

While acknowledging that experience heightens intuition, timing and market awareness, most beverage operators I've met insist success in the bar business is predicated on creating a human connection with people and ensuring they feel welcomed, comfortable and well treated. It's precisely that unwavering standard of care for their clientele at the heart of building repeat business and sustainable profitability.

It's somewhat ironic that these same seasoned professionals are among the least content and most hands-on overseers of their businesses. The fact that their guests enjoyed themselves two visits ago no longer counts. The only thing that matters is how well they are treated tonight.

Rendering street smarts and bar savvy into a tutorial on how to keep your clientele engaged and coming back may be an inexact science, but it certainly must contain the following precepts.

- *Slow Down* — A bartender's degree of professionalism is most apparent when the bar is slammed. Whether it's that "calm under pressure" quality, or their controlled, precise movements, really great bartenders are a genuine pleasure to watch. On the flip side, a bartender who loses his cool and makes guests bear the brunt of his anger is an affront. People get kicked around plenty in their day-to-day lives without being subjected to a browbeating during "happy hour."

While there is a natural tendency when behind the bar to rush to keep up with rising demand, cranking out drinks as quickly as possible isn't the objective. What would happen if your bartenders broke with convention and slowed down a few mph? The likely result is that they'd make

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better drinks, waste less product, appear more professional and provide your guests with hospitable service. Even when people are standing at the bar waiting to order, bartenders need only smile, acknowledge them and say that he'll be with them in a few moments. So what's the rush?

- *Anticipating Guests Needs* — Service excellence can be defined as anticipating a guest's need well before they realize the need themselves. While bartending obviously involves preparing and serving drinks, it's no more than a secondary aspect of the job. What's ultimately important is treating guests to an evening on the town that they'll remember and tell their friends about.

- *Fair Pricing* — Gouging people on the price of drinks is a thing of the past. Competition is such that it's better ratcheting down prices a quarter or two than scrambling for every dollar possible. High-perceived value is an essential aspect of getting quality patrons to return another night. Value is as powerful of a force as gravity. Who doesn't want to think they are getting good mileage out of their hard-earned money?

- *Slam Dunk Drinks* — Guests rarely return another night for lackluster cocktails. You need to offer them drinks so intriguing that once smitten they'll have only one venue where they can get them. Don't commit bad products to good liquor and hope for the best. Insistence of using only fresh, high quality ingredients in cocktails is becoming the norm, an excellent reason being that they make significantly better drinks.

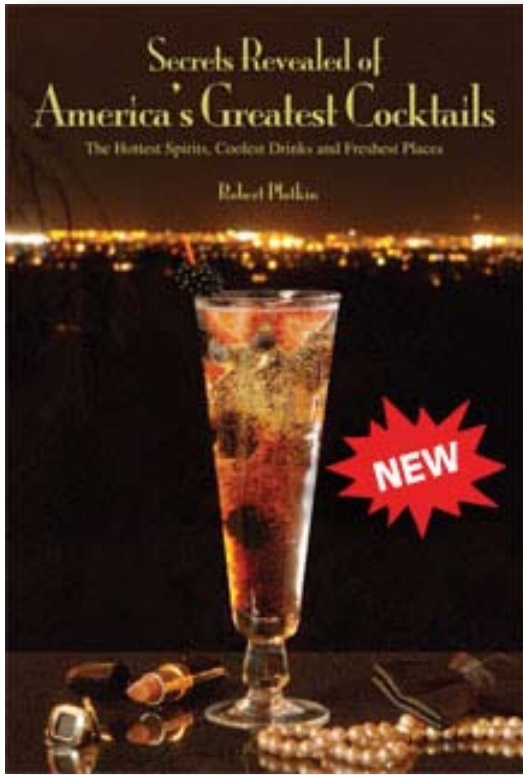
- *Avoid Stagnancy* — There's no room at the top for the complacent and uninspired. It's all about stepping over the rut, not falling in it. So look to shake things up. Regularly change how your place looks. Move a mirror,

or paint a wall. Even subtle changes can make a difference in the feel of the place. Guests will appreciate the scenery change, as will the staff. Give your people a new look. Wearing the same clothes to work gets old and takes a toll on staff morale. Put the bounce back in their step with new duds.

- *Adopt A Spirit* — Spirit sales, especially for top-shelf brands, are soaring. Per capita consumption is steadily increasing back to the highs of the early '80s. Now is the time to jump on board and leverage their popularity into greater bar sales. Choose a spirit and become known as a great bourbon bar, tequilaria, or single malt haven. Educate your staff and expand your back bar selections to offer guests an interesting array of brands from which to choose. Tap into the guests' sense of discovery and you'll be guaranteed success.

- *Be Unpredictable* — What if you periodically bought people in your restaurant their dinners? Or sent a bottle of wine to a table compliments of the management? Or bought a party a round of appetizers? Why, there'd be a massive outbreak of goodwill. Perhaps change decades now and again, and go "retro." It's a blast for the staff, a novel change for the clientele, and a boost for business. Pick a decade and work with it — music, costumes, vintage drinks, period decor, etc. Have fun, it's contagious.

It's difficult to overestimate the value of treating people like welcome guests. After all, who doesn't "want to go where everyone knows your name?" It entails connecting with your guests in such a way that they feel at home at your bar, instead of being just another face among the throng. There's nothing passé about making people feel appreciated.



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