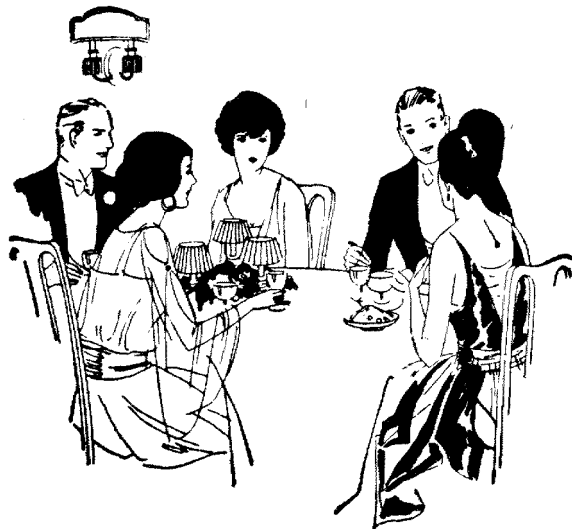


# Repeat Business Trumps A Down Economy



The economic downturn is pounding the food and beverage industry, and the prevailing forecast suggests battening down the hatches and run a tight ship, so to speak. One thing is certain; as the economy continues to slow it will become increasingly important to extract every drop of revenue out of their operations. Well, if you were deprived in your youth the experience of navigating a bar or cocktail lounge through heavy weather, worry not; the cumulative learnings can be rendered down into a bite-sized nugget of advice—returning guests keep the doors open, newcomers pay your salary.

Attaining the elite status as a destination venue necessitates building a core of loyal patrons and accepting the reality that today's regulars were yesterday's newcomers. Enticing people to walk through your doors for the first time invariably involves an expenditure of marketing and advertising dollars.

However, getting those same people to return another night is considerably more involved, and depends entirely on whether expectations were met on their last visit. The public rightfully maintains a “what have you done for me lately?” attitude. They'll remain loyal until disappointed, after which they'll tear your listing out of the phone book and for weeks tell everyone they know to do the same.

There is an intangible factor at play, and when it comes to building repeat business, it exceeds all other considerations. People go where they feel most comfortable, and what's more comforting than being made to feel at home, like you're one of the regulars. The impact treating people like welcomed guests has on building repeat business can't be overemphasized.

There are several field-tested ways of accomplishing this. High on the list is for everyone on staff to welcome people into the business like

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they were welcoming guests into their homes. Hospitable service is a learned skill that needs to be applied with sincerity, feigned or not. It requires a significant amount of discipline to remain calm and patient under pressure. Regardless of how demanding guests may behave, they deserve the staff's hospitable best.

Along the same lines, the staff and managers should make a concerted effort to acknowledge guests they recognize as having been in before. A quick "welcome back" is like money in the bank. Who doesn't appreciate being acknowledged? In addition, servers and bartenders should be reminded to maintain eye contact with guests when interacting with them. Considering the often loud and distracting circumstance, maintaining eye contact is a quick means of creating a rapport and human connection with people.

The next step is to initiate a program aimed at capturing guest contact information. Any type of weekly or monthly drawing will quickly develop an email mailing list. Staying in contact with your core constituency is a proven means of building repeat business.

The following is a strategy for achieving the "Cheers paradigm," you know, creating a place where people want to go and where everybody knows your name. Keep them coming back, that's how you perpetuate business. To that end, I offer the following.

- **Prevent 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 a bounce in their step with a uniform change.

- **Streamlining Sales** — People shouldn't have to beg to be served. Staff a sufficient number of people to handle anticipated demand—wasting a few labor dollars is better than losing potential sales and making good people wait for bad service. Instruct the staff to ask guests questions. Are they celebrating

a special occasion? Are they hungry? Guests will nearly always heed menu suggestions or beverage recommendations. But make them get rid of the canned delivery. The staff should offer suggestions like they were feeding guests insider information. People just love the personal attention.

- **Olympic Class Drinks** — Essential to the strategy is offering your guests drinks so intriguing that they'll have only one venue where they can get them. Pawned off replicas of the drinks poured down the street won't cut it. To compete your drinks should be original, singularly delicious, branded with high quality products be visually appealing. And finally, you need to offer your clientele an interesting mix of drinks from which to choose.

- **Fair Pricing** — With few exceptions, getting the most for our hard-earned money is important to all of us. Considering the nature of the economy and people's sensitivity to prices, offering guests drinks with high-perceived value will become more of an enticement in getting them to return another night,

- **Develop A Specialty** — Some bars proudly let it be known that their Martinis are second to none; others boast of unrivaled Manhattans, Margaritas, or Mojitos. Whatever your interest, choose a category of drinks and make it your bar's specialty. People naturally want to sample what you do best, and when they discover that it lives up to advanced billing, likeminded aficionados will soon be calling your bar home.

- **Taking The Lead** — There are occasions every night when staff is in the position to assist guests with their drink selections. The ability to quickly size someone up and pair them with the perfect cocktail is an invaluable attribute behind the bar. Guests nearly always go along with bartenders suggestions on what to drink; it's like being fed insider information. People enjoy the personal attention. Likewise, bartenders should ask guests questions about their drink preferences. The more they know, the better service they can render.

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• **In Good Hands** — Bartenders and servers should be able to quickly answer questions regarding the menu or specific products. Fumbling for answers, or looking for someone else to deal with the situation diminishes their credibility, and that of the business. People like to know they're in capable hands. With consumer interest in premium spirits soaring, it's easier for bartenders to up-sell guests when they can articulate why a particular brand is worth the higher price.

• **Anticipating Needs** — Service excellence can be defined as anticipating guests' needs before they realize the need themselves. Refill water glasses and replenish breadbaskets without being asked. Likewise, many cocktails should be served with a back of water. So after you serve a Martini or Scotch, neat, return moments later with a glass of water. It's a classy thing to do and guests will appreciate the service.

• **Be Unpredictable** — What if you periodically bought people in your establishment their dinners? Or sent a bottle of wine to a table compliments of the management? Or bought a party a round of drinks? 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.

• **Be Entertaining** — And finally, tell your bartenders that enjoying themselves behind the bar goes with the territory, even when a night turns frenetic. Fun is contagious and an invaluable commodity in this business. Likewise, humor is a great equalizer. Laughing is something everyone can use more of in their life. Making guests smile may be the best thing that happened to them that day.

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**Robert Plotkin** is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and the author of numerous books including *Secrets Revealed of America's Greatest Cocktails*. You can reach him at BarMedia— **robert@barmedia.com**.

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