

Matchmaker, Matchmaker: Pairing Consumers and Beer Will Have You Falling in Love with Profitability!

“Different people look for different flavor components especially when they are new to beer; learning what people taste / notice gives me something to build on.”

Ted Whitney, Avery Brewing Company

In talking with retailers from across the country, I have found that there can be reluctance by many retailers to engage customers on the subject of beer, let alone take on the role of “matchmaker”.

Now whether it is because as a beer retailer you see your role as simply being the provider of beer selection and that beer can effectively sell itself, or it is because the majority of your retail staff has never had beer training to build up what I term their “beer confidence,” proactively selling beer or “matchmaking” is something every retailer and their staff should absolutely do.

In an article by **Marc Babej** and **Tim Pollack** appearing on *Forbes.com* in October, they stated that “more than 70% of purchase decisions are made in-store”¹. So, in essence, about seven out of every ten customers that enter your package shop, liquor store, bar, or restaurant are open to having some assistance in selecting their beer. The opportunity that you shouldn’t let pass is to match your customers with brands that meet both their need for beer selection and that offer better margins and profitability for you and your store.

With beer being responsible for 57% of all alcohol sales, along with the increasing growth in popularity of a wide variety of craft beer styles (the craft beer segment has grown by 23% over the last two years), and knowing the significant differences in volume and profits between the beer brands you sell, there is no reason not to engage customers with some proactive beer selling.

As intimidating as it might seem,

recommending or matchmaking beer drinkers with the “right” beer brands and styles isn’t all that hard to do. I spoke with Ashley Stewart, who waitresses at the Flying Saucer Draught Emporium in

Raleigh, North Carolina and from her daily experience, she says matching consumers and the right beer it isn’t something that is all that difficult to take on. According to Ashley, “moving a Light Lager drinker over to a Summer Wheat Beer is a very easy thing to do, plus what is really rewarding is that once you’ve introduced a customer to a new beer style and they experience the difference in flavor, they very rarely go back and they’ll actually thank you for it”.

If you have ever seen a Flying Saucer they offer roughly 225 beer brands in bottles and on tap in each of their thirteen locations, as a result Ashley has the constant challenge of being the “matchmaker” to all types of beer drinkers ranging from the novice to the beer fanatic. So, if it is “easy” to switch beer drinkers in her environment, how tough could it be in yours?

Where to begin?

Between beer fests, brewery tours, beer tasting events, beer dinners and designing new beers, brewers spend much of their time pairing up beer drinkers with the right beer brands or styles. Compiling responses I receive when I consulted the Brewer’s Association Forum, these are some tips from the most experienced beer matchmakers in the business:

Start with a Few Simple Questions

According to the brewers we consulted, there are basically a few simple questions

that you’ll need to answer to begin:

First, “What types/ styles/ brands of beer has your customer enjoyed before and why?” To this first question, you’ll want to understand if they found these styles/ brands to be:

- Sweet or not so sweet (i.e., bitter)?
- Fuller-flavored or light (in taste not necessarily calories)?

Second, “Is your customer looking for a style/ brand that is similar or different from what they have had in the past?”

Follow the Clues and Avoid the Pitfalls

Understanding what your consumer likes, notices or tastes in a beer will allow you to find the right match. Your customer’s past beer experiences will help you introduce them to new brands that are more sweet or bitter, more full or light or even to brands that are extreme, depending on what direction they want to go.

