

Keep Betting on the Variety of Beer

As you think about your floor space and consider various strategies for increasing your business in the current economy, take note that through March beer remains a steadily growing segment where brand variety can provide a significant return on investment.

“Seasonal brands are up 28% and combo packs are up 24% through mid-March,” reported Nielsen Vice President Nick Lake during his presentation at the Craft Beer Conference in Dallas, Texas in May, a World Class industry event developed and sponsored by Andrews Distributing.

From Lake’s presentation it was clear that regardless of the challenges seen in other areas of the economy, beer continues to be a source of steady economic growth; domestic craft beer specifically remained a solid contributor, although growing a bit slower than we have been spoiled with over the last few years.

Despite craft beer sales trailing just a bit behind those of the premium beer brands (which include the overnight powerhouse Bud Light Lime) for the first time in six years, craft beer was still up 6.5% in volume and 12.5% in dollars through mid-March.

Last year’s shortages in hops, malt, and glass, fueled significant increases in the prices of craft beer. However, according to Lake, it doesn’t appear to be impacting sales: “Consumers see the value in craft brands and the difference in profit per six pack being nearly a dollar ahead of

those found in the premium beer segment, provides a great opportunity for retailers”.

Note that the beer economy is not without its casualties. Although the economy is only slowing craft beer growth, where craft beer is being consumed has dramatically been affected. Per Lake, there has been a significant shift in volume, about 63%, and more consumers are shifting their beer drinking from on-premise restaurants and bars to buying craft beer off-premise and enjoying their beer at home.

Another trend we have been noticing is the high number of consumers moving from wine and spirits over to craft beer brands. Many of the retailers we work with believe that consumers, in the current economy, are

drawn to the value and affordability of craft brands. Lake confirmed that, nationally there is indeed a lot of switching going on from wine and spirits to craft beer products.

Out-of-the Box: Internet Ordering

This month’s Out-of-the-Box tip came from **Jeff Steckler**, General Manager of the Liquor Locker in Evansville, Indiana. Jeff describes his store as “Evansville’s Craft Beer Headquarters,” a status they have been working hard to build over the past five years.

The Liquor Locker boasts an inventory of over 400 beer brand in bottles, cans and kegs and the store is committed to keeping a constantly rotating selection of micros and imports. They have an “A” rating on BeerAdvocate.com.

Along with their beer selection, The Liquor Locker has achieved success by focusing on home brewers; Jeff tells us that “by being a home brewer friendly store, we have become very popular with the local OVHBA (Ohio Valley Home Brewers Association)”. The home brewer’s passion for beer seems like a natural fit for any great beer store.

Another tip from Jeff that I thought was completely “Out-of-the-Box” was the use of The Liquor Locker website. “We set up a web site about 5 months ago to allow customers to request beers from the comfort of their home and sign up for the monthly newsletter. The newsletter keeps our customers aware of our newly available brands”.

“Our customers go to

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liquorlocker.org and the site has two request pages: a 'product request' and a 'keg request'. Jeff explains, "On the 'product request' side there is space for requesting liquor, wine, domestic beer, or micro/import beer, plus an option for asking questions".

"The 'keg request' page has a list of the kegs we always have on hand with prices and a PDF download link which contains a spreadsheet with most of the beers that are available," continued Jeff. "If a customer sends a request, we check availability, send over the price, and let them know about when to expect the keg to arrive at our store".

Aside from trying to attract home brewers and offering on-line ordering, The Liquor Locker has found success by:

- * Giving customers the flexibility to purchase any beer in a six pack as a single
- * Teaming up with local radio stations to offer beer and food tasting
- * Being a Beer Knowledgeable store by providing: beer tasting tips; having seasonal beer release dates posted in the store; promoting an understanding of the brewing process; and, always helping customers find good food pairings for their beer

Above all Jeff strongly believes in the value of knowing his customers, "to me the most important promotion you can have is your relationship with your customers. If you can explain to someone why the yeast strain in a beer gives it a spicy or fruity aroma and they come back in the store and are telling you how they tasted banana in their first Belgian beer, you've opened up a whole new world to that person and they'll come back, even better, they'll tell their friends" concluded Jeff.

Are You Thinking Out-of-the-Box?

How innovative is your store at selling beer? We would like to know. If you have promotions that go beyond refilling the cold box, we would like to hear from you and share your "out-of-the-box" thinking with our fellow *Beverage Media* readers.

E-mail me at mkuderka@mcbasset.com with your successful ideas for selling beer, along with your contact information. If we write about your program in our column we will send you a free copy of The 3rd Edition of *The Essential Reference of Domestic Brewers and Their Bottled Brands*.

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Knowing When You're Over That Hump

At what point can you say that you are a seasoned bartender and no longer a beginner bartender?

Here are a few things to consider:

Taking away the training wheels –

In the beginning, you're drink recipe book was never too far from reach. Now, you really don't remember where you left it. And when a drink does come in that you don't know the recipe; chances are it's probably not in the book.

A customer asks, "How much?" You use to say, "I have to go add it up," until you realized that customers ordering four, five or more drinks at a time is not out of the ordinary; but normal. Now you're using a few adding tricks you picked up along the way, such as memorizing the multiples of your most common drink prices, so that, except for the really big orders, you can pretty much add it up in your head.

It's not such an effort anymore –

There was a day when it seemed like you were never on top of it. In other words, you were finding out just how many little things have to get done behind the bar. Then you found out that there is a best way of doing everything; whether it's holding a liquor bottle, picking up glasses and filling them with ice or pouring a draft. Now you're figuring out that working fast is only half of it. Working smart is the other half. And now you're finding the groove.

There's more to bartending than –

You may have thought you were over the hump when the boss told you to peel that "trainee" label off your name tag. You were trained on how to open and close the bar, taught the process and procedures of bartending, instructed on cleaning chores and relevant health code issues and so forth. But now you're finding out that there is more to bartending than the technical stuff. You are seeing how important people skills are when working with the public; as well as with fellow coworkers, including management.

Is that the hump or just a bump in the road?

Anxiety, stress and fatigue lessons –

It wasn't too long ago when you were dealing with the anxiety of being on stage behind the bar. Now you are learning how to overcome the fear of working solo. You're learning how to respond when customers put you on the spot, such as, when you have to decide who's money to take when customers are arguing over who will pay. You're learning how not to get frustrated when you're busy and customers don't order as fast as you would like. You are learning how to deal with problem customers professionally, learning how to work through the super busy times without getting overwhelmed and learning how not to let fatigue affect your performance, or mood.

Wait, did you say you are learning?

Does that mean you're figuring out things on your own instead of someone telling you how to do it?

Now that's a pretty good hump to get over.

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