



TO PROMOTE AND SERVE

At some chains, the reigning beverage philosophy is “if you serve it, they will come.” But rows of bottles on the back bar, stacked wine on a shelf and a long line-up of taps aren’t always enough to stay in the black. Operators with an eye on a sustainable, healthy bottom line consistently roll out creative beverage promotions ranging from educational beer classes, to wine dinners and regionally themed cocktails. Many operators could easily get inspired by these success stories designed to maintain guests’ interest and pump up drink sales.

“Beverage promotions increase guest excitement because they are a way to engage them and get them involved more closely with the product,” declares Jason Asher, general manager of Rustico Restaurant and Bar, a duo of neighborhood restaurants featuring approachable, American cuisine and a large beer selection. The venues in Alexandria and Ballston, Virginia, with two hundred and three hundred seats, respectively, are owned and operated by the eleven-unit Neighborhood Restaurant Group.

“We do a combination of beverage programming that includes ongoing series as well as one-off events that tie to holidays and happenings,” explains Asher. The restaurants’ proximity to Washington, D.C. made an election-timed beer promotion a no-brainer: a glassware giveaway featured beers from the candidates’ home states and a select number of American craft brews were available. The event was heavily promoted for a month prior, through staff training and printed materials including menu stuffers and posters. “The result was a fun promotion that helped the bottom line and increased sales significantly for a slow Tuesday evening in January.”

Rustico’s current promotion spans the entire calendar year and appeals to budding students of suds. The Beer Academy (also referred to as “Brew U”) features twelve unique themed classes, led by Neighborhood Restaurant Group beer director Greg Engert. Classes are held once a month for two hours on a Saturday afternoon at a cost of \$24. Students who sign up for a full year of classes receive a discount of \$6 per class, which has helped the restaurant sell classes well in advance. The Beer Academy was promoted with a press release a month before its inception and management has made good use of Facebook, Twitter and their website to push the message out to its guests.

Bringing in Business on Less Popular Nights

Part and parcel of a solid promotion is attracting guests on off nights. Erik Bergman also concurs with Rustico’s philosophy with regards to timing events, a tip he says is often overlooked by operators: focus on off nights. The general manager of Washington, D.C.’s Birch and Barley and ChurchKey, two bars under the same roof also run by | CONT >



CONT | the Neighborhood Restaurant Group (with 84 and 140 seats, respectively), has an award-winning beer program that makes empty seats hard to come by—except at the beginning of the week. To boost business on less busy nights, management holds “beer features” and “tap takeovers.” The former is a group of eight or so similar styles of beer or offerings from a single brewery; the latter involves at least twenty of the bars’ fifty taps being used for beers from a specific brewery. “We try to hold them on slower nights like Mondays and Tuesdays,” explains Bergman. “This gives the guest the best opportunity for one-on-one attention from our staff, and the opportunity to chat with representatives from the brewery.”

During every beer event, Birch and Barley and ChurchKey print special tasting cards listing the featured beers, with a space to take notes. Even if guests never pick up a pencil, Bergman notes, highlighting these special beers sets them apart from regular offerings. Not surprisingly, the features and tap-takeovers that have been the most popular and spotlight well-known breweries like Stone and Rogue, as well as crowd-pleasing, intriguing styles of beer including such beers as IPAs and sour beers. ChurchKey has seen revenue increase twenty-five to thirty-five percent during Monday and Tuesday evening events; features with highly sought after breweries can result in a fifty per cent increase. The bars’ Twitter feed serves as the main marketing tool, and journalists covering the beverage scene also receive alerts when special events are planned.

Speaking of social media, these tools are an easy, inexpensive way to broadcast promotions to a large number of fans and potential patrons. The web in general is an indispensable advertising method for tech savvy operators. This is perhaps no more apparent than in the Las Vegas market. Peter Brattander points out that eighty per cent of guests research, plan itineraries and make reservations online before even coming to town. The director of beverage for the 2,763-room Mirage Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, which features fifteen restaurants and quick service outlets and eleven bars and lounges, employs the hotel website, Facebook, Twitter and even You Tube videos to reach out to guests.

The Mirage’s new cocktail program features interesting spins on thirty classic cocktails, with a particular focus on inventive garnishes. The Samba (\$12), their take on the cachaça-based Batida, is adorned with a slender cucumber dill fruit chip; the High Roller Cosmo (\$12) is rimmed with fragrant hibiscus and lavender petals. Brattander’s beverage program is designed to keep guests in their seats. “The most expensive item in a bar or restaurant is an empty chair and a crowded venue will always be more attractive to visit than an empty one,” he points out. “As an operator your goal must be to create programs that will make the guest stay longer. Along with Happy Hour specials and cocktail promotions for a special event or holiday, I want guests to have an overall great experience at our venue, from service to atmosphere to drink selection, so they will continue to return.”

