

THE SHIFT UP

An Insider's Guide to
Hospitality Operations
& Marketing



THE **2026** PRACTICAL PLAYBOOK
FOR INDEPENDENT OPERATORS

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Introduction

It is a Tuesday night in November. Your point-of-sale (POS) system has been lagging since four o'clock. The line cook you hired last week – the one who seemed solid in the trial – walked out twenty minutes before service without saying a word. Your food costs have crept up another three points this quarter, and you have not adjusted the menu because you are afraid of losing the regulars who already think you are too expensive. There is an email from an influencer offering to post about your restaurant in exchange for dinner for four and a bottle of wine. The email promises 'exposure to 48,000 engaged followers'. You have received eleven of these emails this month. None of the previous ones produced a single booking.

Your sous chef is covering the abandoned station. Your floor manager is short two servers and running food herself. The couple on table nine have been waiting fourteen minutes for their mains and the woman has just checked her phone – which means the review is being composed before the plates have arrived. You owe your fish supplier for last month and your landlord has started making references to the break clause in your lease. Somewhere between the printer spitting out the next ticket and the realization that nobody restocked the bar limes, you will ask yourself the question that every independent operator asks at least once a week: is any of this actually working?

This book exists because the honest answer, for most operators in 2026, is no. Not because the food is bad. Not because the service is careless. Not because the concept is wrong. But because the tools, the strategies, and the assumptions that the industry has been selling to independent operators for the past decade have quietly, systematically stopped working – and almost nobody in a position of authority is willing to say so.

The numbers are not gentle. In the United Kingdom, two licensed venues close permanently every single day. The sector is 14.2% smaller than it was in March 2020, and independent restaurants have been hit hardest, their numbers down 22.7% against pre-pandemic levels. In the United States, 9% of full-service restaurants are classified as critically at risk of closure. In Singapore, 82% of food and beverage businesses that closed before reaching their fifth year had never once recorded a profit. The global hospitality industry is not experiencing a temporary downturn. It is undergoing a structural contraction driven by compounding operational costs – energy, labour, insurance, rent – that have outpaced every incremental revenue gain most operators have managed to achieve. The old playbook, the one built on chasing algorithms, discounting to fill seats, and throwing money at platforms that extract 30% of every order whilst withholding your customer data, is not merely outdated. It is actively accelerating the decline of the venues that still follow it.

This is not your fault. But it is your problem. And the purpose of the book you are holding is to give you a different set of tools – ones that were built in the operating environment you actually face, not the one that existed five years ago.

I have spent 25 years running, launching, and consulting for hospitality venues in markets that do not forgive mistakes slowly. Hong Kong, where I remain based for part of the year, and where a landlord will double your rent the moment your queue gets long enough to prove the location works. Shanghai, where your primary supplier can vanish three hours before a Friday service and your contingency plan is whatever you can source from the wet market before the doors open. Dubai, where the staff turnover is so aggressive that the server greeting your regulars tonight may not be the same person who greets them next week. Beijing, where regulatory requirements shift without warning and the operator who does not adapt immediately does not adapt at all. And Koh Samui, where I spend the other half of my year, where the collision of pop-culture tourism, infrastructure strain, and a seasonal economy that swings between feast and famine has created one of the most instructive operating environments in the world.

I do not list these cities to impress you. I list them because the lessons they taught me are the ones this book is built on. The physics of a profitable venue – the relationship between concept clarity and margin protection, between staff culture and guest retention, between operational discipline and long-term survival – are the same whether you are running a beach club on the Gulf of Thailand or a neighbourhood bistro in south London. The details change. The principles do not.

I should also tell you what I got wrong, because a book written by someone who claims to have made no mistakes is a book written by someone who has not operated long enough. Early in my career, I chased a concept that the market did not want. I had the data telling me it was wrong within the first six months – footfall declining, customer acquisition costs climbing, repeat visits flat despite strong review scores. I ignored the data for another eight months, convinced that better execution would fix a structural problem. It did not. The concept was not bad. The execution was not bad. The market simply did not need what I was selling, and no amount of menu tweaking or promotional spending was going to change that.

I lost money, lost time, and learnt the most expensive lesson this industry teaches: the market does not care how much you believe in your concept. It cares whether your concept solves a problem it actually has. That lesson – the difference between an execution failure and a market-fit failure – runs through every chapter of this book. It informs how I think about concept development, how I evaluate whether a struggling venue should evolve or close, and how I advise operators to read a market before they commit capital. It is the foundation of everything I now advise operators to do before they sign a lease, hire a team, or spend a single pound on marketing.

