



## *Refusing Service Without Angst*

I received the following email. *I tend bar in a busy, tourist area on the coast in central California. I have taken both the TAM course and the new web course at Cheers University Online. I am confident that I can recognize the stages of intoxication, and I could probably write a report on how alcohol affects the body and mind.*

*Nobody seems to go into detail about how to actually deal with an intoxicated guest. I know it should never get to that point, but sometimes it does, or it gets very close. I always hear “be courteous and professional, friendly but firm.” Or “be discreet, don’t embarrass the guest, and don’t ever say, “Sir, you’re drunk.”*

*Sometimes I’m the only one working the bar. No manager, no owner. Give me some actual dialogue. What EXACTLY do you say to a guest who is getting to the point of intoxication? Please give me some actual examples of what might be said to diffuse a situation with an emotional customer. Thanks for your help. —CJ*

What struck me about his note was its underlying emotion. He sounds almost desperate to learn how to handle these situations. After having already completed two exceptional programs on alcohol-awareness though, you’d think he’d be well prepared for the eventuality. Refusing further service goes with the territory, so why the angst?

Well, anyone who has had to cut off someone barreling along toward intoxication knows exactly why the angst. It’s intimidating and goes against the grain of most everything we’ve been taught about interacting with guests. It’s difficult to anticipate whether a person will acknowledge the refusal calmly, or get agitated and go ballistic.

At my first bartending job in college I worked with a journeyman bartender so old that he had no name. He was a thread bare, old-school guy who had little patience for rookies. He delighted in pointing out how little I knew about bartending. While surly with me, he worked the crowd like a

## *Service Standards*

maestro. I recall greatly admiring his complete awareness of everything happening at his bar.

One night he took a drink order from a couple seated at the bar and called me over. "See that woman, she's starting to get lit. Now learn something." Lit was his term for becoming giddy, or animated.

He brought the drinks over to the couple, leaned in to the woman, and quietly said. "Here you are...drink this one slowly because it's the last one I can safely serve you tonight."

I remember her reaction to this day. She raised her eyebrows for a moment, thought about it, and then nodded, seemingly unfazed and unperturbed. The brute walked back to the well grinning. "Kid, see how that's done? I just cut her off and didn't refuse her a thing."

As time went on he explained to me that cutting off a guest is less involved and better received when done before the person becomes inebriated. He said that way they're afforded the face-saving opportunity to nurse their last drink of the night.

That was 1973, and for the following 25 years, I approached refusing service in exactly that way. In my experience the tactic rarely causes patrons embarrassment, and typically doesn't provoke a negative response. To the contrary, more often than not, the person actually said thanks. In the handful of occasions when a nasty scene ensued, I had misjudged the situation and was too late intervening.

That's the operative point. Bartenders need to be constantly aware of their environment and everything in it. There are easily recognizable signs of impending inebriation, but the rub is that you have to be paying attention. Before a person gets to the point of slurring they've likely exhibited a dozen symptoms of intoxication. The time to intervene is early before the person is under the influence.

Regardless of what is said when refusing service, I've learned firsthand that the simpler the approach the easier it is to intervene. An important aspect of educating bartenders and servers is familiarizing them with how to best accomplish the objective as succinctly as possible. The more automatic they become delivering the lines, the more comfortable they'll be when obliged to refuse service. Tact and diplomacy are the two strongest attributes they can possess.

Informing a person already intoxicated that he won't be served any more alcohol is a straightforward proposition. For example, "In my judgment you've had enough to drink, so I legally can't serve you any alcohol." It is succinct and to the point. The bartender clearly stated that the decision was based on his best judgment, and at no time does he accuse the patron of being drunk. If the statement is delivered properly, it will likely not elicit a negative response; and if it does, management should be notified immediately. It's their responsibility to handle these kinds of customer situations.

After the patron is cut-off, the manager should arrange alternate means of transportation for the guest to get home. The options available are to either call a taxi to drive the customer home, or assist the patron in calling a friend or relative to take protective custody, so to speak. It is important that the intoxicated person not get behind the wheel of his car.

Refusing service of alcohol needn't necessarily be challenging. But let's be honest, most servers and bartenders find it one of the most daunting aspects of their job. What makes refusing further service intimidating is that alcohol can have a destabilizing effect on a drinker's emotional state. It is difficult to anticipate whether a customer will acknowledge the refusal calmly or react in a belligerent manner.

Send us your comments at [amo@barmedia.com](mailto:amo@barmedia.com)

The primary service rule regarding the sale of alcohol should always be, "When In Doubt, Don't Serve." It remains the best advice available. You can ask no more from your staff than to exercise their best judgment in these situations. There's too much at stake to base the decision whether or not to serve alcohol on anything less.

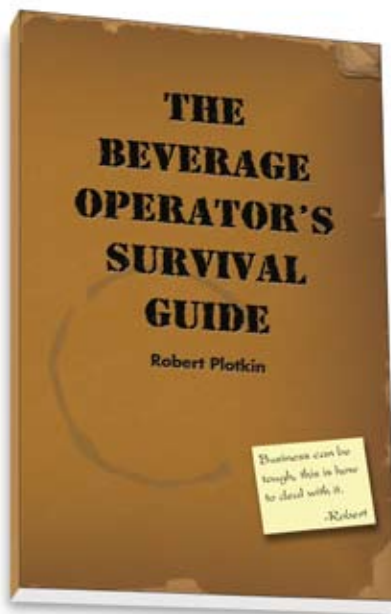
At the end of the day though, what's more important than the exact phrases used is the conviction behind them. Intoxication is bad for business.

---

**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](mailto:robert@barmedia.com).

---

## ***This Month At BarMedia***



The title speaks for itself in this handbook by Robert Plotkin. Healthy survival is all about contingency planning. Think about any day and how many things happen to change the way you expect it to go. Add 5-25 other people (employees) into the mix, and you can guarantee at some point in the day you will have to plan for the unforeseen, and occasionally it will be something that seriously threatens some aspect of the business. So roll up your sleeves and get ready to put some policies and procedures in place that will, in the long run, make your business a much more lucrative and positive place to be.

Was: ~~\$15.95~~, Now: **\$9.95** + S & H

***This month only!***

Valid until 08/01/09