

What Do Your Bartenders Really Need to Know?



Considering the pivotal role bartenders play within your business, what they don't know can hurt you. But let's be honest, what's easier to put off than staff training? The irony is that few things are more pivotal to your operation's success than ensuring your frontline employees are well trained. If a mind is a terrible thing to waste, imagine the terrible cost of squandering the intellectual capacity of your entire staff.

Simply put, training is a dollars and cents issue. If bartenders and servers are insufficiently trained, every aspect of the operation suffers. Consider the ramifications of servers who aren't familiar with the menu, bartenders who don't know about the products on the back bar, or who aren't comfortable cutting someone off. This just begins to scratch the surface of the things your staff needs to know.

The most advantageous course is to institute a continuous training program. Typically bars and restaurants concentrate on training employees only before they initially open for business. But why leave it at that? With turnover and the natural effects of time, you can anticipate that the benefits of the initial training will decrease dramatically. Bartenders often get complacent and begin taking liberties with portioning or deviate from stated procedures. Inevitably these breeches exact a toll.

The essential first step to designing a training program is to determine what your staff needs to know, provide them with the education and then hold them accountable for learning it. To that end, here's my short list of what you should consider including in your program.

- **Product Training** — Maintaining consistency of product is crucial to longevity. It's a cornerstone of the kitchen, so too behind the bar. This means ensuring that your bartenders are pouring the same recipes in the same types of glasses and charging the same prices. To find out what recipes they're pouring, call a meeting and give them a test. Ask the bartenders to write

down the ingredients, portion, glass and price for the top selling drinks at your bar. The results may surprise you.

- **Public Safety** — Your entire service staff must be cognizant of the legal responsibilities they incur serving alcohol. This involves making certain that they know how to responsibly serve alcohol, effectively refuse service and properly request identification. Each directly impacts public safety and incurs civil liability. Add to the list how to maintain health codes and an explanation of the establishment's emergency procedures.
- **Product Knowledge** — Operators are stocking more premium and super-premium brands on their back bars than ever before. This means that bartenders need to be increasingly more knowledgeable about what these spirits are and why they are worth their elevated sales prices. From a sales standpoint, some guests need a little prompting to switch from their usual brand to a more elite spirit. This is easier to accomplish when the bartenders can speak informatively about the products.
- **Food Service** — Today it is more fun to dine in the bar than drink in the dining room. This trend necessitates that the bar staff be comfortable with food service and thoroughly familiar with the food menu. They also must be versed in the proper procedures for placing food orders with the kitchen. Providing competent food service is not an inherent ability, it is a learned skill.
- **Beer Training** — As an industry we waste a staggering amount of the draft beer, a figure that translates to roughly to one out of every five kegs we purchase. A leading cause of this is that many bartenders don't know how to properly pour draft beer. Wholesalers in most cities provide training on how to pull a perfect pint and get glasses "beer clean," a crucial factor in maintaining the proper amount of head. In addition, bartenders need to be knowledgeable about the beers featured at the bar.
- **Service Standards** — One consistent thread running through all genuinely successful food and beverage operations is the ability of their staffs to render efficient and hospitable service. Guests deserve to be treated as guests, not paying customers. In the lounge, bartenders should be indoctrinated to work quickly and expediently, but never rush through a guest interaction. Each person seated at the bar should be made to feel welcome and unhurried.
- **Operations Review** — Employees often need to be reminded that they are operating within a business and made to understand what is expected of them. For example, bartenders need to comply with the operation's cash handling procedures and capably perform their opening and closing responsibilities. Likewise, they need to be proficient with the POS system, know how to requisition inventory and properly take a dinner reservation or

"to go" orders. Again, this only scratches the surface of what they need to know.

- **Terms of Employment — A sobering trend in the industry is the growing number of people who sue their employers for wrongful discharge. One aspect of training should be a periodic review of the employee handbook and the conditions of employment. The review should include everything from your policies on sexual harassment to what constitutes grounds for termination. If something is important for the employees to know, tell them in plain English. People can't be held accountable for things they haven't be told in writing.**
- **Cross Training — There are considerable benefits to training food servers how to tend bar, or bar backs on how to work the floor and bus tables. Along the same lines, bartenders should be well versed on the menu and capable of properly presenting food menu items. When necessary, bussers should be able to go behind the bar and competently prepare cappuccinos or help wash glassware. Cross training allows employees to expand their skills to the fullest. Your business will benefit by having a more capable, versatile staff and a smoother running operation.**

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