

Beer Fests: Let Beer Education Season Begin

Expanding your beer business hinges on having both a good beer selection, and more importantly, on having a “beer confident” staff. However, finding the appropriate beer education, making time to attend and budgeting for the expense, can make training something that is easily put off.

Despite the fraternity-like, beer chug-a-lug-a-thon image the term “beer fest” brings to mind, done right a beer fest is an excellent, inexpensive way for you and your staff to pick up three hours of in-depth and fun beer education credits.

Fostering a passion for beer in your staff is key to attracting and retaining customers. Encouraging and sponsoring your staff’s attendance at a local beer fest provides you an opportunity to build up your team’s beer knowledge, which will work to increase your store’s beer sales and profitability.

Goals and Objectives

The Beer fest is an unique environment as no other venue offers you the opportunity to experience dozens of different beer styles, to form opinions on the numerous brands that you sell (without tapping into your own inventory), and to meet and ask questions of the brewers.

As with any training course, it is best to attend with a clear idea of what you want to accomplish. The three beer fest objectives that can help improve sales in your store are:

1. Finding brand recommendations for each of the most popular beer styles
2. Experimenting with matching beer and various food choices
3. Picking up information on and tasting soon to be released brands

The Top Selling Beer Styles

The top six selling beer styles are Seasonals, Pale Ales, Amber Lagers, Amber Ale, Wheat Beers, and IPAs. Ideally, your team needs to come back from a festival with opinions about, and recommendations for, each of these beer styles.

From my experience, it is best to focus

on just one style at a time. Tasting four different brewers’ pale ales gives you the ability to taste subtle differences in grains, malts and especially hops.

At the event, stick to the buddy system; everyone should take turns describing the colors, aromas and flavors of what they are sampling. It will definitely improve their ability to describe beer to their customers. Plus, being able to guide customers based on their own experience is extremely valuable and it will help them make solid beer recommendations.

Beer and Food

With increased industry interest in pairing beer and food, the variety of food available at a beer fest has greatly improved over the years. Even better, the restaurants and catering vendors that participate are local, so you will be able to have experience matching meals that can be bought all around your store’s location.

Food can be expensive. However, tasting how various beer styles pair with anything from a turkey sandwich to Cajun shrimp or Texas chili can make your store a whole new resource for your customers.

Depending on the beer fest, many of the larger events have space set aside for cooking with beer demonstrations. Aside from getting to try the free samples, this can also be great information to share with your customers, and often copies of the recipes are available at the festival. It might also be a great opportunity to find a vendor to offer a cooking with beer demonstration in your store.

Coming Soon

Come to the festival with some of your best beer crazed customers in mind. Being “in-the-know” as to what styles and brands are scheduled to hit the shelves for the next six to twelve months from your best selling brewers, shows your beer passion. Knowing what these new brews are going to taste like, puts you way ahead of the curve.

Take time to talk with the brewers at each station. Brewers have a lot of pride in their

craft and are excitement by their product. Stories about how they brew and where they get their inspirations for ingredients or product names will load you up with the kind of great stories consumers love to hear. It also gives you an opportunity to see if you might get one of the brewers to stop in for an hour or two to meet customers at your store for a win-win promotional event.

Keeping Score

Believe it or not, it is a very good idea to bring a pen and paper to a beer festival. Aside from preventing you from forgetting the names of the brands and the brewers after a few hours of sampling beer, taking notes lets you and your staff capture your first impressions of each product. So, take the time to rate the beers and write down what you liked and didn’t like about each.

Remember, just because a specific beer style isn’t appealing to you, your customer may be obsessed with that very specific style. Being able to say that a beer has an overabundance of hops, was very malty, smoky, or has a lot of clove or spices will be a terrific insight to share with your customers.

On the landing page of our web site www.mcbasset.com, at the bottom, under beer resources, we have a card designed for you to print and take to a beer fest.

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 Journal* 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*.