A recent drinks feature at The Mirage combined Chinese New Year and gaming. For each purchase of an Eastern-inspired cocktail like the Zen Mojito (\$10)—made with Bacardi Dragon Berry Rum—guests received a Golden Good Luck Dragon Coin. Most were made of chocolate, though a few lucky patrons received a \$100 or \$500 casino chip. With this promotion, Brattander wished to create a buzz outside the hotel and cross promote. “Las Vegas is a gaming town, so why not combine the two?” CONT >



CONT | Happy Hours have been a beverage promotion staple but operators have been upgrading the available options by getting the kitchen involved. At Fleming's Prime Steakhouse and Wine Bar, a 64-unit, Tampa, Florida-headquartered upscale steakhouse, the popular "5 for 6 'til 7" promotion keeps guests returning. Five cocktails, five wines and five appetizers are all priced at \$6 each until 7pm and bringing both new customers and return-visit patrons.

Wine Dinners Still Bring in Diners

Cocktail lovers may be attracted to glasses with striking presentations, but operators may need to rely on other methods to entice wine drinkers. Oenophiles flock to promotions like flights and tastings, but perhaps nothing is more enticing to a wine lover than the chance to taste specially chosen wines alongside perfectly matched dishes. In 2011, Helen Mackey, the national director of beverage strategy for the Winter Park, Florida-headquartered steakhouse chain Ruth's Chris, helped to launch the "National Wine Dinner Series" for the 134-unit restaurant chain. The promotion runs on the same evening at all participating locations, with the identical four-course meal, plus dessert, paired with the same wines. It was inspired by the release parties; harvest celebrations and VIP style wine parties Mackey encountered during her ten years living in Napa Valley. Tickets for each dinner cost \$95 to \$120 per person and include a surprise giveaway including wine, estate-produced olive oil, books and corkscrews.

"We have had an incredible response—we have even heard of mini-spontaneous wine clubs popping up in cities," notes Mackey. "Building these bridges between our wine loving guests has been a wonderful part of doing these dinners." Specially printed menus, check stuffers, E-blasts, a dedicated section on their website and winemaker videos have been used to market the dinners, which were rolled out through close communication with the field, winery representatives and distributors. The promotion was so successful last year that five more events are planned for 2012: with dinners featuring Duckhorn Vineyards, Penfolds Grange, Taylor Fladgate Port and a Glenmorangie Scotch dinner. "Each of these national dinners has been successful because each is genuine in its pursuit of putting great company together with great food and wine," muses Mackey.

To appeal to spirits' lovers and to keep current with the trend of classically inspired, well-executed cocktails, Ruth's Chris also rolled out their "Vintage Cocktail Program" last December. Fifteen new sips priced at \$12 are based on classic libations and the menu gives the story behind their creation. The French Quarter 75 adds St. Germain Elderflower liqueur to the traditional sparkling wine cocktail, while the 50/50 Vesper stirs Grey Goose Vodka, Tanqueray Gin and Lillet Blanc.

Celebrating an Anniversary

When a venue is marking a milestone anniversary, beverage features serve to attract guests by providing an atmosphere of celebration—not to mention nostalgia. Hard Rock Café opened its first location in London in 1971, and today boasts 173 venues in 53 countries, each displaying an impressive collection of rock and roll memorabilia. The casual restaurant chain marked its fortieth anniversary last year with a worldwide beverage promotion called Summer Hits. Cocktails including the "Rum Rocker," made with Bacardi Select Rum and Bacardi Torched Cherry Rum, DeKuyper | CONTINUED >



CONT | Peachtree Schnapps and juices, were sold for \$12.99 to \$14.99, and served in a take-home, 20-ounce souvenir pint glass listing every Hard Rock Café location. "The program celebrated forty years of the Hard Rock brand and culture, spreading the universal language of rock as well as driving traffic and building global beverage brand awareness," says Cindy Busi, worldwide director of beverage for the Orlando, Florida-based Hard Rock International.

Management rolled out the promotion through the company's internal portal, thorough training materials sent to each location, and by conducting on-site training. Busi notes that guests loved taking home a piece of forty years' of the brand's history, with some even traveling to different countries to collect the unique glassware. As a result of the three-month promotion, Hard Rock Café saw a 30 percent increase in beverage sales from the prior year.

No matter the theme, size or scope, Busi offers a sound piece of advice for operators adding promotions to their beverage program. "Stay true to your brand. If you are an Italian-themed concept, don't do a feature around sporting events. Pretty simple, but I see many concepts trying to be something they are not. Listen to what your guests want and deliver."