of fruit loaf and they're keen for feedback. Super fresh and toasty. Would you like a little taste? Great, there you go.... I'll be keen to hear what you think!" So Miro's had a free coffee and a free plug this morning... I'm back in credit.

The group start to take their seats. I've made up some little "Come back and have a coffee on us" freebie cards that I've placed on each setting, along with a little "10 tips for hosting a memorable event" coaster checklist my team put together a few months back. I mean, as hospitality providers, we do it for a living, so why not share a few learnings with clients, right? Ben likes it - it makes him look like he's made a great supplier choice. We think similarly.

I've seen business card swap-fests in here before where you can just smell the desperation of people trying winning business or gain an advantage without any real interest in adding much to the pot. Too many takers in the world, I think. A little generosity works. I want Ben to feel like his group's had a great function today. And you never know, maybe again and again.

Morning tea 6

What's your best coffee?

I get asked the question a fair bit.

What would I recommend, or what's the specialty of the house?

I don't know? What do you feel like?

If you've got the time, if the sun's still climbing and you like frothy milky drinks and have a little bit of a sweet tooth, we're pretty proud of the Cappuccino we do. If you're trying to lose weight or are lactose intolerant and intolerant of the taste of Soy, a nice espresso might suit. For the time-poor after a quick and intense caffeine hit, try our ristretto - a densely tamped triple shot of espresso, only 15 ml of oily concentrate finding its way to the cup through the grind. Sell a lot of those to the lycra-wearers pre-pedal.

A well-dressed young executive is standing at the counter. She's in here a lot.

"Would you like your regular, ma'am?" Skinny latte, 1 artificial sweetener.

"No thanks, I've already had two this morning. I'll have a green tea please."

I used to think I was doing the regulars a service, showing off my memory and attention to their needs by starting the pour the moment they walked in the door. I mean, to be presented with your regular before you've even ordered, right? I've stopped doing that.

"Certainly! Would you like any milk on the side?" Dumb question, right? Who pours milk into green tea? Purists roll their eyes.

"That'd be great, thanks."

I see a lot of business people come in and sit quietly by themselves for 10 minutes or so before they're joined by another. Mostly I think they're sales meetings or partnership pow-wows. What I see a lot of them do, while they're alone, is look out the window into thin air, thinking, tapping their pencil. Then often they jot down some notes. When their meetings begin, I see some of them refer back to their scribbles. I'm a bit of a snoop - sometimes I see what they've written on their pages.

Often it's lots of question marks.

Lunch 7

Viewing pleasure

Catch the moments when things work
and when they don't.

Nothing gives me greater satisfaction than watching members of my team interacting with customers when they don't know I'm watching, and watching them get it right.

I think a leader has to be a bit of a voyeur. Those general observations you make when everyone around you is buzzing like honey pot bees, to take in the nuances and subtle temperature shifts and catch the moment when things work and when they don't. They, for me, are the things that influence my next decisions. I'm pretty comfortable putting down my best business decisions to watching closely.

Dion is clearing a table and smiling and chatting animatedly to the older couple sitting nearby.

I'm pretty comfortable putting
down my best business
decisions to watching closely.

He's moving quickly and cleanly to refresh the real estate we need occupied for cashflow, but he's not making those nearby feel like they're in his way. He's adding a little colour to their lunch. I like that about him. He's very perceptive. Inclusive. He gets the work done, but he enjoys and includes others in the enjoyment.

Grace is in the kitchen tasting the soup, tweaking it. Lunch service is half over, and she could serve what's in the pot and assume it's all fine. I think half-a-dozen people have already eaten it. But you can see she wants it to be better, to take pride in knowing it's great. That's great.

Dion trots past me with an armful of dirty plates and smiles.

"All good?"

"All good. Having fun?" I ask him.

He gets a surprised look on his face.

"Sure! Why? Don't I look like it?" His smile falters a mite.

"You do. You're doing a great job. Those customers out there love you. Good stuff. Table 5 needs clearing too" I tell him as I spy another party standing and leaving.

It's not the team I worry about so much. They're great kids, they're trying hard, and the muck-ups they make aren't fatal and prove invaluable learnings.

I've got to keep remembering my role as a role model. If I'm not doing the right things, how can I expect to keep the culture bubbly and self-sustaining and magnetic? I can pump their tyres up all I like, but if I don't walk the service-focused talk?

I put the smile on my face and focus on pouring the best soy latte I can make.



Afternoon 8

Dancers

There's a lot of dancers in this afternoon.
Must be the weather.

"Dancers" is a kind of facetious term I use for those people having a conversation for the sake of it, some kind of obligation or routine. You can see they're not really in it - like the Rosella on the sauce bottle, my Dad says. They're just playing out a little dance they think they have to have, to tick a box, to keep themselves feeling like they're progressing.

By the window, the suit triad. One's explaining what could be a strategy to land the new client or execute the takeover or something equally important. One's checking his phone. And the third is nodding, then continually looking over at Mel, our young and very attractive staff member, going about her work. Dancing. There, but not.

In the booth, two ladies who lunch, looks like they're readying to pick the kids up from school, one's trying to call attention to herself by raving about a holiday and guffawing at her own stories. The other smiles tightly at appropriate intervals, nodding and mentioning that Bridgette has to be at piano at 4:30, her teacher thinks she's got such talent, but we're not sure we want her giving up the dance class that clashes, it's such a choice.... It's like they're having two separate conversations. Dancing.

There's Mike, who's in here a lot, and one of his colleagues, Zina. Account Exec's for a finance company of some sort. I assume they have these pow-wow's to break their day up, maybe compare notes, just because it's easier than seeing clients. Not much productive, as far as an outsider can see. Mike's checking his messages while Zina's speaking. Killing the time and dancing.

I laminated a sheet and stuck it up in the kitchen when I first took over this place. Something I picked up from an old boss (they seem to be the source of most of my best learnings, now I think about it, good and bad). On the sheet I typed the words "No matter what you're doing or who you're with, be there. Be 100% there." Kinda Zen. I don't mind when we get it wrong. It kills me when we don't pay attention. If I catch a team member dancing, they get 'the look'. I hold the look until it pulls them into the discomfort of the moment. And then they're there.

We're trying to achieve something big here.

We don't have time to dance.

Dinner 9

Not waiting

"I've got this Scoopon coupon
- can I use that?"

"Certainly sir! We've got a lovely bottle of wine for you to enjoy with your meal! And thank you for choosing to dine with us - this promotion is proving really popular!"

Too many restaurants I know get themselves into these special promotion deals to grow their foot traffic, then make the client feel like a cheapskate when they present their discount. We've talked about this as a team. People want to know they made a good choice, one others made, and that we're glad they came. We make a fuss of the test-drivers. Not as much as the regulars, but...

Social media's been interesting for us. One of our youngies tweets specials and recipe tips and random happenings in the crew - we had some SM training, and I'm the first to admit, I'm still trying to figure it out. But we have a lot of people trying to be 4-Square "Mayor's" in our venue, and our Facebook page is evolving and has lots of 'likes' and I've created a LinkedIn group for coffee aficionados that I try building by one or two every day.

It's interesting, you know. When I first took on the place, I thought "we serve food and drinks, people will just come, and I suppose our success is at the whims of the crowd and how they judge our offerings". I suppose it could be if we let it.

I go out and try finding new punters.

