

IMAGE: CATTINISOLA

How to become an outstanding brand for hospitality

BY: HEIKE LUCAS 🕒 **READING TIME: 8 MINUTES**

Edward Francis ditched his A levels to learn more about food, wine, design, branding and all the other ingredients of an unforgettable hospitality experience. In 2015 he felt good enough to set up his Rebel Agency and gradually evolved his business from a consultancy to a new kind of company that's fit for the next generation of hospitality. Today he combines the best of a creative agency with operations knowhow and well-honed team engagement skills. For customers like Sheraton, Aloft Hotels and LABS worldwide.

First of all I would like to do the elevator pitch with you. So please explain: What does the Rebel Agency do? Attention: We only go as far as the fifth floor.

We develop, launch and grow acclaimed, successful hospitality brands on the foundations of operational excellence, a people-first approach and a commitment to doing business sustainably.

You work for well-known hotels, restaurants and hotel chains and show them how to do. From concept to menu. Why are you hired – shouldn't they be able to do this by themselves?

Everyone needs an external perspective from time to time. We've even hired another agency to do our own rebrand. Working with experts can be really useful when challenging or validating assumptions and ideas. Our clients value collaborating with us because we can bring fresh thinking to teams that are juggling lots of balls, and sometimes those who don't have the insights and skills that we can bring to the table.

Concept Development, Branding and Marketing require specialist knowledge that isn't always available in house. We also find that much of our work – particularly with larger, corporate clients – is around stakeholder alignment with a need to engage and moderate different departments and teams. We love the hustle of working with our clients to push through ideas that challenge people.

We spend a lot of time keeping up with the latest consumer and industry trends, really understanding how consumer behaviour and expectations are evolving. And because we spend our lives in and around companies of all shapes and sizes, all over the world, we're able to bring all that invaluable insight to every project. This benefits everyone. It's often 50% deliverables and 50% approach and strategy.



Edward Francis | Image: andydonohoephoto

For over 5 years you have been advising restaurants and hotels. What has changed in this time?

With the current covid-19 pandemic shaking the hospitality world to the core, we're really in unprecedented times. There's going to be casualties. That's inevitable. But there are opportunities to be had too.

I think what we're going to see is an acceleration of how consumer behaviour and expectations were changing anyway, rather than a fundamental shift. I think the biggest changes over the last five years have been around sustainability and transparency. And it's no longer acceptable to be mediocre in any area of your business. People demand quality and an experience regardless of occasion. Nothing about your restaurant or bar can be functional. It has to be brilliant.

You've got to have a genuine point of view on sustainability. It's got to be about more than profit. Consumers are just not going to support businesses that are behind on this.

Transparency and authenticity will prevail. A brand can no longer carry a business alone. Groups like Jamie's Italian failed partly because the product wasn't good enough, partly due to over expansion. But also because having a brand (or name) above the door isn't enough. People know that the person isn't in the kitchen. You've got to have a real story.

Social media, and the rise of food TV and celebrity chefs has created a boom of independent businesses that people want to visit. They see every meal as an opportunity to brag about where they've been. So you're going to go to the latest masterchef winner's restaurant because it reflects well on you, not only because it's going to be much better than one of the many multiples on the high street that once stood for safety, familiarity and quality.

What challenges do hotels have in particular at the moment?

Like in many sectors, hotels are playing in a saturated market. Often with little to differentiate between them. Pipelines for incumbent, established brands are aggressive and driven by a real-estate play. But this doesn't always bode well for brand consistency and delivery of a quality product.

Loyalty schemes carry many brands. But price is going to become a huge factor. At least in the short and medium term. I'm confident that things will return to normal once we have a vaccine. But not before a long and deep recession that's going to cause properties to close. Volumes are going to be drastically reduced for a long time. Weathering the storm is going to be very difficult. Independent hotels with community-centric food and beverage outlets that tell local stories are likely to seize this opportunity to attract guests away from some of the ailing corporate brands. But at the same time many hotels have the resources, space and locations to offer 'safe havens' for their local communities in a way they couldn't before. But again. The product needs to be good.

