

Advice for the Rookie Bartender



What advice would you give a bartender working your bar for the first time? Sure you'll give the person an employee handbook, and while important, it's largely full of policies and procedures—rigid, formally worded directives.

Advice is different. There probably won't be a more opportune a time to make an indelible impression and provide a bartender with insight and guidance than before their first shift. What you say could genuinely affect his or her career. After all, the person hasn't had an opportunity to learn any bad habits or pick up an attitude.

Like the saying goes, "you only get one chance to make a good first impression." In all likelihood, most new bartenders would welcome constructive advice. Bartending a high volume bar is often stressful and uniquely demanding. Some well-intended direction from you might have a significant impact.

So, what would you tell the person? While there are likely a hundred things you might tell them, I recommend giving them an understanding of what their primary responsibility is behind the bar, and it most likely isn't what they imagine. Typically bartenders contend that their primary job is to make drinks and collect the money. True? Well, it's not.

A rookie bartender needs to understand that his or her job is to make guests feel appreciated and cater to their needs. They need to treat guests to a night on the town that they'll remember and tell their friends about. While bartending obviously involves preparing and serving drinks, it's no more than a secondary aspect of the job. What's ultimately important is that they play the role of gracious host and treat the clientele like guests.

Once you disabuse rookies of the notion that they are mere drink-slingers, it's time to sit them down and open their eyes to a few other realities of the business. To that end, here's a short list of things to cover in that initial pre-shift meeting.

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- **Always Give People an Honest Break** — Everyone deserves to be treated fairly. In this context, an honest break means equity in all transactions—no overcharging, under pouring or shortchanging. This fairness doctrine dictates leaving all prejudice and preconceptions at home. There's no such thing as a second-class guest.
- **Always Remember That You Represent The House** — Don't violate the trust being placed in you. Bartending is a pivotal position that affects nearly all aspects of the operation. While on duty, place the best interests of the house ahead of your own. Few, if any, are able to perform competently while advancing a hidden agenda. Don't let the social environment distract you from your professional responsibilities.
- **Card Anyone and be Vigilant Against Inebriation** — It's imperative that you establish the age of anyone ordering alcohol prior to service. Asking for identification goes with the territory. While carding guests may not be expedient, serving a minor can have disastrous ramifications. So, too, will serving someone to the point of inebriation. Whether it's a question of someone's age or sobriety, when in doubt, don't serve.
- **Always Run an Honest Till** — As many ways as there are to steal from a bar, there is an equal number of ways to get caught. Bartending can be stressful enough without stealing and attempting to avoid detection. If there is any question as to the propriety of what you're doing, think twice and don't do it. Don't cash in your integrity, run an honest till.
- **Never Serve an Inferior Drink** — In this business, quality assurance is measured one drink at a time. Make sure that what is being served is exactly what the guest requested. Check that all of the ingredients being used are good—sodas are sufficiently carbonated, juices and prepared mixes are still fresh and of good quality. Don't commit bad products to good liquor and hope for the best.
- **If There's Time To Lean, There's Time to Clean** — There is more at stake keeping the bar clean than just passing health code inspections. Lack of sanitation can result in the spread of disease and illness. The bar's cleanliness also reflects on the establishment's overall sanitary condition—if the bar is dirty, imagine what the kitchen must be like. A spotless bar is the mark of a true professional.
- **Set Professional Standards and Maintain Them** — From a pressed uniform to a positive attitude, professionalism matters. Be ready to work, in every respect, before you punch the time clock. Appearance and demeanor need to reflect that every night is a new performance. Establish personal standards and refuse to settle for anything less. Make professionalism a personal benchmark.
- **Wear Comfortable Shoes** — It's nearly impossible to be gracious when your feet are throbbing. There are shoes specifically designed for bartenders and waiters—sturdy, long lasting and meant for people who earn their livelihood on their feet. An aching back makes smiling a physical improbability. Along the same lines, hunger can make bartenders surly, so make sure to eat before a shift. While you're at it, don't drink too much caffeine while you're on-duty; a jittery bartender is not an asset behind the bar.
- **Relax and Enjoy Yourself** — Having fun is an integral part of the job, even when the job has stopped being fun and turned frenetic. When it's busy, remain cool and work as expediently as possible. If the internal thermostat feels like it may blow, try silently chanting, "This will pass, this will pass." The key is to have your composure last longer than the "rush." Nothing more can be expected of you.

The Line On Touting Rookies

How can you tell if your new bartender is a candidate for rookie of the year or should be consigned to the minors? Here are some things to consider:

- **Pouring Ability** — Can the bartender pour consistently accurate shots? When hurried, does liquor fly every which way or splash off the ice? Does the individual look comfortable behind the bar? Is there grace and fluidity to the person's motions?
- **Personality** — Does the person have an infectious, likable personality? Does he or she have a ready smile and a good feel for humor? Is the individual receptive to constructive criticism and take direction well? Does the person maintain his or her

composure when everyone else seems to be losing his or hers?

- **Knowledge** — Does the bartender have an apparent aptitude for mixology? Is he or she knowledgeable about the products stocked behind the bar? Is the bartender receptive to learning more about his or her profession?
- **Service Abilities** — Does the person look to excel at service? Does he or she interact well with the clientele and adequately anticipate their needs? Is the person still hospitable under fire?
- **Reliability** — Is the person seemingly committed to serving alcohol responsibly? Is he or she conscientious in all aspects of the job? Does the person have what appears to be a stable life outside of work?

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