We train the staff to ask the questions. When they hear the words at the register "we had a lovely time / meal / event - thank you!", it's like the provoke to return with "oh, thank you! We'd love to have you back again, and your friends too! Would you like to take a free coffee card for a friend?" (We made these little cards that say "Your friend's shout!" - I'm sure a number use it themselves, but hey, they come back...).

We advertise, we direct mail, we sponsor events, we donate to the local schools, we're in networking groups, we run some free classes on making coffee and cakes, and the team have been unbelievable in taking it on themselves to try growing the menu-readers. I routinely make appointments with corporate types to present how we can enhance the value they offer their clients. And we do tastings. You've got to try what we're famous for!

You can't wait.

Closing time 10

We want to keep you

Worth the tweaks. Keep the good 'uns.
Too hard to find.

Calliope comes up to me and says "I'm not sure how to say this, so I'll just say it. I have to resign." I probably look a bit shocked. "I'm going to study full time, I got into Architecture, and it's going to be full on, so..... I've really loved working here! I can work out the next few weeks if you need me to, or whenever you want me to finish..."

She could have told me this at the start of her shift, but she held off. Not sure if she was too scared, or procrastinating because she likes it here, or just thought it would distract us on a busy service night. I think it could be the last - she's not a retiring type, and continually demonstrates her consideration. Regardless, I'm glad we're having this chat with no punters in the house. They pay for our focus.



"Ahh, Calli, that's really exciting! Congratulations!" I mean, it is, right? It sucks for me maybe, but this is a big thing for her. She's a ripper - piercings and tatt's aside, she's one of the most diligent workers we've had here for yonks. It's like this is her own place, she clients her own guests - relatives - and she's got a keen eye for when people need some attention. If she's not serving, she's cleaning and helping another. She's anti-lazy. Rare.

"Oh, phew! I thought you'd be really p#ssed!" She breathes a sigh and her shoulders drop. She's been carrying that around. I'd never have guessed. So many bring their troubles to parade before the team, or worse, in front of the payers.

"I'm not keen to lose you! But I'm delighted - you'll be a brilliant architect, you're creative and have a great eye for detail. More than that, you really listen to people - you pay attention and read the signs. Pretty important, I imagine, when taking a client's brief to design a house for them!" A bit of an aw-shucks look. I've got to move fast here.

"Calli, we don't want to lose you completely if we don't have to. Have you got a part-time income source? We'd love to find a way to support you while you're studying, even if it's only one or two shifts a week that don't get in the way of your study?"

"Oh. Thank you. I'm really unsure about the study schedule, and I thought I'd give it my full attention for the first month and get a realistic idea of what's required. I've saved enough to get me through for a couple of months, and I can pick up some casual shifts somewhere near campus once I know. I can't ask you to hold the role open - that's not fair. This place is great, and you need someone full-time I think. There's a girl I know..."

"That's why I want you to stay. Because you think like that. Ahead. About others. Solutions. Gratefully. I can't train that. You're great here, you'll do great in your course, and what if we gave you the first month off to tackle the course, suss it out, then we'll sit down and design a shift that will suit? I'm happy to look at an on-the-job mentoring role - you can build up some of our juniors. And if you're happy to send your new Uni friends here, I'm happy to spot you a small 'study kickstart' sponsorship of some sort, t' get you going. What do you think?"

My business isn't so inflexible that I can't mould it to incorporate people who've proven themselves to add great value to it. And who, when feeling indebted, I know will go +1 to get themselves back in credit. Worth the tweaks. Keep the good 'uns. Too hard to find.

Sparrows 11

Disciplining the inner voice

“I ordered a latte, not a cappuccino.
Can you make me another thanks.”

He wasn't rude, but curt. And I know he ordered a cappuccino. Jenny gives me the sideways confirmatory glance. “Sir, my apologies - I'll get that for you right now.”

He moves back to his group, early morning corporate pedallers in lycra groaning in the wrong places. I so want to let churlish thoughts about stuffing sausages play out in my head...

He pays for your success. He's the reason you have a business. He wants this place to be great.

The group laughs loudly, too loud, and an older man walking by the shop nearly trips on their gaggle of 2-wheeled Porsches. I so want to let acid-tipped barbs flow through my brain about the lycra confirming the compensation theories of owning expensive toys...

They're regulars. They're why you set up a business. They're paying for a forum to relax, unwind, enjoy. They'll spruik.

One of the crew comes back up and asks for another round. “Can we pay for those at the end? Separate accounts. And can I get three, no, four bottles of tap water? And 8 glasses? You'll bring those out?”, turning and walking before the answer leaves my lips. “No problems at all.”

I'm busting to entertain the inner screams of “mid-life crisis” and “what sort of role models for manners are you for your kids”...

They're the customer. They're your VIP's. They are why you exist. They fuel your goal achievement. This place is for them, not you.

I brief Jenny on their repeat order, pop 4 bottles of water and some glasses on the tray, take a deep breath and smile like someone just told me Buddy Franklin had been signed at Carlton.

“Here you are gentlemen. It's a brilliant morning - how was the ride?” My success, in the hands of the payers, in the thought train I choose to let traverse my noggin.

Morning 12

The homework

Professional development stuff.

I've got the rest of the day off. My 'sabbatical' day. I take it once a fortnight, distinct from my regular weekly rest day. I put my 2IC in charge, she's great. She loves the chance to run the whole shebang - it's a trust thing. Place hasn't burnt down yet on her watch. She's going to be a star.

I drink a lot of coffee on sabbatical day. I set myself the challenge of getting to 4 cafes. I also go to a restaurant for lunch with my better half.

It's a great day. I take notes, I taste how others brew their commodities, I sit and watch the dynamic between staff and managers and customers. Consider other marketing approaches, watch what creates a buzz. I often catch up with business partners or I'll meet with a staff member somewhere new, and we'll talk through practices, either ones we're employing or ones we're watching as we sip. I read in some coffee shops. Professional development stuff.

I'll get to the markets. I mean, I go there weekly on 'operational' trips, but to go there when you're just there to observe, and think, and reflect on why the successful are....

Some of the best initiatives we've put in place had their genesis in sabbatical day. I've seen another service provider do something, or not do something, and thought “we could do a variation on that!” It's the thinking time, the fact the day's dedicated to it, that allows the thought to be scratched into an initiative in my notepad I carry. I mean, ideas and inspirations are a dime a dozen. But it's having the regular time home to let them stew, to reveal themselves fully as translatable changes that would fit our business... an old boss taught me the value of a regular 'extract-yourself-from-the-business-and-go-tour-others' day.

My wife loves it too. A tax deductible date lunch. It's a tough gig, so taking these regular moments is pretty crucial if you're going to sustain the effort. I take notes during it, so it's not completely romantic, but still...

I swear some of the waiters think I'm a restaurant reviewer.

I'm not. Well, I am. Of course I am. Everyone is. I'm a particularly avid learner though. I like researching. It's healthy. You can make it fun too.

Rush hour 13

On balance

I have to make a judgement call.
I'd love his cash, but on balance...

"So, we want to hold the event here, in the main part of the restaurant... I like the ambience, it's got a really positive feel. Happy."

The debonair man is expansive in his gestures, smiling a smile that could be Californian veneers, it's so white. He's looking around at our space, bustling with people, the air rich with pasta sauce notes and fresh roasted ground. I'm flattered, but I'm flat stick. Be disciplined with your patience, Toby.