As a consultant, it's obviously easy and advantageous to say that hotels should be investing in their brands, products and experience. But I do genuinely think that change is a necessity if they're going to succeed.

Do you see a new foodtrend or food changes in food culture depending on the corona crisis?

It's difficult to say. Most of us have had more time on our hands recently, and I know that I've used that time to cook more, shop more carefully, and support small businesses and local producers. I'd hope that there will be a more fundamental shift towards more conscious consumerism. But that was happening anyway.

Safety, traceability and hygiene are no longer givens. They need to be incorporated into marketing messaging and into the way spaces are adapted to reassure guests. From an operator's perspective, I think we're going to see even more focus on efficiency, value and streamlining as operators look for cost savings. One obvious avenue for this is collaboration with local restaurant and food partners, shifting the accountability to them and engaging with the local communities in the process.

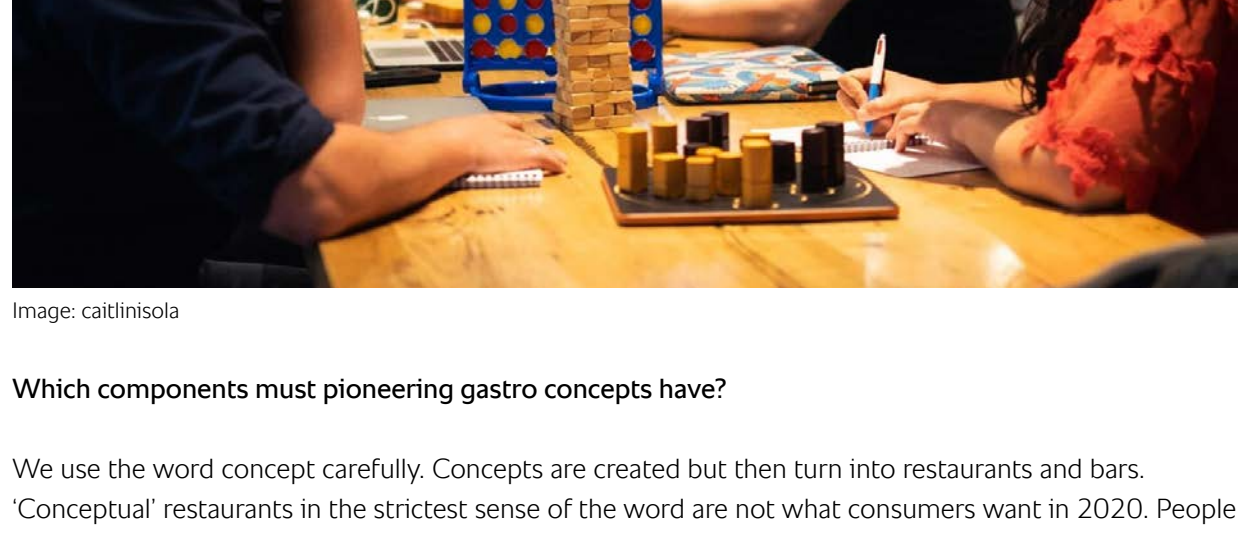


Image: cattinisola

Which components must pioneering gastro concepts have?

We use the word concept carefully. Concepts are created but then turn into restaurants and bars. 'Conceptual' restaurants in the strictest sense of the word are not what consumers want in 2020. People want to feel like locals when they travel. Part of the neighbourhood they're staying in. So the starting point should be around how a business can attract and work with the local community. Be this a chef/restaurant partner, local designers, artists and musicians. This is where the narrative needs to start.

If you're a hotel, you've got to offer value at whatever price point you sit at. And prices have to be comparable to the neighborhood. It's no longer acceptable to charge £20 for a gin and tonic when the bar down the road charges £10. F&B should be driven by talent, seasonality, local everything, innovation and evolution. Keeping things fresh and always evolving will drive loyalty and repeat business. Design should be simple and seen as a backdrop for an experience. It mustn't shout for attention. Restraint, simplicity and quality are all essential.

