

DEVELOPING A CUSTOMER SERVICE CULTURE

The First Impression

What's the first thing visitors are likely to see when they walk into your cellar door? If it's like many cellar doors, it's probably a person standing behind the bar. Visitors will always look for people first and they'll form an immediate – and often unchangeable – opinion from this very first contact. You and your staff need to be primed to show a friendly face and offer a warm welcome. *Even if you're busy.* Visitors will normally be happy to wait their turn if they have at least been acknowledged and given a time frame in which they will be attended to.

Contrast these two greetings:

"Hello there, we're really busy at the moment, do you mind waiting?" (The visitor's grudging "no" response might not even be acknowledged.)

Instead, try:

"Hello and welcome to ABC Winery. Please help yourself to water and take a look at the tasting sheet. I'll be with you in just a few minutes." Leave them with a smile and something to do.

Don't Judge a Book by its Cover

Experienced cellar door operators will know that people on holiday can dress entirely differently to how they dress in their usual environment. Corporate one day, casual the next. Until you begin questioning people, you simply can't make any judgements about their level of knowledge or pre-disposition to purchasing wine. There are countless tales of staff misjudging their customers and paying dearly for it.

This extends to the way you interact with visitors too. That corporate businessman dressed in faded jeans and sloppy t-shirt is used to being called "sir", not "mate". Besides, you don't even know him, so he's not your mate.

By addressing people formally, the worst that can happen is they'll say, "Hey, nobody's ever called me sir before!" Then you can ask what people normally call them, and you're likely to get their first name. Even better.

The age of visitors can sometimes influence the attitude of staff towards them, giving preferential treatment to older visitors who might be perceived as more serious wine consumers. Discrimination can be unintentional, but have a detrimental effect nonetheless. Take the example of an older couple trying a flagship wine and commenting favourably about it. A young couple at the bar that has demonstrated an interest in red wines overhears the conversation and asks about the wine, only to be told its name but not offered a taste. The young couple feels discriminated against and leave dissatisfied with the experience. And the winery has missed a golden opportunity to build a long-term relationship – since they've obviously got plenty of drinking years ahead of them!

Be wary also of jumping to conclusions because someone appears grumpy. You don't know if they've just had an argument with their partner or one of the kids threw up in the back seat. Or they may just be tired, or too hot or cold. Use empathy to try and uncover the problem and if it's in your power, offer a solution. And remember, some people are just grumpy.

Keep your Distance

There's a fine line between coming across as friendly but still professional and appearing over-familiar. If you're unconvinced that friendliness has boundaries, try moving in closer than a metre to someone you've just met and continuing your conversation. Chances are they'll take a very quick and automatic step back to maintain the original distance. Only close friends, family and lovers are allowed into that intimate space.

Touching is another area for consideration. It's common courtesy to shake people's hands, but be very wary of touching them randomly. Always try to gain attention first by establishing visual and verbal contact. And remember that different cultures have different perceptions on correct etiquette.

If you're conducting seated tastings, you'll sometimes need to sit closely to visitors. Ask their permission first. Just a simple "May I sit here to show you through the wines you're tasting?" is sure to get a positive response.

Identifying Visitors' Needs

Visitor motivations are discussed at length in the Research section. By asking some simple questions, you can learn a lot about your visitor so that you can fulfil their expectations.

- ❑ Have you visited us/the region before? If not, you've got an opportunity to talk about the winery, its history and about the region in general.
- ❑ What sort of wine do you normally drink? For visitors unfamiliar with your range – or who drink wine infrequently – finding out the style or even the regular brands they drink will assist you in determining the starting point for the tasting.
- ❑ How long will you be spending in the region? The answer to this question allows you to offer advice or refer them appropriately to other wineries and attractions. You'll be surprised how many people arrive around midday and haven't yet booked accommodation for the night. This represents a great opportunity for you to make a recommendation or even a booking.
- ❑ Are you interested in learning more about wine (or wine and food)? Depending on the answer, you can direct people to a winery tour, interactive display or dining facility that offers wine-matched lunches. Of course, you may have these facilities yourself...

If people are travelling in groups you may find that not all of them are interested in tasting wine. Offer the designated driver a soft drink or complimentary beverage and engage them in the conversation by asking general questions about their trip. Others may be more interested in perusing your art space or merchandise, so find out about their interests and direct them accordingly. On a fine day, send them outside to take in the view and relax under the shade of a tree – perhaps with a coffee and cake – while the others complete their tasting.

If children are in the group, find out how to cater for them. Parents will be eternally grateful if you can direct their children to a specific area or offer them a non-alcoholic drink to enjoy while they taste. Children running wild in a cellar door are a distraction to everyone – so take charge and offer a solution to the exasperated parents, who are probably cringing in shame.

Tailoring the Experience

Once you've got a handle on some of your visitors' needs you can create or direct them to the experience that most suits them. Time constraints on the part of the visitor may mean a shortened tasting session that focuses closely on their stated needs. On the other hand, they may have arrived just in time for the daily tour, after which you can invite them back for a tasting and since they're hungry, encourage them to stay for a bite to eat.

Knowing how to pitch wine information is vital, but how do you seek this information from visitors? Targeted questioning is the answer, and it includes things like "What was the last bottle of wine you drank that you really enjoyed?" While the visitor may not necessarily be inclined to buy the same type of wine on this occasion, it gives you a clue as to where you should pitch your information. It's also important not to try and impress people with technical jargon – it's this kind of pretentiousness that has earned the industry a reputation as elitist or snobbish in the past.

From the information you've gained about your visitor, tailor the experience accordingly, depending on the range of options you offer (see the Tasting Options section under Products & Services).

Word of mouth remains the best advertising and promotional tool at your disposal. This means that every person who ever sets foot in your cellar door is a potential advocate – or not.

Adding Value

It is important to understand that visitors are likely to go to other cellar door outlets during their visit, and perhaps other regions as well. Therefore a thorough knowledge firstly of your region's wines (for referral purposes) and other regions (for comparative purposes) is essential. It also sets you apart from other outlets whose staff may not be as highly informed.

Some simple ways to add value to your visitors' experience:

- Provide accurate regional information
- Keep maps, brochures and visitor guides on hand
- Offer to make bookings at restaurants and for accommodation
- Recommend other cellar doors that offer great service and products they'll like
- Offer appropriate volume discounts or incentives
- Offer a free beverage for designated drivers
- Take wine to the car for them (or offer to deliver for free)
- Smile and thank them for visiting

It's usually the little things that make the biggest differences. How can you add value?

Good Service Pays Dividends

It makes sense that the better the service, the more likely it is that people will purchase. This has been quantified by research conducted by The University of South Australia¹ that implies poor service translates directly into lack of sales outcomes. In fact, the provision of good or excellent service results in the value and quantity of wine sold more than doubling. The same study also revealed that the average dollar sale for very frequent visitors more than doubled that of the first time or infrequent visitor, who also purchased more bottles at much higher price points.

This means that building a relationship with visitors is critical to ongoing success.

Now that you've created a terrific service culture, discover the finer points of selling to complete your visitor experience.

¹ *Understanding the Impact of Wine Tourism on Future Wine Purchasing Behaviour*, B.O'Mahoney, John Hall, Larry Lockshin, Leo Jago and Graham Brown, Funded by the Sustainable Tourism CRC.