"Thank you very much, sir, I appreciate that! Now, can I ask, when precisely did you want to hold your event?"

"Oh, it'll be a lunchtime, either a Tuesday or a Thursday. That's the best day for our clients."

Can't please 'em all.
Got to keep pleasing the
payers though.

"I see. Sir, can I show you our function room? It's capable of fitting the group you've described quite comfortably..."

"No, I've been in it before. It's very nice, but we really want the event in here - where it's all happening."

This happens occasionally. I have to make a judgement call. I'd love his cash, but on balance... Today, as with most occasions, it goes this way;

"I understand. Sir, we'd love to have your group in. I'm afraid we made a decision a couple of years ago not to open the main part of the restaurant to large corporate functions during our normal daytime service periods. We're very fortunate that a number of very regular customers fill about 1/2 our restaurant most weekdays at lunchtime.

We're very proud of looking after our regulars! What it means is that we've chosen not to displace them for the occasional larger function. It's why we've invested in our beautiful new function room - we'd love to try and accommodate everyone! I hope you understand. Because I'm putting you out, I'd be quite happy to waive the normal room hire fee for your group...?"

You can see he's not used to being told no. But he grits the pearlys.

"Ahh, that's a shame. I had my heart set on here. No, we're not after a function room, we really want a certain vibe for the session we're running... I'll have to have another think."

"Sir, I am sorry. There are a couple of very good places that may be able to accommodate you..." I reach under the counter and grab a card of a friend who runs a cafe chain. "But sir, if you don't find anywhere that's right, we'd love to have your group in our function room - I can tell my staff to amp up the noise in the room!" He half smirks at my humour attempt.

Can't please 'em all.

Got to keep pleasing the payers though. They paid for that function room.



The quiet spot 14

People: strange or predictable?

Lower stress, pays attention to the the details
for the local tribe. Good for me.
Maybe good for him.

Phil, my favourite wine rep, is in. He's toting a cracking new Pinot Grigio, a bit of an 'it' varietal right now. He knows our drinkers will like it. He jots notes on everything I say, every bit of feedback I give him about what punters tell me they like and which sections of our wine list get the most questions. I like a note-taker. Columbo of the Colombard.

"The two Pinot Gris' you've been moving a lot of, this one's got slightly more pronounced pear and peach flavours... still a nice light mouthfeel though, I think it's got great balance... I've thought about this one with your seafood linguini... what do you think?" He eats here a bit too, on his own coin.



"I like it. Ricky!", I call out to my sidekick between spits. "Try this - do you think Sam would like it?"

We're backstage - well, back of house; I like to think of the counter as a stage. It's quiet - mid afternoon, the best time for reps to call. Phil always phones ahead to see how we're travelling. We've got a standing monthly catchup, but he doublechecks. I don't change the wine list monthly, but we like to benchtest frequently.

Phil's a good guy, considerate, listens. He gives us more service than I think our account must warrant. We sell a bit of mid-range wine, but we're only a mid-size cafe-come-restaurant. If it were me, and I know he's on commission... there's bigger fish. I think his bent is more lifestyle - lower stress, pay attention to the details for the loyal tribe. Good for me. Maybe good for him.

There's this other rep that comes in, Pete - always right in the middle of our peak periods. Swaggers in with his sample booze, makes a song and dance like he's Santa, sporadic in his visits and no idea what we've been selling. Just brings us what he tells us is 'the next big thing'. I mean, I'm keen to explore options and hear about what others are doing, but...

"This same winery does a beautiful Pinot Noir. I was looking in the history and the Pinot we put in here about this time last year is not dissimilar. Now the weather's warming, have you begun seeing more demand for the lighter reds?"

Why can't Pete be more like Phil? It's strange - Pete's been in the game a long time too, you'd think he'd know how to make himself more endearing by coming in when it suits us, by doing his homework... I give Phil every opportunity, chances I wouldn't offer first up to Pete.

I do keep buying Pete's wine though. Dill as he is, he's got some good stuff. And I've never really sent him away when I've been flat stick, just make him wait, so I guess he figures... I'm probably a smaller fry for him and maybe he saves those quiet times for his big punters....

"Sam'll love this" says Ricky in future tense. I'll get a couple of off-menu cases in to test it.

Elevensy's 15

On show

I just made a regular look good.

"Toby! How are you?! My gosh, you're busy! You've done a great job with this place - congratulations! Well, let's add to your success - Frank what will you have?"

It's John, my realtor regular. His tone says he's out to impress. Show he's connected, part of the fabric. Positive. Praising. A contributor to the economy and the success of those he touches. I know in part it's genuine - he's still a good guy in alone moments. But I know this one must mean something. Happy to oblige for a regular.

"Ahh, it's your tips paying off John! If you ever decide you've sold too many homes, I think I'll have to get you in here to help us expand!"

"Frank, this is Toby - Toby, Frank's a developer with a midas touch. Great guys in here, Frank. Toby does a mean coffee too. Shame he's got such a good head for radio..." As Wilde said, John has a large wardrobe of humour's cast-off clothes. I smile widely and look to Frank for his order.



One of the things I've noticed about John is, alone or with company, he seems to know he's on show.

When you cultivate a public persona (and triple-size headshots on street corner billboards and for-sale signs means you'll probably be recognised a bit), you've got to bank on being spied on. John's always looking dapper. Even late on a Friday, he never looks frazzled. A bit loud with company maybe, but never offensive.

Frank orders, and John orders.

"Thank you gentlemen, grab a seat, I'll have them out to you momentarily." Frank goes to pay. John gently places his palm between Frank's reaching hand and my counter.

"Please, Frank. On me. Biscotti?"

"On me" I say. For a landed cost of less than \$1.50, I just made a regular look good, and maybe won a new customer whose star, if John's tyre-pump is accurate, is on the rise. On the tax form, that one's marketing expenditure.

The happy campers move to a table, John gesturing to Frank to take the best seat. Two people are watching them. Maybe more.

One of the things I've noticed
about John is, alone or with
company, he seems to know
he's on show.

Breakfast 16

Blinded by the light

A first impression firecracker?

“Maria, would you take a first impressions walk for me please?”

A little practice we developed a couple of years ago. It started when a prospective new staff member walked in for an interview and said right off the bat “Wow, it’s bright in here!” We’d been changing the light fittings over a period of a couple of weeks, and the staff (and certainly I) hadn’t noticed that the lux rating had crept up to point it was tangible. The candid one didn’t get the gig - not because they didn’t have a subtlety filter; they just couldn’t pour coffee - but they did give us a gift. Fresh eyes and the value of looking through them.

Maria walks through the growing breakfast crowd and out the front door of our nosherly into the frigid winter air.

At a staff meeting soon after our eyes were opened to the brightness issue, one of our crew suggested we adopt a regular habit of walking into the business with ‘new customer eyes’. To have someone walk outside, clear their head, consciously try and step into some newbie shoes, and walk back in and give us their 5 first impressions as if they’d never set foot in the place before.

Maria walks back to the door, opens it, and stands at the threshold just a moment, looking, listening, smelling, soaking. Then she walks back behind the counter, takes a notepad, and writes down 5 words. Ever since that staff meeting, we’ve made it a daily discipline to have one of the team members take what we’ve branded as a ‘first impressions walk’. I have it on my daily checklist to ask a different team member to do.