I also learnt, across five countries and more venues than I care to count, that the operators who survive long-term are not the ones with the best concepts or the deepest pockets. They are the ones who treat the operation as a discipline – who track their numbers daily, who invest in the people behind the bar and on the floor, who resist the temptation to chase every trend that surfaces in a conference presentation, and who understand that the most profitable thing a venue can do is keep the guests it already has rather than spending a fortune trying to acquire new ones.

This book makes claims that parts of the industry will find uncomfortable. I argue that algorithm-driven marketing is a broken model for independent operators – that the platforms have structured their economics to extract maximum value from venues whilst delivering minimum return. I argue that influencer marketing, as most operators practise it, is a waste of money that produces vanity metrics and zero attributable revenue. I argue that points-based loyalty programmes do not work for independents – that human connection, executed through systems that cost almost nothing, outperforms every digital loyalty platform on the market. I argue that trend-chasing kills more venues than bad food, that the staffing crisis is a permanent structural reality that will not resolve itself, and that most hospitality consultants sell what they know rather than what the venue needs. These are not provocations for the sake of controversy. They are positions I have arrived at through decades of watching operators spend money on strategies that sound sophisticated in a conference presentation and collapse the moment they encounter a real Tuesday night.

If you disagree with any of them, good. Disagreement means you are paying attention. But I would ask you to hold your objections until you have read the evidence. Every claim in this book is supported by specific data, named case studies, and operational detail drawn from venues that exist in the real world – not hypothetical models, not anonymized composites, not the sanitized success stories that populate most industry publications. Where I am uncertain, I say so. Where the data is disputed, I flag it. Where I have a strong opinion that exceeds what the evidence strictly supports, I tell you that too. This is not an academic textbook. It is not a trend report that will be obsolete by the time the next season's menu launches. It is a field guide written by a practitioner for practitioners, and it is built to survive contact with reality.

The book is structured around the lifecycle of an independent hospitality operation. It begins with the foundations – how to develop a concept that survives its first eighteen months and how to raise capital without surrendering the creative control that makes the venture worth building. It moves into the mechanics of attention – how guests find you in an era where artificial intelligence (AI) has rewritten the rules of search, how to build a community that generates revenue rather than an audience that generates likes, and how to manage your reputation in an environment where a single one-star review can cost you 5% to 9% of your revenue. It then enters the daily grind – menu engineering, beverage programme design, the staffing crisis, loyalty systems that actually retain guests, and the diversification strategies that generate revenue beyond covers without diluting the core product. And it closes with the long game – how to read a market with enough discipline to know what to build and what to avoid, and how to face the hardest decision any operator makes: whether to evolve, hold steady, or close the doors in a way that preserves everything you will need for whatever comes next.

These are not isolated topics. A brilliant beverage programme cannot survive a toxic staff culture. A perfectly engineered menu cannot overcome a location that guests will not visit. A thriving community cannot compensate for a capital structure that leaves you answering to investors who do not understand hospitality. The best marketing strategy in the world will not save a venue where the operator has stopped reading the numbers and started relying on hope. This book treats these elements as what they are: an interdependent operating system for venues that intend to be here next year, and the year after that.

I did not write this book for operators who want to be reassured. I did not write it for people looking for a motivational keynote in print, or a collection of case studies to admire from a safe distance. I wrote it for operators who know the industry is harder than it has ever been – who feel it every time the payroll clears by less than it should, every time a platform takes its 30%, every time a trend report promises a revolution that never arrives – and who want to be armed with what actually works when they turn the key in the lock tomorrow morning.

The first chapter starts with a concept. Yours.

About the Author



Marcus Treamey has spent over 25 years in international hospitality - not studying it from a distance, but running it from the inside. He has opened venues, closed them, turned struggling operations profitable, and learnt more from the failures than the successes.

His career has taken him through some of the most demanding hospitality markets in the world: Hong Kong, where landlords negotiate with the subtlety of a closing bell; Shanghai, where supply chains can evaporate between breakfast and lunch service; Dubai, where staff turnover is a structural condition rather than a seasonal inconvenience; and Beijing, where regulatory environments shift without the courtesy of advance notice. He is now based in Koh Samui, Thailand, where the collision of pop-culture tourism, seasonal economics, and island infrastructure creates an operating environment that tests every principle in this book on a weekly basis.

Marcus writes and consults on hospitality operations and marketing at marcustreamer.com, where his 56 published insight articles have become required reading for independent operators navigating the realities of the 2026 market. His work focuses on what actually works when you are the one standing at the pass - not on what sounds impressive in a conference presentation.

This is his first book. It will not be his last.