

EXTRAS: ADDRESSING THE PRACTICALITIES

Before we dive into how to host a memorable tasting, first we need to go through some of the practical aspects of hosting groups.

TAKING CARE OF THE DRIVER

The driver in any group represents a huge opportunity to the cellar door. Chances are they've been ignored by various venues as a 'non-buyer' rather than being perceived as a surprising opportunity. As the non-drinker, the driver has more ability to remember their interactions and is more receptive to being taken care of, as it's quite unexpected. Set them up alongside the group, offer a free coffee or soft drink and engage them in the conversations happening around the wine. Get them involved by asking lots of questions and offer them wine to smell/spit so they can participate in the tasting. If you can make a great impression with the driver, chances are they'll be back as a tasting guest next time around – not to mention the valuable WOM(O) created by going that step further and providing great hospitality. A little recognition and appreciation in this instance does go a long way.

TAKING CARE OF LARGE GROUPS

This comes down to company policy however there are a couple of important factors to consider when developing a strategy for large groups:

If you have a tasting fee policy, address the payment before the tasting. Be clear about the fee and don't apologise for it. If possible, move the group away from the main tasting area so you can address everyone at once without distracting other guests. As you move through the wines, give a quick summary to everyone and then speak to individuals about their thoughts and response on the wine - this means that you can provide more detail for those who want it, and leave less interested guests to socialise. Don't forget to include details about your wine club, and when it comes to asking for the sale, don't be shy - often one person buying will encourage others.

And of course - be gracious, always. Yes, it may be frustrating however it should always be viewed as an opportunity.

CHARGING FOR TASTINGS

In most wine regions around the world, charging for tastings is the norm. Knowing that every venue is different, what's clear is that the issue is inherently complex and the practice is inconsistent: deciding whether to charge is a significant strategic decision which demands a full analysis.

If you're going to charge, you have to deliver // The more we pay the more we expect – so to charge to something which has traditionally been free in Australia is going to raise the expectations of the guests. Over 70% of wineries in the USA charge for tastings. The critical thing is, these venues deliver great experiences because they absolutely have to. It's fair game: the obligation to deliver is proportionate to the investment; and the expectation is much, much higher.

If you're going to charge, make a point of it // This is the tricky one for Australian wineries: if no one in your region charges, how do you start? From an outsider's point of view, if you're confident in your wine and the people who represent your brand, then go for it. Yes, you may create controversy but if it's been identified as an opportunity for your business, then the case should be strong.

No matter your strategy though, you have to own it, you have to communicate the reasons and you have to follow through. For example: if the staff don't understand it, they'll be hesitant to charge anyone and it will unravel. Introduce a trial period, create a policy on how to talk about the fee to guests and when (if at all) to waive it. And do plenty of training! Whether it's \$5, \$10 or more, if it's refunded or not, the point is consistency, good reasoning and clear communication.

Are you in the wine, or tourism business? // This is about how the cellar door is perceived in the business framework: Is it the cost of acquiring customers? Or is it a revenue raising activity? Research by Dr. Robin Black (2016) suggests that for 'tourism' – where wine buying is just part of the subset of offers, charging a fee should be part of the strategy, as the business framework includes wine sales as part of the revenue targets. This gets complicated in reality though – if for example a new group arrives for a tasting having just finished at your restaurant, would you charge them again to taste your wine? If the cellar door is perceived as a 'marketing cost' it is suggested that it is a worthwhile expense to offer free tastings as part of the promotional mix. It is a simple way to attract customers and lowers the risk of participation. Of course, the cost of servicing visitors must be considered. As a happy medium, a solution for many venues who rely on free tastings for their visitation, adding a 'premium' paid tier is a good way to generate revenue without sacrificing numbers.

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Not charging probably sells more wine, or does it? // The jury is out on this: 2009 research by Kolyesnikova & Dodd suggests free tastings sell more wine, an effect attributed to our tendency to reciprocate a free tasting by buying a token bottle. The problem with this is, building a sales strategy on 'obligation buying' is unsustainable. Wineries must work harder on their offer and create sales as a result of good performance, not feeble obligation.

If you have a big, busy cellar door... // Dr. Black's research did find that large, busy cellar doors are generally easy to disappear from, lessening the obligation to purchase. So, a fee in this situation may be a way to counter this. Small, intimate spaces increase our obligation so if this is the case, a tasting fee might not be necessary.

SERVING GUESTS WITH CHILDREN

Family groups can sometimes be perceived as slow and inattentive – however, should always be treated with the highest respect and courtesy. After all, they probably made more of an effort to visit than groups without children – meaning that if you can show genuine hospitality and effort, you will be rewarded.

- Be patient!
- Reassure the group that you understand the difficulty in traveling with children and that you are very gracious and ready to help with anything they need
- Have a corner set aside in the cellar door with toys / activities for children
- Know the areas where children can play safely so the adults can relax
- Make an effort to interact with the children if they are at the tasting counter - but ask permission to have the children smell any wine or interact with the products.