If your customers’ past experience is with Lagers and Light Lagers, think about brands that are more “malty-sweet” or are what some call “user friendly” or beginner beers

If your customers’ past experience is with dark beers, find out if they would describe themselves as more coffee drinkers or chocolate eaters? If they lean toward coffee you want to recommend styles that are more on the “bitter and full” side. For customers who are in the chocolate camp you will want to recommend styles that are more “sweet and full”

If your customer says that they want an IPA, make sure that they like “hoppy” bitter or “big” beers, according to our brewers, some consumers have begun using IPA as an acronym and many people use the term without knowing anything about the style

It is important to use words that let the beer sound appealing, so describe a beer as Malty not sweet, Hoppy not bitter, Crisp not

dry, Full-bodied not as having mouth feel and Strong and not high gravity

Try to move from light to dark when introducing beers and save the stronger or hoppier brands for last

A Framework for “Matchmaking” Success

Building on your customers’ preferences for beers, that are either bitter or sweet and either lighter or fuller-flavored, can allow you to easily make beer recommendations using four broad taste buckets (Sweet-Light, Sweet-Full, Bitter-Light, or Bitter-Full). Try out being a matchmaker using our flow chart:

THE THREE BEER MATCHMAKING QUESTIONS

What beer styles have you enjoyed before?

Did you like them because they were sweet or bitter – dark or light?

Do you want a beer that was different or the same?

Bitter – Full

India Pale Ale
American Pale Ale
Extra Special Bitter
Stouts
Porters

Bitter – Light

Czech/ German Pils
Dortmunder
English Pale Ale
Kölsch
Red Ale
Amber Ale

Sweet – Full

Scotch Ale
Cream Stout
Brown Ale
Bocks
Munich Dunkel
Dunkelweizen
Marzen
Barleywine
Alt Biers
Belgian Dubbel

Sweet – Light

American Wheat
Witbier
Helles
English Mild
California Common Ale
Vienna Style Lager
Lambic
Blonde Ale

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1. Marc E. Babej and Tim Pollak, *Unsolicited Advice In-Store Advertising: Coming Of Age?*, October 30, 2007, Forbes.com

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BEHIND THE BAR by David Kratt

Keeping Your Spirits High In the Coming Year

What can be done about the situations that bring your spirits down?

Even when you’re in a position to say or do something about a situation, you probably can’t respond in exactly the way you would like. Yes, situations behind the bar can bring your spirits down. But, one way to keep your spirits high and the “I wish I would have done that differently” blues away is to keep building on your repertoire of healthy responses to the oh-so many recurring situations.

Here are some examples:

This customer’s hand is out waiting for a quarter change. What else can you do but blow that one off? His cocktail order adds up to, for example, nineteen-something. He hands you a twenty-dollar bill and says, “Keep it.” How about thinking, Gee, thanks mister! A customer builds up a pretty hefty tab and says, “I want to transfer my tab to a table.” Figuring out a way so everyone gets their fair share of a tip is healthy. Getting angry with that customer is not.

A customer walks up to the bar and, even though it’s obvious you’re busy, shouts, “Hey!” and maybe slaps the bar a couple times or, arguably a tad bit more annoying, whistles to get your attention. Here’s a time when I need to say something; and it’s usually, “Ugh...excuse me?”

On your last pass, you noticed that he finally put his money on the bar but didn’t have time to get his change. During the next break in the action you remembered that he still owed for his drink but saw that his money was gone. He put it back in his pocket. Oh the things I could say.... But, I’ll usually say, “I didn’t collect for your drink yet, did I?” along with my why-did-you-do-that look.

I’ve never understood why a guy would point at a lady he doesn’t know and say, “Bring her a shot. But don’t tell her who it’s from.” To be honest, I think it’s a little creepy, especially when he doesn’t seem to care if she’s with a guy. But most of all, I don’t like being put in a position that may make another customer feel uncomfortable. That said, I’ll usually ask if he knows her. Then I’ll tell him right away if she’s with the guy sitting next to her. If she’s with another lady, I’ll usually say something like, “Sure, but how about I ask her friend, also?” If he says, “No,” (getting creepier) I’ll tell him that it will be rude if I don’t ask both ladies. Then I’ll tell both ladies that a secret admirer would like to buy them a shot. If they say “no” to shots, I’ll say, “How about another drink then?” Usually by then you will know if they have a problem with receiving a drink from an anonymous admirer. If it is a problem, I’ll joke, “Should I tell him you’d rather have the money, instead?”

May all your spirits stay on the top shelf this coming year.

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