“So?”

“Colourful. Buzzing. Wood. Coffee smells. Jazz.”

“Great stuff, thank you.” We’ve been thinking about the wooden furniture a bit. Stodgy? “I did notice that the San Pellegrino bottles we’ve got lined up on the shelf are looking a bit skew. We’ve had them there a while... tired. Can we do something else?”

Hmm. For tomorrow’s staff meeting. Seems like a minor detail. But what if we could make it a magnet? A first impression firecracker?

“I think you’re right. Well done. Head’s up, Rick’s just walked in.”

Post-school-drop-off rush 17

Perpetual motion

Joint’s buzzing.

Mums who coffee - the pupae version of ladies who lunch - are dominating our brewhouse. I love the vibe of a busy morning crowd - fresh, the day hasn’t yet crushed their mojo, and there’s a sense of freedom in the room.

One of our new guys, Leon, is standing looking at the crowd. He’s trying to engage Marie in a conversation, but she’s busy restocking the fridge. I call him over.

“What are you doing now, Leon?”

“Ahh, I’m on clearing duty, just waiting for a table to finish. All full at the moment.” He’s right - at this second, there’s not a table that needs clearing.

“So... what are you doing now?” I can see this repetition of the question has had the desired effect. A penny’s just dropped. Standing still doing nothing when you’re a servant in a busy service business doesn’t cut it.

“Uhh, I’ll check and see what Marie wants a hand with.”

“Great. Leon, there’s no quiet spots in a place like this. It’s different to a lot of work places. I hope you love it - you’ve got some great promise. If ever you catch yourself standing still, remember these words.” I enunciate them for effect. “Activity. Equals. Results. Activity equals results.”

I can see him trying to remember something the boss obviously loves, but he’s not quite getting it. That’s ok. He’s super young. The words’ll take years to click into place.

“When we’re doing things, things happen. When we’re serving, clients spend. When we’re moving, clients are happy. When we’re creating or cleaning or engaging in customer conversations, the business grows. Trust me. Keep moving. Never stop in the middle of busy service. Good man - see what Marie needs a hand with. Oh, and Leon?”

“Uhh, yes?”

“Table 42’s leaving. Clearing’s up.”

Pre-lunch 18

How to grow business

We're only as good as every single service.

"So Toby, you're nominated for a restaurant & catering award - how does that feel?"

I'm sitting at a back table with a journo from the local rag - they're doing a short interview with me to run in the food section next weekend.

"Oh, it's nice, I suppose - feels good to be recognised. Our team work really hard, we're proud of what we do, and I'm glad people are enjoying it!"

"You're being modest - your diner has become one of the most popular coffee, lunch and dinner spots in town of late - no mean feat in such a competitive space. Three years ago, few people would have heard of your business. How have you grown it?"

We're nominated in 3 categories, including coffee, cafe-style dining and service.

"Uhh... well... I think the most important thing of all is to deliver great food and coffee. If we don't do that, we're out of business. I mean, sounds obvious, but we're only as good as every single service."

"OK, but there's lots of places that do good food and coffee... there must be more to it than that."

"Well, we work hard on our service. The basics. Be friendly, be accurate, think about the customer's experience, remember why they're there.... that's an interesting one. Not everyone is looking for the same experience when they come... and you can't just come out and ask them, right? I mean, they might be here for business, so want peace and quiet and efficiency. Or they might be here for a party or social catchups, so noise and colour and banter with the staff might be important. It's different for everyone. We - our team - try and give the customer the style of service they're looking for. But the service is nothing without the quality of product. Like the impending lunch service... we'll get judged on what we start plating up in the next 15 minutes."

"So good food and coffee, good service... anything else?"

I think about this for a moment.

"No. I mean, there's glue-stuff that holds it together, like teamwork and a dynamic culture and the aesthetics and function of the space we have.... and we've been active in our marketing efforts, and I have a focus on developing the corporate business with our function room. But if I had to say what's really grown us? Great food, ripping coffee, and service that suits the individual. It's all important, but that's foundational."

Kinda boring article. True though.

Afternoon 19

I have to get away

It's time to step away and clear the head

I'm taking a run through the parklands and one of my knees is clicking. Damn. I'm not thrilled with the idea of visiting the sawbones again. But it's been getting worse these last few months. Another scope. Another bit of rubbish scooped out. More time on the bench. Getting old.

The dappled shade along the recreation path is remarkable for taking the mind to other places. I imagine I'm in New York or London or Singapore. Adelaide is great to run. There's a few trotters out, most are still at work though. I like this time of the day for running. Too hot in Summer, but during late Winter & Spring, it's perfect. A distraction. A refresh.

I had to get out of the restaurant. Was about to lose my chip. You know when customers start giving you the sh#ts, it's time to step away and clear the head. I didn't get short with one, but a churlish retort I'd formed in my head to lob back at a snotty one got far too close to the tip of my tongue for comfort. And had they not been such a self-absorbed tw\$t, they would have read the look on my face for what it was. Go buy a clue.

My foot bones (being connected to my leg bone, which is connected to my knee bone) are a bit achey. Meh. Stop being a princess. Got nothing but first world problems.

We roster the team's shifts to avoid extended back-to-back's wherever possible. Despite the fact we're not performing brain surgery, it can be a mentally taxing space to spend stretches of time in. It's the keeping-a-smile-on-the-face-ness of it that's the toughest. You've got to do your hardest work in full view of people who don't just judge what you do, but how you do it and how you look and how you treat them while you're doing it. And doing your bottle just wouldn't do.

The wind's picked up and I'm into a stiffening southerly. I don't mind. Not here to win a race. The forced air into my lungs makes the gasping easier. I let the pain of my foot and knee and the chill through my sweaty t-shirt take my mind off the shop. I'm on a late one tonight, and as Boss Hogg, I'm there most days regardless. I've found I have to take these short time-outs when our staff load is coping. I make sure testy staff take spells too. Working them until they bark won't do our long-term reputation as a service standard any good.

Turning around now (ahhh, a tail wind...). I'll get back, have a quick shower and watch the mood improve around me. It's good for business. Good for me too - been eating too many of those Apricot Oyster's Marie's Nonna makes...

Daylight 20

Speaker's corner table

What's the best way to attract and keep the best staff?

She's a smart rep, that Catherine. Understands the way we think. She's put together this small group of cafe owners - all customers that have one of her coffee machines, all spaced far enough away to not feel too much like direct competition. She's built, like, a little breakfast support group that gets together once a month. Pretty good bunch, I like our pow-wows. We rotate hosting duties.

This month it's my turn.

We've got 9 in this morning, and it's early - before opening. We're all early risers, we have to be, so we figure this is the best time to catch up with minimal impact on business operations. How many sales reps will run a function at 6:15am for you? Catherine pays for the coffees and we pay for our breakfasts, mates rates. The host venue ponies up with a little bonus taster - we show off.



Catherine brings us an industry update - goings on in the world of coffee beans & machines, bit of local goss and people movements, usually a subtle little plug dressed up as an information update about Carlton Coffee products. I don't mind, it's often quite useful. Not sure how she gets over all the local market information - she's only been in Adelaide a few months. Husband took a transfer from Brisbane. She's a gun. I've told my other good suppliers they should poach her.

