



# The Strategic Math of Success

By Michael McCall

I greatly enjoyed Bob Rogers' strategic review of EPCOT in the last issue of *EM*. We received the benefit of one of our industry's keenest minds, who was present and accounted for in the Imagineering trenches some twenty plus years ago, and has been re-cutting the strategic story ever since — perfecting what could have easily been, but will never be. Nearly all of us have directly or indirectly learned a great deal from the teachings of Disney, so when the creator, and still reigning champion of themed entertainment, makes a mistake the learning is particularly poignant. Disney taught us that Story Drives Design, although in this case, the learning falls under the category of, *Do as I say, and not as I did* — at least at the level of the macro, strategic story.

As Bob Rogers articulates, EPCOT's potential strategic story did not drive the master plan design, the most ambitious, most sophisticated, most expensive theme park ever built was not conceptually held together.

Ironically, by all tactical measures, EPCOT was a brilliant success, and the purest, most remarkable example of the collaborative synergy of imagination and engineering. EPCOT was the first theme park designed by Disney's Guestology body of knowledge, as defined by Bruce Laval's groundbreaking understanding of human behavior in a theme park environment. (Years later, as Executive Vice President of Operations Planning and Development for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, Bruce was also the quiet hero who forever changed the industry with Disney's Fast Pass). EPCOT's enabling technology included the invention of such things as new ride systems, show controls, water fountains, animatronics and movie cameras. Areas of everyday endeavor as diverse as corporate sponsorship, dinner reservations, landscaping and fireworks were all elevated far above the previously established Disney bar. The sheer management of the monumental project, while not always pretty, gave birth to the modern day process of themed design, production, project management, and to countless careers and companies. Tactically, EPCOT is a sterling example of great execution.

Where EPCOT failed was in not clearly knowing who it was, in not projecting a singular, powerful story which guides and aligns the tactics of execution to a clear and compelling product positioning, a strategy that shapes and propels the emotional impact of a daylong experience. Twenty years later, this is the lesson to be learned — great execution of a less than great idea does not produce a great result. One can think of the math of success like this:

- Good Strategy + Good Execution = Success
- Lacking Strategy + Good Execution = Disappointment
- Good Strategy + Lacking Execution = Potential

(to succeed or fail)

- Lacking Strategy + Lacking Execution = Failure

While everything great or everything lacking leads to obvious results, the lessons of the math of success are twofold:

**1. Strategic Supremacy** – The first lesson is that even the great execution of a lacking strategy produces a product that disappoints at best, and fails miserably at worst. Disney has been adding ex post facto tactical ingredients to its EPCOT recipe for two decades; but, once the dish is cooked, adding spices is never strategically satisfactory. Strategy outranks tactics, as it is the business imperative, the project's *raison d'être* from which tactics follow.

**2. Tactical Tenacity** – The second lesson is that the right strategy, even when its tactical execution is lacking, has a chance to succeed. In this case, the adding, tweaking, editing and embellishing of the original manifestation of the strategy does have a chance to succeed.

Now, let me bring the conceptual theory to the “so what” application. Many, perhaps most, of us have labored diligently and creatively on projects that we knew in our hearts were strategically DOA. We have been accessories to conceptual crimes committed in the first fifteen minutes of charrettes, from which years of effort and millions of unfulfilled investment followed. We are professionals after all, serving bosses and clients, and we take the hand that has been dealt, and play those cards to our best ability. Sometimes we even enjoy the challenge of tactically making something out of strategically nothing. Like a game of Name That Tune, we make an implicit bet with those we serve, and ourselves, that we can pull a clear & compelling strategy out of a pile of disparate notions and components. However, in the process, we make a risky business riskier.

We can do better. Strategy, like winning, is not everything; it is the only thing that counts until it is right. We owe it to our clients, the industry and ourselves to be professionally disciplined, to lead by, at times, hesitating to follow, by constructively challenging the clarity of an obviously clouded vision. The sobering reality is that all the strategic, creative & business planning will never be as costly as a flawed project that gets built.

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