



Beating The Mid-Winter Blahs, It's Mind Over Matter

It's as real as overcast, freezing rain and grungy slush. They're the mid-winter blahs, that pervasive depression that befalls all of us not lucky enough to have a 'script for Prozac. It strikes in the early part of January when our minds begin to accept that there won't be any occasion worth celebrating until spring.

"We're not talking upper level psychology course here. The mid-winter blahs, blues, whatever you want to call it, is a real syndrome that not only affects your guests, but it affects your business' bottom line as well," states Tim Johnson, president of *Tim Johnson & Associates* located in Larkspur, Colorado. Johnson is one of the food and beverage industry's leading consultants having played a prominent role in the success of such concepts as Houlihans and Applebee's.

"The mid-winter blahs cause people to mope about, stay at home more often, and when they do go out, to merely go through the motions of having a good time. You can expect there to be less energy in your club. There will be a depressed feel in the air and your operation will be more sluggish," conjectures Johnson. "All of these factors will have the affect of decreasing revenue. The mid-winter blahs have as significant of an impact on your business as the general sense of well-being around the holidays does, only in reverse."

Scott Young, president of Vancouver-based *Bar Smart*, a company specializing in the training of extreme bartending skills and enhancing customer service, agrees with Johnson. "There's a general malaise the hits people during the first third of the year that you can almost reach

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over the bar and touch. Does it affect business? Absolutely. Does it affect your staff's morale? Absolutely, not to mention their tipped income."

Depressed yet? Well, not to worry, overcoming the effects of the mid-winter blahs, according to our experts, requires some psychology and well-timed promotion.

"I think the necessary first step is to recognize that your staff is feeling just as gloomy and depressed as everyone else. I recommend giving them things to look forward to, reasons for them to feel up-beat and enthused," says Young. "One of the best ways to accomplish this is to give them a new skill, one that enhances their professionalism and elevates their self-esteem. From my particular point-of-view that would entail teaching them extreme bartending."

Scott Young is acknowledged as one of the world's foremost experts in the art of flair bartending and showmanship. "Extreme bartending is more than just tossing bottles and glasses in the air. It's about providing bartenders with the confidence and skills necessary to entertain your guests with style, grace and showmanship". Once bartenders have gained these skills, we're finding that they're more enthusiastic at work and have more energy. Their positive attitudes is essential in helping guests shake off the mid-winter blues."

Young contends that there are other benefits for operators. When bartenders elevate their level of showmanship, customers tend to stay at the bar longer, spend more money, tip better and return more often.

There are, of course, are other ways to bolster your staff's morale. "During the holidays is typically when we look to give employees their year-end bonuses, which basically acts like a motivational booster in an envelope," states Johnson. "I recommend operators take proactive measures to look after their employees' attitudes during the first quarter. The mid-winter blues slams your staff just as hard as it does everyone else."

Johnson suggests meeting with each employee and mapping out their career track within the company. The more secure and valuable your people feel, the more likely it is

that they'll maintain a positive work attitude. "The plan you develop with them could entail cross-training to learn new marketable skills, or an expanded job description and responsibilities with a corresponding hike in pay. Naturally it'll vary with each employee, however, the objective should be to provide the individual with a professional challenge, something stimulating that helps recharge their batteries."

According to Tim Johnson, "It's much easier to meet and greet a parade of depressed customers if you're feeling good about yourself and where your career is going."

Promote Your Way Past The Blues

Our experts agree that after the staff's collective heads have been taken care of, your focus needs to shift to promotion. Beating the mid-winter blahs depends greatly on giving your clientele something to look forward to, which is exactly what in-house promotions are designed to do. Not just any type of promotion will fit the bill, however.

"The objective of these promotions isn't necessarily to sell more drinks and stuff the cash drawer. The objective is to give your clientele something to focus on and to transport them out of the dreariness of mid-winter into another time and place," contends Scott Young. "I've seen it work dozens of times. Let's say you hold a July 4th celebration in February or March, when the weather is miserably cold, overcast and dreary. With the proper promotion and lead-time, anticipation starts to build giving people—your staff included—something to look forward to. That's the recipe for success."

Both experts were keen on holding summer-oriented promotions to beat the mid-winter blahs. Explains Johnson, "Let's say you schedule a beach party during the dead of winter. For a solid month your staff promotes the event through word of mouth, building the excitement in people's minds. Then when the date finally arrives, you bring in a truckload of sand, set-up an indoor volleyball court, a barbecue pit, put blow-up palm trees around the facility and

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dress the staff in Hawaiian shirts, Speedo's, whatever. The clientele then show-up in summer garb and bring in food for a local charity as their cover charge.

"It's a ticket out of the here and now and a guaranteed lock to beat the mid-winter blahs. There's no need to be dictated to by the calendar."

If helping your clientele escape the here and now is in your agenda, take heed to what promotions guru Patrick Henry suggests. The founder of Patrick Henry's Creative Promotions advocates retro-themed events as an effective way to help your guests cast off the mid-winter blahs.

While many may associate Disco music with retro-nights, Henry advises to let your imagination and the imaginations of your clientele and staff soar by slipping into another era altogether. Now that's the epitome of escapism.

Take a Swinging '40s promotion, for example. The staff should dress in period costumes. The more authentic their apparel, the more convincing the effect. The décor for the evening should be

wartime posters and patriotic banners. Swing music is undergoing a revival, so selecting an appropriate play list won't be a problem. The event even provides you with an opportunity to offer your clientele free swing lessons during the early part of the evening.

The drinks of the period are also currently undergoing a popular resurgence, cocktails such as the Martini, Manhattan, Daiquiri, Bacardi Cocktail and Champagne Cocktail. Give your guests shock and roll back your prices, perhaps not to those of the 1940s, but far enough back that they'll realize that you've fully embraced the spirit of the evening.

According to Henry the key to this type of promotion is to make every effort to help people suspend their disbelief long enough for the enchantment of the evening to take hold. Once people are under the spell of the evening, maintaining the illusion is a simple matter.

So whichever direction you go, whether it's changing eras or seasons, helping people shrug off the mid-winter blahs seems to be a simple proposition of mind over matter.

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