What differentiates this get-together from other networking groups I've tried before is Catherine poses us all a question a few days beforehand on the email, then she facilitates the conversation and experience sharing around it.

Today's question - "What's the best way to attract and keep the best staff?" Huge challenge for small businesses with a largely casual workforce.

"You've got to pay a little more than award - performance bonuses, set some service KPI's."

"I get my best staff to put the feelers out amongst friends - I tell them I trust them to recruit wisely, most take that trust pretty seriously."

"I poach them! I ask our supplier reps who impresses them, then I'll get them to suss it out for me."

"You've got to be flexible - you know, it's often Uni students, so know their study schedules and make sure they can have the pick of shifts."

"Role-model the behaviours you want them displaying, and don't talk to them like cr*p - too many small business owners I know treat their staff like rubbish."

"Be nice, thank them, praise them, give them instruction that'll be valuable later in life. Let them have ideas."

Catherine takes notes in these sessions, then sends us a wrap-up afterwards on the email. Savvy - she's got a front row seat to the ongoing thought process of her best clients. I've spoken with my team about what we can learn from her approach and apply to our clients.

I love good suppliers. I get so much from them.

Morning 21

Routine with edge

The competition is a routine, but I keep changing the prize and the number.

There's a sackful of repetition in what we do. Coffees, food orders, service drills, the logistics of running a business that brings stuff in, tweaks it, sends it out for consumption then cleans up afterwards, day in and out. For the most part, I don't mind that.

I know it makes us money.

It doesn't mean I seek out the dull prosaic spirits that thrive on auto pilot to fill my staff, nor create a process model that bleeds all spontaneity out of the experience customers come here for. I admire Macca's, but I don't want to be Macca's.

But I do have to have people and flows that persist with consistency. It's smart, it's reassuring for the punters, and we can organise around it. Hippy communes might be fun. Damn hard to manage, I'd bet.

Sometimes it's the little touch in the generosity of your sprinkle chocolate.

We've developed a "Routine + Edge" program that we try percolating through our culture. It's a mantra we have people apply to their commonest duties. For example, pouring a cappuccino. We talk routinely about what the routine to make the best brew is - the order taking, the ergonomics of cup to machine to counter, the grind and tamp and frothing, even the cash handling.

Then we talk about the "+ Edge" bit - how can we improve it by a gnat's nose each time? Put some spunk into it. Keep it fresh and challenging in our own heads and create the moment where the customer is conscious they're special to us and they're getting something special.

Sometimes it's about the chatter you engage the client in. Sometimes it's the little touch in the generosity of your sprinkle chocolate. Sometimes it's speed - how fast can you make it? (We have races). Sometimes it's in precision movement. Has to be continually refreshed to stay edgy. Routine is sandpaper, and talking about the + Edge takes the plane to the task once more.

I've created a + Edge prize. Clients don't know they're nominating for it, but we've created a short list of "Edge" words that, when the staff hear them made about a colleague, they scratch a notch into a piece of wood I've nailed behind the counter. The scratcher is a nail. For when we 'nailed it' (get it?). When we hit 42 notches, there's an edgy prize.

The competition is a routine, but I keep changing the prize and the number.

Competitions need to stay edgy to inspire.



Lunch 22

Mentoring & eye-opening

“Watch how long this takes.”

I’m sitting at a table in a coffee shop with one of my senior team members. We’re ‘secret shopping’ the competition, getting a feel for how others are doing it. Ric has great promise. I don’t think I’ll keep him. The catch 22 of a service business.

“Surely they’ll do it. Surely.”

“Nope. Watch.”

The place we’re in has a big sign - “Counter Service Only”. It’s got a reasonably friendly vibe, but we’ve hit it on a slow lunch day. I’ve noticed their lunches are getting progressively slower. I make it my business to know this. There’s a young guy behind the counter, a younger girl standing near the pass, and the shop owner (who hasn’t seen me yet) talking on a mobile phone looking towards the kitchen, back to the crowd.

The object of our interest is an older couple who’ve just walked in, looking a little dazed and confused, and who’ve sat straight down at a table. They’re nestling in, they’re looking for menu’s, they haven’t seen the sign (or maybe they have, but hey, they’re the customer, and they’re old). Whatever the case, they’ve been seen by at least one of the sedentary servants, who, despite not being occupied by other service duties at this second, have decided the big sign policy mandates they man their stationary stations. No eye contact or theatrical whispering to the old couple to come to the counter, let alone a waltz to their table to suggest they come up and check out the specials. Heaven forbid they bend the rule. These people must be 80. To get out of that chair would take more effort than the cook will put into making them a sambo.

“Now watch the interplay” I say to Ric. Like magic, the two young people start staring at the old people and barely veil their in-joke about how they mustn’t be able to read and how stupid some customer are. The boss gets off the phone, sees his staff chinwagging, then turns and makes another call.

“Uncomfortable to watch” says Ric.

“Yep. Think other customers aren’t sharp enough to see and feel that?”

Ric’s processing it all. I’m hopeful that, as a future alumni of our cantina, he takes this eye-opening mentoring and pays it forward.

“Initiative trumps policy. Every time. No exception. Look for it in staff.”

My kingdom for a thinking server. Ric’ll champion this now.

Closing 23

All boiled down

On the visor is a sticker I had printed with 3 prompts.

It’s dark and quiet. Team’s gone home. Lights are out and I’ve locked the shop. I jump into the front seat of my car. I leave the door ajar so the light stays on just a minute. I flip the sunvisor down. It’s a lesson that became a discipline that’s since evolved into a habit.

On the visor is a sticker I had printed with 3 prompts.

Do something to improve the business today?

Make someone’s world better?

Have fun contributing?

I use these prospectively as spurs and retrospectively as audits. Last thing I do before I get out of the car in the morning when I’ve pulled into work. First thing I do before turning the engine on at night when I leave.

I know they’re not words that’d push everyone’s buttons.

I’ve found them to be a nice little mental bookend, a date with myself in my car. Distinct concentrated gift moments to focus on the daily vehicle I’ve chosen, the people I choose to be with and the way in which I’m electing to partake. Every morning - will I? Every night - did I?

A new lot tomorrow.

Off home now. Being all focused and principled is taxing. Refresh. My gift to others.

Looking at the midnight ceiling 24

Stenting choke points

I guess every boss or business owner knows the dark patch of ceiling above their bed pretty well.

We're doing OK, but I can see tough times coming.

Sometimes I wish I didn't have to worry for 15 staff. For the security of my family and the business lots of people have come to rely on. I imagine how well clock punchers must sleep.

But I know that's bollocks. "Job security". Pshhh. Maybe once upon a time. The only security I know is taking your own destiny by the scruff of the neck and frogmarching it in the direction of your goals.

We've got to stent our choke points. The rate limiting steps in our business, the things that seem to bottleneck and hold the waves of cash from torrenting into our tills. Got to wedge them open as wide as we can.

In a shop like ours, there's a few key choke points. "Hours in a day" is one - how many am I willing to stay open, what's the diminishing return or profit asymptote if we open earlier or stay open later? We track our dollars per hour of the day pretty tightly. I regularly test-drive periods of altered opening times. Think we're ok there. "Coffees or covers per hour" is another chokepoint. How many deliverables can we physically put up in a finite time period? If we can't up our saleable stock, can we charge more per serve (and justify it?) Or can we cut cost per serve and keep sell prices the same? We need to relook at this.

