

Raising the Bar

Mixing a Formula for Long-Term Success

The industry is experiencing a cocktail revolution, and it's time to start demanding more from bartenders

Has any one else noticed the increase in bars, restaurants and clubs arriving on the scene at the same rate they are disappearing? In major urban centres every week it seems that there is a new "I have to go" spot to check out. Why can't these concepts find the secret to lasting success? Many bars and restaurants begin with a well-defined vision, spend countless hours and dollars on all the hard details of their operations and then in one swoop, hire their front line salespeople without considering their abilities to serve a drink? With all of these new places opening, who are we putting on the front lines to represent our new concepts?

The industry is experiencing an exciting time. The cocktail revolution is in full swing, so many new flavours are on our bars, yet, we're still selling vodka and sodas like they're going out of style. Companies like The Keg and TGIFridays have arguably the best corporate training programs in the business, and it shows in their commitment to deliver consistent quality and innovation in their products. In today's marketplace, our guests have more knowledge, and with that, come higher expectations. Shouldn't we have higher expectations?

Cocktail of the Month The Classic Manhattan

2 1/4 oz. rye whisky or Bourbon whiskey
(Depending on guest preference and country of origin)
3/4 oz. sweet vermouth
1 dash Angostura bitters
1 Maraschino cherry

Combine your ingredients with 2 - 3 ice cubes in a mixing glass.

Stir gently for 5-10 seconds to chill the cocktail without clouding the drink.

Place the cherry in a chilled glass and strain cocktail mixture over the cherry.

Manhattans were originally made with rye whisky. In Canada, we still make them this way.

Most Americans expect a manhattan to be made with Bourbon whiskey. It's better to ask than to assume.

It's no secret that there is great money to be made behind the wood and the hospitality industry, much like the fashion industry, can be very image conscious. Well, the bodies are still flowing through the doors, eager and pretty, but bartending has become a bit of a halfway house for people who are waiting for their break in another industry that they are both trained for and passionate about. Vogue magazine doesn't recruit cover models from the legions of mediocre bartenders, so my question is, does your average out-of-work model or between jobs actor have what it takes to represent your brand?

While employees in other industries are constantly upgrading their skills, it seems that in our industry if a candidate can fill out an application, he or she is offered a job. Perhaps it's because the hospitality industry is so transient that there is seldom any cash allotted to training. The fact remains that these people are the ones directly responsible for your sales, and the long-term cost of not training your sales force will far outweigh the short-term cost of bringing them up to speed on your expectations. Unfortunately, most new staff will only complete a couple of shadow shifts where they learn (among other things) the bad habits of the previous generation of staff... Does this sound familiar?

Some of the greatest cocktails ever are now making a comeback and its amazing how many bartenders today don't know what a 'press' is, how to make a 'burnt' martini or even what bitters are. These classic cocktails weren't perfect the first time they were made, but their creators kept trying until they got it right. When you're crafting something new, knowledge is power. Have a look at the ingredients you have on your back bar. If there are products there that you've never tried, or don't know much about, perhaps it's time to start to learn. Empower your staff, make it a competition or a challenge for each bartender to learn about one bottle and share their findings with their peers. Check out www.thatsthespirit.com for tons of useful information. One of my favourite questions from a guest is 'can you make me something different?' If you ask your bar staff the same question and get a blank stare like a deer in headlights, it's time for some training. We are, after all, supposed to be bartenders, not order takers.

We take care of others and create a great party. We've all heard the acronym T.I.P.S. - To Insure Prompt Service. I think it's time to start demanding more from the bartenders of today. Make them work for their money. If you order a steak medium rare, you expect just that, and if it's overcooked, you send it back. Start demanding the same from your drinks. If I'm paying \$12 for a martini, you better believe I'll send it back if it's



not right. The cost of losing a guest and their group due to poor quality is greater than simply remaking that drink.

Here's where the formula for success comes in. Don't be afraid to try, and more importantly, don't be afraid to fail. It has been said that failure is a far greater teacher than success. It has also been said that the definition of insanity is to continue to do things the same way and expect a different result. If your bottom line results aren't changing, maybe it's time to vary your method. Next time you're in Toronto, belly up to the bar at Canyon Creek on Front St. and ask for a bartender named Chris Purdy. His commitment to excellence in knowledge and service may inspire you to examine the way your staff interact with your guests. To those who take the time and respect the wood, I salute you. For those who do the hiring and write the schedules, its time to take a good look around and start asking more questions. Make it your resolution to "Raise the Bar" in 2007, because if you don't, someone else will!



Gavin MacMillan was Canada's Top Ranked Flair Bartender in 2005. He trains, competes and performs all over the world and operates Canada's Premier Bartender Training Facility, BartenderOne. You can reach him at gavin@bartenderone.com.