HANDLING INTOXICATED PEOPLE

Your employer must have a policy on this, and as the holder of an RSA, you would have also covered this in your training.

- Use tact – politely inform the person you will not serve them any more alcohol. Don't speak to the person in front of others if possible.
- Repeat firmly, that by law, they cannot be served another drink. Management policy may be to offer a non-alcoholic drink or to suggest ordering food.
- Notify other bar staff that you have refused service to the person & notify the manager, licensee, supervisor or security.
- You should be sure of your reasons for refusal of service and these reasons should not be discriminatory on the basis of race, sex or disability. A person has the right to take the matter to the Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission if they feel they have been subjected to discrimination.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH CULTURALLY DIVERSE PEOPLE

As a host & the provider of an experience, it is your job to learn how to communicate effectively with people from all backgrounds. Know that first and foremost, courtesy and respect are paramount, and will ensure you are able to deliver great service even without detailed knowledge of the appropriate customs. Consider these tips:

Speak clearly & concisely // In the beginning especially, this will help establish verbal cues and boundaries while demonstrating respect.

Be aware of your body language // Body language accounts for over half of our social cues - so practice an open stance and a big smile.

Avoid slang and some types of humour // Most slang and some Australian humour doesn't translate particularly well so try to consider how best to get your point across without it.

Keep your descriptions simple // Given the complexities of wine vocabulary in English, try to keep your descriptions simple and not too wine-specific. 'Show' where possible, rather than 'tell' - Things like the intensity of colour and smell are universal so use this to your advantage.

Summarise and encourage feedback // Try to summarise the discussion before asking for their opinion - it reminds the guest of the words used originally to describe the wine - which might be helpful to their response back to you.

If in doubt, be more formal rather than less // Formality in itself is recognisable across different cultures so if you're not sure best to be more formal, rather than less.

Remembering how delightful it is when a foreigner has learned a phrase, or how to say hello and goodbye in your language, try to learn some key words or customs of the main cultural groups which visit your workplace. You'll be amazed at the response.

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ENCOURAGING SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN CELLAR DOOR

Most wine brands use at least one social platform to connect with their followers online. Encouraging your visitors to connect while they are in the venue is a way to encourage positive WOMO and build engagement in the moment. Research in the USA (TMRW Digital Insights) has shown that customers who directly engage with a brand online (over the lifetime of the relationship) spend 35% more when buying wine online. It's also a great way for staff to interact with customers and bring a bit of fun into the tasting.

Make sure the handles & hashtags are visible // Publishing your hashtags & handles on tasting notes or signs will make sure that your customers can find you while they are interacting online. Importantly, the signage should tie in with your branding and be thoughtfully designed – not just printed on a piece of paper and stuck to the wall.

Encourage or incentivise checking in on Facebook // This is an easy way to secure a spot on their feed, promoting the venue to their friends and followers.

Take a picture of the tasting group // Offering to take a picture is a great way to encourage the group to post it - as the photo is generally better than a selfie. You could even sneak a bottle or two into the picture!

Set up your live Instagram feed on an iPad // Having a mounted iPad or screen set up with a live hashtagged feed can encourage people to post. The idea is if they post a photo with the correct hashtag, it will be picked up by the live stream and be shown on the screen. You can also use the same code within the winery website or other platforms.

Create a photo opportunity // Picture frames, Instagram frame props or other little nooks encourage visitors to have their picture taken. They are used widely in festivals and weddings to great effect - just make sure there is some branding visible - as subtle as it might be.

Consider competitions // Competitions are a great way to build on an already interactive audience online - get creative and give it a shot - just make sure the legal guidelines are met.

Bottle pictures // Suggest that taking pictures of the bottles is a great way to remember the wines they liked – even if they don't buy anything, this is a valuable visual reminder of the brand stored in their phone.

TRIP ADVISOR

Often the first result in a search engine for a venue is TripAdvisor – creating significant pressure for the winery to manage the reviews and spend time interacting with the people who have posted them. When used well, TripAdvisor can be a powerful driver of visitation that is essentially free to the business.

During the tasting // If you think it will be favourable, encourage the guests to leave a review, and if the winery is 'recommended' make sure the stickers and promotional collateral is displayed

After a review has been posted // Respond within two weeks – always. Responding to reviews shows that you're listening, and you care. It's also an opportunity to set expectations for future guests. You may be responding to an individual reviewer, but your audience is the greater community of tourism consumers.

Which reviews should I respond to? // The oft-cited 'good, bad but not the ugly' rule is useful. Definitely respond to any commentary that is damaging to your reputation or that calls for an apology or clarification. Remembering that criticism can add authenticity and set expectations, responding demonstrates good will and understanding. Responding to all positive reviews is viewed by many to be overkill – they can get repetitive and even off-putting. Respond occasionally to thank the reviewer and to highlight the positive. Or send a private note to express gratitude to your advocates. You can use these reviews also on the website or through social media channels. The 'ugly' reviews will be a case by case basis – if it's clearly unreasonable the general rule of thumb is to ignore the review in the assumption that readers will be able to tell for themselves.