Then there's "Real Estate". Even if we had people pouring in at all hours and food and froth flying left, right and centre, how many bums on seats can we handle? Take-aways - is that the answer to our restricted floorplan? Instead of the sushi on the conveyer belt, maybe we need to sit customers on it... in, move, eat, and you're out! That'd be nice sometimes...

I've come to appreciate these chokepoints only create choke if we've got enough sand dripping through the hourglass. "Paying punters". There's our real rate-limiter. Got to keep the ones we've got. Got to grow via modelling them, inspiring them to help recruitment, calibrating our electromagnet to their particular polarity to get more like 'em.

The spot on my ceiling never has all the answers, but it's good at reflecting questions.

Breakfast 25

Memorable from the question

Great customer service is about asking great questions.

I'm convinced.

I'm standing watching our most remarkable server, the effervescent Jules, do what she does.

"How was everything? Did you enjoy the mushrooms? They smelled great! How about coffee top-ups... would you love another soy latte?" Love, not like. The party of four lycra ladies now feeling like they're having a bit of a party - someone fawning & fussing over them, VIP's.

"Good morning! How are you? Would you like some breakfast this morning, or just coffee?" to a newly entering regular.

"There you are. Would you like cracked pepper Sir?" to the bacon and eggs.

"A recommendation? Have you tried Eggs Benedict before? It's something of a specialty of the Chef's - I think they're to die for. Do you like fluffy banana pancakes with maple syrup and double cream? Go on, treat yourself!" cheekily to the middle aged couple who are scanning the menu with a smile.

"Is there anything else I can get you Sir?"

"Would you like...?"

"Can I..."

"What if I?"

The smile, the tailoring-the-talk to suit the moment and the VIP, the politeness and perceptiveness and respectfulness all key. But it's the questions that brings the punter into the play rather than feeling like an audience member. That's what engages hearts, heads, wallets.

Loyalty.

Isn't that what we're after?

Jules is making a bomb in tips. People remember her.

10am 26

Same name or reframe?

Of course, it's just a name.
One that's reasonably well known,
that's come to be associated with good things.

"I think you've got a chance to take a leap forward with your business, and create a fresh, strong, distinctive new brand. Something that says "Wow! You've got to check us out!" Something with pow!"

I'm sitting at the restaurant kitchen table with a creative type in pointy fake alligator shoes, pants cutting off blood flow and a shirt that should come with a seizure warning. I won't even mention the hair. My team move around us going about the business. Arty pants is all hands and expressives. I slow him down.

Why throw away the history,
the battle scars, the street
cred it took so long to build?

"I'm concerned about the fact that the place is so well known by its current name. Are we throwing that away? What do you call it, "Brand Equity"?"

"Sure, sure! Well, of course, it comes back to what you're trying to do here. If the brand's tired or redundant or incongruent with what you want this place to be, well... And do you want to put your own stamp on it? You inherited this brand, right?"
More like paid handsomely for it.

We've been to-ing and fro-ing awhile about whether we change the name of the place. Its name, Doull's, comes from the original owner. While it was a bit tired when we took it over, we've built the place up to a healthy business with loyal clients and a space & service we're proud of. But, probably like everyone that owns a shop, there's this temptation to tinker. And I keep thinking, does the name, the place, represent what I think this place needs to be in coming years to keep it profitable and enjoyable? His word 'congruence' is a good one. Will it all fit?

Of course, it's just a name. One that's reasonably well known, that's come to be associated with good things.

"If you did change it, what would you change it to?" asks the maybe-savvier-than-he-looks young trendie trying to pitch me his makeover services.

"Toby's" I say deadpan. Not really. I hate it. But I want to see his reaction. It's always funny trying to watch someone hide a wince and then suck up to you.

"I can see that! Big white letters, maybe a charcoal background, classic, understated, classy. "Meet you at Toby's!" I like it!" Sycophant. I put him out of his misery.

"Rueben," (really...), "I'm not changing the name. It's worth too much. The VIP's who pay for my existence like it, they know it, and the opportunity cost of discarding it far too high. I am keen though to give it a makeover. Let's talk about what that could look like..."

Our name's got us through this far. Why throw away the history, the battle scars, the street cred it took so long to build? When it's still working, still fits, cut and polish is more the order of the day.

Just after lunch 27

Treating them differently

You can't treat them the same. They're not.

I'm watching a boss and her charge have a performance review. She's in here quite often, takes a quiet corner table for what are often serious business conversations.

Today, she's laying it down the line. Don't need to be a lip reader to pick up the bluntness. The 30-odd bloke opposite, he's taking it, no fear in his face, just an open, focused look and some slow nodding going on. He's writing notes.

I don't know what business she's in - I think it's finance services of some sort - but she fascinates me. The approach I see her take with who I can only assume are her team members is highly variable. I saw her a few weeks ago take a young girl, whose ruddy cheeks and doe eyes gave away her obvious angst, from a place of fear to a seemingly resolved plan platform by setting the tone dial to warmth, moving beside rather than opposite her, and walking her gently but clearly through a process, ultimately lightening up the conversation's closing ceremony with smiles and chuckles.

(You'd be amazed how much you can garner from paying attention).

I've seen her call out a grizzly old bloke and then put a pen in his hand that must've been doubling as a talking stick and let him take her through what he was going to do while she listened sternly but openly, hands steeped before her chin.

I've watched her facilitate a 4-way planning session with a chatterbox, a mouse and a shiny-object-syndrome sufferer, and keep them together in a room full of distractions via modulating her interplay with each.

I think of the AFL coach with the prodigiously talented ratbag and the run-of-the-mill workhorses and how they manage to apply a consistent set of rules in different ways depending on the individual. This lady's a gun at that.

The lady reaches over and grabs the man's forearm while holding his eye contact and persisting with serious lower-face motions. Another personality might react like they'd had an electric shock, and if it is indeed the boss giving him a spray, even think it inappropriate and respond accordingly. But she's either got a 6th sense or knows her people, because this guy responds with a look, a smile, a nod, and more writing, like it's all for him.

You can't treat them the same. They're not.

The afternoon meeting 28

Refreshing the continuum

I've got a surprise for you.

Crew's gathered for a regular pre-dinner service pow-wow. So much of what we do is rhythmic routine. The greased wheels moving perpetually to deliver on our promises.

Every so often though, the continuum of our efforts needs a zesty burst of refreshment.

"Guys and girls, I've got a surprise for you. Two Monday's from now, I want to invite you to be my special guests for dinner here at the restaurant. A long table feast."

"Us? You mean eating rather than cooking and serving?"

"Yes - VIP's. The best long table in the house. Food and wine and some of the casuals are coming in to serve you. It's a thank you for all the efforts you put in each and every service. I'm lucky to have a crew like you all."

This isn't a Christmas dinner or a regular event - it's a surprise, unexpected. Most don't work Mondays, and the few full-timers that do, they'll be paid to eat. The casuals will do a great job - step it up when they know they're serving the regulars.

"I'm also going to extend the invitation to 10 of our very best customers. It's a chance to celebrate the people that keep this place going and growing."

