

Is Your Tasting Room Ready for the Crowds?

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The busy season is approaching for wineries in the northern hemisphere. It's a good time to take a look at your tasting room and make sure it's ready for the influx of visitors. Presumably you have two goals:

1. Make your visitors' stay as enjoyable as possible, so they remember you favorably when they get back home, and
2. Generate as much revenue as possible from their brief visit--from both wine and non-wine items. Here are some tips to help maximize both.

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Physical Appearance Outside

Pretend you're a first-time visitor and look at your building from those eyes. Is it attractive, clean, inviting? Is there anything about the building or its landscaping that particularly pulls you in? Do you notice anything that is less than pleasing and could be corrected?

Inside

Does your sales area look like a place where people would want to spend some time? Does it provide an environment that's comfortable, yet encourages them to take action by examining, then purchasing, items? Spend some time watching people as they enter your sales room and watch how they react and behave. Your visitors can teach you a lot.

Acoustics

Your sales room should not only look good, it should sound good. You (probably) don't want it to have the silence of a chapel, because you want people to realize that everything connected with wine is an enjoyable, social experience. But neither do you want a room so loud that your visitors can't wait to get outside and away from the noise--and your cash register.

There are a variety of methods you can use to achieve the desired sound level. They include placement of tapestries and displays, background music, and sound-dampening materials. Your goal is a room that will have a pleasant acoustical "feel" no matter how few or how many customers are inside it. Check with a local acoustical designer or engineer for professional advice.

Signage/Printed Material

Make sure all your signs and literature are up-to-date, attractive and easily readable. The visitor should be able to see all prices without having to ask for assistance. Save the assistance for special help where it can really mean something to the customer.

The Items You Sell

Is your selection of non-wine items innovative and competitive, or do you look like everyone else? Visit competitors, both wineries and other retail merchants, and see what they're offering. Make sure you have all the usual items that visitors would expect you to have. More importantly, make sure you have useful and/or fun items that your competitors *don't* offer.

Check out what's new in other parts of the world. If you're in the United States, find out which items are hot sellers in Europe, Asia or South America. Browse the Internet looking for new products. When you

have visitors from other countries, ask them if they've seen things in their home countries that visitors to your winery might enjoy.

It's convenient to look for new ideas offered by exhibitors at wine industry trade shows, but even better is to go to *non-wine* trade shows. Many of your competitors won't be there and you might stumble on some truly great ideas.

Consider supporting local artisans by selling their work to your visitors. It's mutually beneficial. You're able to offer unique crafts such as plates, cups and serving platters, and the artists gain a new outlet.

Whenever possible, use logo-branded non-wine items, such as apparel and wine glasses. Branded gourmet foods are doing exceedingly well in sales rooms. With your name on a jar of pasta sauce, customers will think of your winery every time they open the refrigerator.

If you have the space to provide tasting samples of your gourmet foods, by all means do it. It will increase sales of those items by as much as 50 percent. Just make sure to keep the area tidy. And only offer tastes of items that are compatible with wine. Skip the mustards and vinegars.

Displayed to Sell

Once you've determined *which* items to sell, decide how they can best be placed to move. If there are some items that you'd really like to push, make sure you highlight them so visitors will easily spot them. Use physical placement and spot lighting to set off special items. Don't overlook grouping of items. It'll give patrons ideas on how they could use the products at home, and can frequently result in your selling two or three items instead of just one.

Make it easy for your customers to shop. Play to your rural character by making wicker shopping-baskets available. They look attractive, and the more your customers can carry, the more they'll buy.

All of the above is, of course, true with your wines. They should be attractively displayed and easy to find. Special vineyard or varietally-labeled wines can be set off in separate display sections. Food pairings can be suggested with tasteful signs or even photographs. Unless your winery cultivates a particularly ultra-ultra-premium image, make sure your wines are presented in a way that is not only attractive but also accessible. Make them look like something real people buy to drink, not just to place on the family shrine.

As long as it fits your winery image, have a Special Buy of the Month with a special discount. Make sure you rotate the wines used on the special, so that regular customers won't see the same thing each visit.

Follow the lead of supermarkets who place their dairy products at the back of the store, and place your most sought-after items in areas which require customers to walk through the rest of your wine and non-wine displays.

Staff

Okay, your room is ready, but how about your staff? Do you have enough people? It's better to be slightly overstaffed than to take a chance on being understaffed. A dissatisfied customer costs you money in the short run, *and* the long run. Don't lose a customer who passes up a purchase because the line is too long at the cash register. You want customers happy in your tasting room so they'll remember you fondly in the future when they see your name on a wine list or supermarket shelf.

If you're hiring new staff, consider a "mentor" program, as well as written and verbal instructions. Assign an experienced staff member to the new person, so the new hire knows there's one person he or she can always depend on for advice. Chances are they'll want advice not just on normal tasting and sales room operation, but also on dealing with some of the quirky situations any tasting room is liable to present a new staff member.

Hopefully your staff training program is ongoing, and includes regular sessions at least every six weeks to two months. You can have the winemaker speak to your staff, present blind tastings of one of your varietals versus other wines from throughout your region, demonstrate food and wine pairings, or take field trips to other tasting rooms. The list is endless.

Don't forget to ensure that they can also give *tourism* advice about your region. Where are the best restaurants? Where are the best places to stay? What else should we see while we're in the area? These are all common questions, and your staff should have answers immediately at hand. Each staff member doesn't have to have the *same* answers, but they'd better have *some* answers.

Remember that when you're talking to a customer, you're talking to the whole room, not just the person in front of you. Never criticize another winery, restaurant or establishment. A friend of the owner could be standing in the corner of your tasting room.

Having visitors in your tasting/ sales rooms offers two opportunities. The obvious one is sales. Every visitor is a potential customer, both at your winery, and back home. Make sure your staff is well-trained in helping visitors decide on purchases at your winery. They shouldn't be pushy, but neither should they just sit back and hope your patrons decide to buy something. Make sure your staff is prepared to offer help and suggestions.

Prepare your staff so they're able to let visitors know where they can buy your wines when they get back home. Best way is to ask where they live, do a quick run through the computer or card file (you'd better have at least one of these available), and tell them which stores and restaurants in their home towns carry your wines. (Very best way, if you can do it, is to give them a computer printout of the outlets where they live.)

Also, let them know about new releases. Moreover, if you have a wine club, invite them to join. Don't forget to let them know you're on the Internet. (If you're not, you should be. The question of whether or not a winery should have a web page was settled long ago.) Your web page address should be printed on every receipt.

Free Marketing Advice

The second opportunity that visitors give you is marketing input. Ask some of them--but not all, or it will look too obvious--how they found out about your winery and what made them decide to stop by for a visit. Ask them if they've visited other local wineries and what they liked about them. Ask if there's anything that they'd hoped to find in your sales room, but couldn't. Inquire if they know of anything from home or their travels that might be an appropriate item for your sales room.

The Greeting

Everyone who walks in your front door should be greeted, preferably within 15-20 seconds, but this does not mean the "corporate greeting". Probably all of us have, by now, endured the annoying experience of walking into a corporate chain's local store and being immediately greeted by an employee--often shouting from the far end of the store--who knew they could lose their job if they failed to greet us with a mechanical "Hello, welcome to XXX" within the allotted corporate time limit. *That is not* what we mean by a greeting. Let each employee use his or her own style and wording. Just make sure that your visitors know you appreciate their arrival.

One last thing. All the above advice has been proven through experience, but the only real rule is to do what works for you. Your winery is unique. If something doesn't work, try something else. Keep testing. And never sit back and say "That's it. It all works. No more changes." Your competitors won't.