

THE LESSON WORKSHEET

The Art of Clever Evolution: How to Build a Restaurant Business That Lasts

Todd Sherman — President, Urban Dining Group

This worksheet pairs with Todd Sherman's Lesson on VettedCV. Watch the 3-minute video first, then work through each section honestly. The value is in the honesty, not the answers you wish you could give.

NAME

RESTAURANT

DATE

01 WHERE YOU ACTUALLY SIT IN THE MARKET

Todd built Gabby's to be 'a little bit of everything to everybody' — not a sports bar, not a pub, not a family restaurant, but all three to the right guest at the right moment. Before you can evolve, you need to be brutally clear about where you actually stand today.

How would a guest who visited your restaurant last Friday describe it to a friend? Write their words, not your marketing language.

The one type of guest or occasion we are not capturing right now is:

If your top three revenue categories were listed, would your restaurant's name or brand positioning actually reflect them? Where is the gap?

TODD'S RULE

'We're not a sports bar — but we offer sports bar assets.' Know what you are to the guest, not just what you call yourself.

02 THE VALUE PROPOSITION AUDIT

Todd's position is clear: not the cheapest, not occasion dining, but better quality than mid-casual at a price guests feel good about. He calls it 'take a little less margin to get more guests.' Where do you honestly sit on this scale?

Compared to our closest three competitors, our price point is:

Compared to our closest three competitors, our food quality is:

When a guest says 'that was actually really good for the price,' what specific dish or experience on your menu earns that reaction today? If you can't name one, write that down.

CHECK WHAT IS TRUE TODAY

- ☐ I can name the one item on my menu where we outperform competitors on quality and still undercut them on price.
- ☐ I have made an active decision about where I sit in the market — not just ended up there by default.

TODD'S RULE

'If you focus heavily on margin from day one, all the other things will fall aside. If you focus on the guest, margin will follow.'

03 THE DETAILS NOBODY NOTICES — UNTIL THEY DO

Todd's attention to detail started at 15 — precise salami spacing, clean glass, menus free of grease. His operating philosophy: guests don't notice when details are right. They absolutely notice when they're wrong. Run this audit on your own location.

CHECK WHAT IS TRUE TODAY

- ☐ There is a perimeter check at open — cigarette butts, litter, and signage are checked before the first guest arrives.
- ☐ Fingerprints and smudges on entry glass are checked and cleared at every shift, not just at open.
- ☐ Menus are inspected regularly and replaced before they look worn — not after a guest points it out.
- ☐ Glassware is audited for scratching and cloudiness from the dishwashing cycle and cycled out on a set schedule.
- ☐ There is no seat in our space that a guest would describe as 'a bad seat.'
- ☐ Every staff member on the floor tonight could name the two or three details they personally own before service.

What is the one operational detail in your space that you have been tolerating instead of fixing? Name it specifically.

TODD'S RULE

'You won't notice that the glass is clean. But you will notice if it's dirty.'

04 HOW FAR AHEAD ARE YOU READING THE ROAD?

When no-smoking legislation was still being phased in, Todd had already changed his menus to be food-forward — a full year before he had to. Clever evolution means moving before the market forces your hand. This section asks you to look ahead the same way.

What is one regulatory change, consumer shift, or industry trend you are watching right now that you have not yet acted on?

If that change landed tomorrow — fully implemented — what would break in your current model? Be specific.

The one change I have been waiting on external pressure to force me to make is:

CHECK WHAT IS TRUE TODAY

- ☐ I have a written roadmap — even a rough one — for where the business needs to be in five years, not just this quarter.

TODD'S RULE

'Evolution has to be slow and well thought out. You don't change on a dime. You read what's coming and move toward it early.'

05 ARE YOU THINKING IN YEARS OR QUARTERS?

Todd draws a sharp line between owner-operators — who plan in ten-year blocks — and appointed leaders managing to a shareholder mandate. The time horizon you operate with shapes every decision you make, from menu investment to people development to real estate.

What is the longest planning horizon you currently work within? Be honest about whether it is genuinely strategic or just this season's budget extended.

The decision I keep deferring because it costs something now but pays off in three or more years is:

CHECK WHAT IS TRUE TODAY

- ☐ My most senior people have been with me long enough to have lived through at least one major pivot or hard season alongside me.

☐ The people around me know the ten-year direction — not just the next quarter's targets.

What would you do differently in your operation this year if you were committed to owning this brand for another two decades?

06 YOUR ACTION PLAN

You have assessed your market position, your value proposition, your operational details, your ability to read ahead, and your planning horizon. Now commit. Three priorities, three first steps — this week.

Priority 1 — The most important thing I need to change or strengthen:

First step I will take this week:

Priority 2 — The second most important thing I need to change or strengthen:

First step I will take this week:

Priority 3 — The third most important thing I need to change or strengthen:

First step I will take this week:

Anything the sections above surfaced that you want to come back to — a name, a number, a conversation you need to have.