There's a nervously excited hubbub. I know I'm going to have to deal with the can-partners-come, I-can't-get-babysitters, what-about-my-other-shifts-that-week questions and gift horse mouth lookers. That's OK. The quorum will be delighted and we'll negotiate the tripwires. It's a chance to get them literally putting themselves in the shoes of our customers for the night.

"I've leant on a friend, Fredo from Spaghetti, to come in and guest chef alongside John for the evening. I've cleared it with John" (our great head chef) "who's agreed to repay the favour for their team down the track." A new influence in the kitchen, a little healthy rivalry, a learning opportunity.

This'll cost me a bit. Extra wages, free dinners and drinks, potentially turning away some other VIP business that might present on that night. I know the investment is worth it though. The energy, goodwill, extra mile the team will go to in the lead-up. The loyalty from our best customers who become even more ingrained. We'll even get a bit of a write-up in the rag I think. "Employer Branding" is something occupying many professional reading piles.

Not first and foremost why I'm doing it though. I love a celebration. I love the team. They need a refreshing break. It's good for them, and the business. "So! Let's decide on the top 10 customers together!"

Tea 29

Small VIP's

But there's another group of VIP's we're trying ever-harder to put on a pedestal.

We fuss over the big coin sharers. The regulars that bring parties and buy platefuls and plonk. The corporates that use us as meeting central. The big and loud who demand their squeaky spending wheels get out supplier love grease. Like the 10 we've decided to have join us at our staff dinner.

But there's another group of VIP's we're trying ever-harder to put on a pedestal.

The small VIP's.

The lady that comes in only twice a week, just for coffee and a muffin, who works part-time across the road and we're just a part of her every workday.

The married couple we see each Friday - most Friday's - who look like they're having 'date lunch' and catching up on each other's lives.



The rep who's in here sometimes once a week, sometimes three times in a single day, just for coffee and meetings and a little laptop time. Good looking bloke, disciplined in his preparation.

Regulars without fat wallets or big cohorts to pay our wage bills by themselves.

We've talked as a service team about how we can recognise small VIP's - people who all by themselves wouldn't keep our business wheels turning, but who without, we know we'd have a slow creep into obsolescence and empty seats. They're representative of who we hung up our shingle to satisfy.

One of the crew came up with the idea of the "Small VIP Spot Voucher". It's a coffee voucher (or two, if they're in pairs), we empower one team member to give away each day, at their discretion. They just have to tell us who they gave it to, and why they made that choice. We talk about it at our pow-wows.

They have to give it to the VIP mid-way through their experience with us and deliver it with a sincere thanks, letting them know that we know they don't have to choose us as their 'regular'... but we're really glad they do.

(Giving it to them mid-way through service also means they'll have time to think about and galvanise their repeat visit choice before leaving.)

Tonight's is a man who comes in here by himself for tea every couple of weeks. Usually the Vongole and a single glass of Sangiovese.

He's coming anyway, he doesn't spend much... why reward him, right?

If I have to answer that, I haven't helped you grasp the right end of our service stick.

Regulars without fat wallets
or big cohorts to pay our
wage bills by themselves.

Lights out 30

Grout

I'm cleaning the toilets.
The glamour of the small business owner.

The handbasin surrounds in the Gents are starting to look grimy. The tiles are sparkly white - we're pretty fastidious about the cleanliness of the smallest rooms in our service house. But the grout between them is starting to chip. There's some mould growing in there that even the toothbrush with Ajax isn't getting out. The sealastic's crazing and peeling. Not horrific. Just tired. Distracting. Shabby.

Philosophical as I get in these closing hours alone with a scrubbing brush, I think there's a lot to be said for thinking about grout. What fills the gaps between those expensive bits that get all of your time and mental real-estate. The easy to overlook bits that you don't notice when they're alright but that stick out like dogs proverbials when they're not.

The schmick delivery van with the fancy \$5,000 custom paint job that's in need of a \$15 car wash.

The beautiful mahogany service counter with a cheap plastic service sign hanging askew.

The sales call that's so neatly put together, with great pre-call planned questions and a lovely opening, only to look rankly amateur when you fumble the 'next steps' segue or make an off-colour comment between process steps.

Telling the job interviewee how great this place is, what an amazing service culture you have, and then not following up or returning their call or email within 24 hours.

The tiled area - the expensive adornments - only ever looks as good as the grout - the necessary but unsexy finishing bits. Heck, most people don't even choose the colour of their grout - it's an oversight, you just assume it'll look ok. And it makes or breaks the final impression.

Grout is attention to detail. Connective tissue that makes everything look and feel consistent.... right.

I'm going to ask the team about our 'grout' as a business at tomorrow's meeting. I think our tiles are usually fairly polished. I think it's looking for the mould spots in between now.

Must write Ajax on the shopping list...

First light 31

RUOK

"Hey, Toby. How are you, my friend?"

From anyone else, these greeting words would be bubbly and beaming. But today, from Miro, our bread guy, they sound stale. A process.

"Morning Miro! I'm great thanks. You sound flat? Are you OK?"

Miro gives me a wan smile without eye contact as he pulls his bread tray out the back of the truck.

"Oh, not much sleep, my friend, just tired. Thank you for asking." For Miro to stop at two sentences when he's been asked a question is like a kid saying they're happy with just the one present from under the tree. I help him with the tray. He changes the subject, all business like.

"Now Toby, we're short on the Ciabatta by two loaves today, my apologies. I've put a couple of extra braid loaves in there, they're really good, and two of the new Pain de raisins, no charge, and I'm sorry, we'll be back on track tomorrow."

"No problems". I don't care about the Ciabatta - we'll cope. But he's not right.

"Miro", blocking his way and eyeballing him, "what's up, mate?"

"Ahh, nothing, come on, let's get this bread inside, you've got customers..."

"It's fine, team's got it. What's up - you sound flatter than a lavash?"

He stops and looks at me, and he's a proud bloke, and he's not going to lose it in front of me. But the red eyes and the lack of mojo...

"Ahh, it's Amelina. She's sick."

I take the bread tray from him. "Sick? Like the flu?"

Miro gives another wan smile. "We don't know. Maria's in the hospital with her..." I put the bread aside and we talk for 10 minutes. There's not much I can do, other than talk, and ask, and listen, and offer.

"Miro, you're part of our team, our family. Whatever I can do, please just ask. Don't be proud, you stubborn b*gger."

His smile's sheepish but genuine and grateful. He just nods, mutters a choked thank-you, and turns away before I can see him.

Asking's hard. It's why it's valuable.

Morning 32

Exceed my expectations

It's the energy. A radiant face.

I see her the moment she walks in the door. She's the first one to have a good gander while standing at the threshold, and the first to really smile. She doesn't know she's being watched.

I'm interviewing today. My terrific table-server turned architecture student has had to drop a few shifts and I need a new head to cover them. Not much promise in the first two I've sat with. One turns up in ripped jeans (trendy though I'm sure they are) and whose half-hearted try-to-impress small talk efforts barely masked what I suspected was quite the vinegar disposition. The other was bubbly and keen. Just had no idea, and it became apparent that the CV, polished as her Mum or Dad or whoever had made it, was no reflection of how little she'd likely bring to the table.

This one though, I've got a better feeling about, right off the bat. Ironed white open-neck shirt, smart black slacks, sensible polished shoes. But it's the energy. A radiant face. She approaches the counter and speaks to Maria. I keep one ear on the conversation from my workstation.