In times of delivery services, you also hear more and more about Ghost Kitchen. Could this be a chance for hotels and restaurants to experience? And what would they have to look out for?

I wrote about this topic on my blog a couple of weeks ago. It's a win-win relationship, certainly. Hotels want to up their game in F&B and restaurants and food brands are looking for opportunities to expand. I think it's important to make a clear differentiation between dark kitchens that are faceless brands, created for the delivery market and those that are developed as additional businesses by respected operators, restaurants and brands. There has to be a genuine story behind them. But if hotels can use their space in this way to improve the offer to their guests. They're likely to also succeed in connecting with communities too.

What might be the power to revive the market? What must be done? And how can hotels and restaurants make their contribution?

There's no silver bullet. I think it's important to stay positive and stay focused. Of course it's essential to keep a close eye on the bigger picture and the competition but that mustn't weigh you down too much. It's a great time for a thorough and objective look at all aspects of a business. Operators need to make sure they really stand for something above and beyond making money; taking a purpose-driven approach to their businesses and making sure their teams and guests feel this. It's about ensuring marketing doesn't oversell. I see this a lot with hotels. The experience mustn't detract from the expectation.

Brand, marketing and operations need to work together to identify their points of strength and be honest about the areas that are in need of improvement. But the guest mustn't be lost in complex internal structures and bureaucracy. We have this 'trick' we use at workshops and meetings where we keep a seat at the table empty to represent the customer. Everyone ends up talking as if there was actually someone in the room and this really helps keep them front of mind.

Be the best you can be. Don't lose sight of what makes your brand great or lose focus on quality. Balance urgency with patience and get things right. Prioritise and maintain marketing budgets wherever possible. Because there's going to be so much noise as businesses try to shout the loudest. And if you're not among them, you're going to be forgotten about.

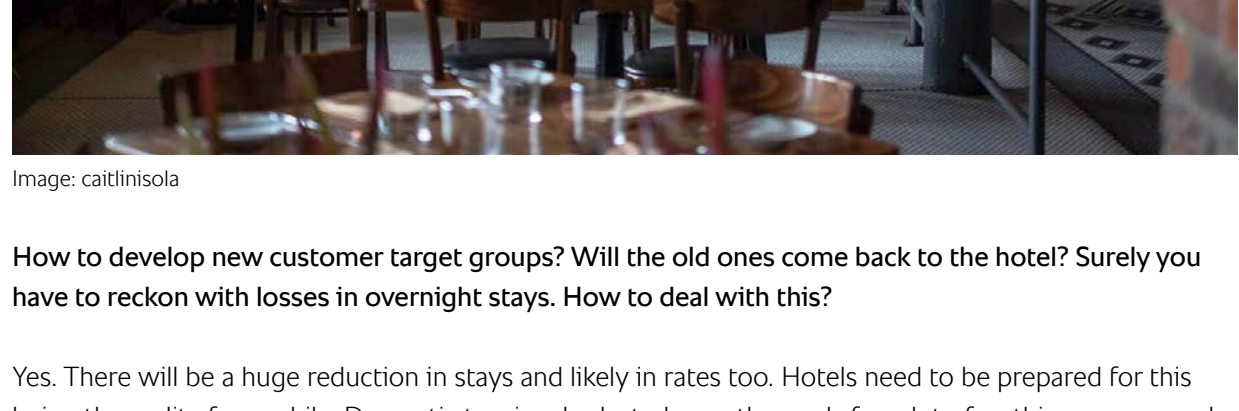


Image: cattinisola

How to develop new customer target groups? Will the old ones come back to the hotel? Surely you have to reckon with losses in overnight stays. How to deal with this?

Yes. There will be a huge reduction in stays and likely in rates too. Hotels need to be prepared for this being the reality for a while. Domestic tourism looks to be on the cards for a lot of us this summer, and I think hotels are well placed to market themselves more locally for staycations as people are desperate for a change of scenery but are not always comfortable to travel long distances.

I think that we'll see both loyalty and experimentation in the market. Guests will trust and be supportive of their favourite brands. But equally, it's a time to try new brands too. But if brands score well on loyalty, they'd be wise to double down on their marketing efforts to existing customers.