"Hello, I have an appointment to see Toby - is he available please?" Polite. Sincere. Friendly.

"Hi - Tammy? I'm Toby, come and grab a seat", waving her towards a reserved corner table out of earshot of most.

"Thank you very much for the interview. This is a really nice place! I hadn't been in here before Wednesday!" Already she's got the job. Just has to lose it now.

"Thank you - Wednesday, did you come for lunch?"

"Well, I brought my boyfriend in for coffee. I thought if I'm going to get an interview, I'd better have experienced the place first!" Homework. Sigh.

"Well, I'm glad you've come in. I've read your CV - tell me about your last role... before we do though, would you like a coffee?" A tricky one with no right answer.

"Oh thank you anyway, would it be alright if I had a glass of water instead?"

While I arrange some water, I keep an eye on her, how she handles the nervous pregnant pause. She sits still, looking around, smiling at customers, watching the interplay between a mother and her two young-un's with interest. I bring the water back and she's the first to speak.

"Oh, thank you very much. I've noticed it's a much different crowd in here today - a lot more families. Do you have a diverse range of customers?"

The interview just turned two-way. I could have hugged her.

Lunch 33

Process flow

There's really two building blocks
- people and process.

When the sum total of our professional efforts boil down simply to feeding and watering those that come through our doorway, there's a couple of things we need to get right.

The first is the experience - will you leave here feeling glad for the fact you were? Better than when you arrived? Inclined to come back? Experience is a word we use a lot in our eatery. It pays tomorrow's bills.

But to get that right, there's really two building blocks - people and process. I worry about people a lot too, because I can't really change them. Just try to get the fit right, inspire them, trust their natures to do the right thing and make them want to be better by role-modelling and recognising.

The process bit though, that's well within our control.

Everything that happens in our little Warung is mapped. The path from the front door to the counter and the signs we use to get them there safely. From the moment someone sees the client to someone happening at the counter with a smile and service question.

The translation of order to activity to nosh to "oh, man, you've got to try this!" to belching to punters waltzing out the door happy and tight in the belt and lighter in the wallet. How dirty plates get back to the kitchen, scraped, cleaned, put away and then used again. From larder to supplier and back. Rep visits. Staff meetings. Cleaning. Marketing. All of it - process defined.

It's not easy, it takes time. Most businesses don't bother, figure it's too time consuming, they could be working in the business while we map. Surely you don't have to make it that complex?

But how do you get it better? How can you improve if you're not really clear on what you're doing? Man, you've got to be consistent and improving.

I pay people to do the implementation.

I'm a process cartographer.

It's why, in tougher times for most, we're doing OK. And intent on being great.

Be generous - leave 'average' to be enjoyed by the average. If you've got an inkling there's 'great' in you, then spend time on the processes that'll support the status development.

4:15pm 34

You show me yours

I open up a little, and shot for shot, we compare notes.

It's me and realtor John sitting at the house table. He booked the coffee with me a week ago. His treat. I see him many times each week, but this is the first time he's formally asked to sit down and have a conversation, with me, his preferred hot beverage supplier.

"Toby, you have a great business here - done amazing things with the place. I see it from a customer perspective all the time, and I'm pretty observant. But I want to pick your brains on what you're doing to get the clients coming and staying."

John picks up on my surprised gesture and grins.

"Don't worry, I'm not opening a restaurant or coffee shop to cut your lunch. I'll be in real estate forever, it's my life. But I'd be an idiot if I didn't look outside my industry to see who's kicking ass and taking names. Learn something I might translate to what I do."

He lets the compliment sink into my heart, softening me a little, before wrapping a bow on it.

"I'm pretty good at what I do Toby - I win a lot of business in a tough game for a reason. If you're happy to share some of the practices you employ, I'm happy to reciprocate - give you some insight into how I run the "client smile factory". I'm guessing you're also trying to keep ahead of the curve. What do you think - would that be useful to you?"

"Ahh, sure. I'm happy to share ideas - I think most of what we do you probably can already see from the outside?"

"Not sure about that Toby. I know a well-oiled machine like this one doesn't happen without some great behind the scenes processes and ideologies that customers are too preoccupied to figure out. Let me go first though. Do you know where 95% of my business comes from?"

"Existing customers?"

"Kind of. It's the other 5%. Like Pareto on steroids. Imagine 5 trees with branches expanding toward the sun, fat oranges blossoms forming. I'm a fertiliser man first and foremost - get the love to the buds via the trees, the branches, the network..." His obviously well-used citrus-floral metaphor unfolds and loses me a little, but I'm quickly fascinated listening to him talk about VIP clubs, referral marketing, prioritised leg work, daily proactive contact disciplines... there's lots of parallels, and my mind starts swirling with applications for his approach (variations on a common theme though they are) in our eatery.

"What about you Toby - what are you doing different to some of the also-rans I go into each day?"

I open up a little, and shot for shot, we compare notes on some of the initiatives we employ to try winning. It's all pretty common sense, just not commonly applied with rigor and sustenance.

"Toby, I know you're busy, and I won't hold you up much longer, but if you're keen, I'd love to do this regularly - how about a cuppa once every couple of months, I'll take responsibility for booking in a time with you?"

We agree to persist and grow the practice sharing relationship, and I thank him for taking the initiative.

"No problems. It's one of the other key disciplines I've developed Toby - making these kind of conversations happen. Taken me too long to do it with you. Have a great afternoon!"



Cue-racking time 35

Newd

What am I doing this for?

What do I really want to get out of this grind?

Chairs up on tables, the cleaners are bringing the polishers in. Stripping away the overlay of shoe dirt, gum residue, milkshake spills and the detritus of a modern world that somehow finds its way onto the timber laminate floors of a humble food house.

I stay and wait for the strippers to finish. I don't have to - they've cleaned for us for yonks and have a key. I like using the time while the wax machine whirs to get my thinking as naked as the epidermis of a newly buffed floor.

What am I doing this for? What do I really want to get out of this grind?

Is this making me happy? Really happy?

Is this making me happy?
Really happy?

Could I do something else that makes me happier? My family happier? What's the trade-off?

Is it doing enough good for enough people? I mean, assuming I'm a long time dead, am I making a dent, a legacy, that's worth a damn?

If I stay here, if I keep investing worry and money and sweat and hours, what do we have to keep on doing that's hard? What do we have to stop doing that's fruitless, even cancerous? What do I have to be big kahuna number 1 role model for?

What should we aim to be famous for? How? What's the best way to achieve it?

What's Plan B? What's the simplest way to do it?

Forget fancy new initiatives - what's the number one tin-tack, birthday-suit, raw shot of cacao bean extract fundamental that we just have to get as right as right can be?

And why would they pay for it? Who? Enough of them? Why will they keep coming back in bigger aggregates?

The polisher strips and waxes, strips and waxes and hums.

I like my little newd thinking sessions. I've discovered they're just indulgent unless I have my diary with me, and I'm willing to write down 3 great action steps in distinct time homes in the next 24 hours that froth out of my mulling. No more than 3 - too diluted otherwise.

I need newd actions.

Ristretto actions.

The hum of the stripper fences my focus.

Meet the author

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Troy has a unique and thought-provoking support style. He believes in the chemistry of sales and leadership - striking the balance between proven success disciplines and bold skin-stretching creativity. And he loves being the little nagging conscience voice on sales and leadership shoulders.



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