Does climate change also show up on the plate?

Covid-19 has given the planet the breathing space it needed. Mother nature is a wonderful self-corrector. We've got to include climate change in every conversation. The issue hasn't gone away. But now we really have a chance to do something positive about it. But it's hard to see how this will happen if it's business as usual as the world reopens.

You can't market your eco credentials and then still have plastic throughout your business. And you can't be wasteful in resources. This hasn't changed. It was irresponsible before and will continue to be so. Again, this is about working purpose into your business, and having a genuine point of view on sustainability. It needs to be authentic and transparent, not lip service delivered by the marketing team to tick a box.

We're members of 1% for the planet. And many companies are now looking to B-Corp registration as a way of cleaning up their act. I look forward to a time when companies are taxed on their omissions not just their profits.

I think that out of necessity, we're going to see a lot less business travel. But all travel should be necessary and companies and individuals should be using offsetting services to counter their carbon emissions. We use myclimate.org for example, for all our work travel.

Did Corona encourage us to try new things, for example new taste nuances, or do the guests not want any more experiments?

It depends on the sector of the market you're targeting. Less adventurous people retreat to safety and familiarity in uncertain times, whilst others use it as an opportunity to experiment and expand their horizons. It comes back to knowing your customer.

But whichever is the case, nothing should be 'experimental'. Things should be carefully and lovingly created, tested and refined before being introduced to guests. You've got to do your homework because one bad meal or one bad stay can be enough to turn hard-won guests away for life. And there's going to be plenty of choice out there if this happens.

Did we drink enough alcohol in lockdown? Is this the time for non-alcoholic drinks, teas and juices?

Wine is my biggest passion so I'm not the best person to answer this. There's always time for good wine. In all seriousness, it's about balance and choice. We call this healthism – balancing health with moments of hedonism. Guests expect to have what they want, whenever they want it and can be many different people during a stay in a hotel or at visits to restaurants.

Natural ingredients, locally-sourced drinks, taste, presentation and customisation are key. Every bar and restaurant should offer something for everyone. Whether it's a Friday night of margaritas at the bar, or a cold-pressed juice at breakfast.

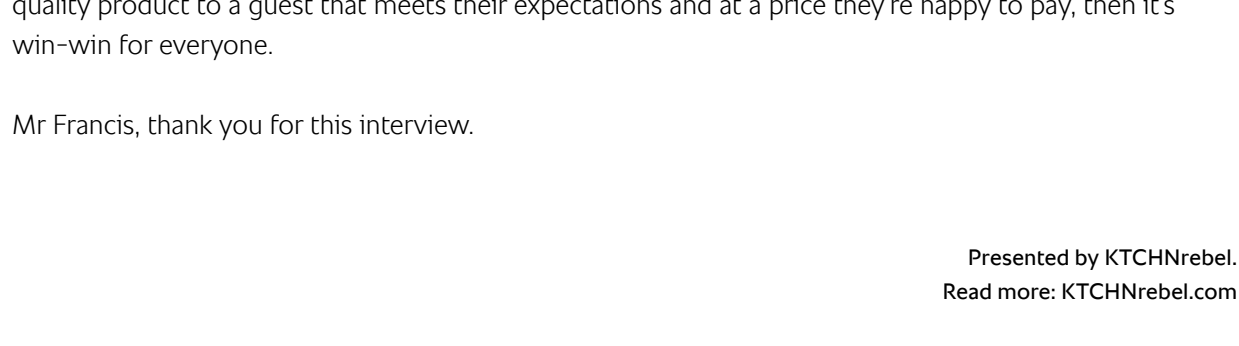


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Digitization has gained enormous momentum. Now also in the kitchen?

Maybe? This isn't my area of expertise. I think we can harness technology across our businesses and this can have huge benefits to operations and bottom lines. But it can't be deployed at the expense of the human touch and creativity somewhere along the line. But if there are ways of getting an authentic, quality product to a guest that meets their expectations and at a price they're happy to pay, then it's win-win for everyone.

Mr Francis, thank you for this interview.