

Enhancing the experience

Paul Buttrick has set up a consultancy, Beer Dimensions, after 30 years with Whitbread/Interbrew

Illustration by Sophie Allsopp



Brewers need to invest more in on-trade beer quality and training, argues Paul Buttrick

When I was a young boy back in the 1960s, my family ran a medium sized hotel in Margate on the south-east coast of England. My father was a French trained chef and on Sunday evenings we went to visit a number of pubs in the Kent countryside. The pubs were very attractive, but most of all provided us with exactly the experience we wanted. My father wanted good fresh, cool, clear ale; my mother wanted ice and lemon in her dry Martini and soda; and my brother and I wanted cold Vimto in a bottle with a packet of OXO crisps. My mother inspected the curtains for cleanliness, checked the toilets were spotless, and that there was soap, a towel and plenty of toilet paper. If any of the elements was missing, we did not go back.

Forty years on, consumers, as we are now called, are expecting higher standards and choice. The best establishments, which are always busy and not necessarily the cheapest, provide excellent food, drink and environment.

How are brewing companies meeting consumer's expectations in 2005? The major brewers all have well known quality brands, some more appealing than others, but they are all trumpeting improving the beer offering, introducing super cold versions of current brands and/or introducing new dispense taps to give a perfect pour.

Branded glasses are widely available, but how often are they used, and when they are, how often do they have the right brand in the glass? Nothing looks worse than Hoegaarden wheat beer in a John Smith's glass!

The new fonts and taps look great, but if the basics of getting the beer to the tap are not consistent, then much of that investment is wasted. It seems to me that applying the basic philosophy of installing cellar equipment which delivers the beer to the tap consistently at the correct temperature and flow rate in order to give a consistently good presentation would be a good place to start. I acknowledge that the complexity of who owns and pays for what will certainly not make this easy.

The major brewers do not have control of the establishments where their beers are being poured. This means there would be real benefits for pub operators in forming a partnership with their suppliers with the aim of delivering beer perfectly every time. Some companies are beginning to do this very effectively, some are dabbling at it, and others are only just starting.

Rightly or wrongly, I am of the impression that some 'pubcos' only appear to be managing property portfolios and are losing out on the extra business they could generate if only they made their offering more attractive. I have been to a number of ex-brewery owned establishments recently, where the outside fabric of the building has been terrible contrasting with bright and welcoming interiors. The trouble is that most consumers will take one look at the outside and move on. The consumer experience cannot even start if you can't get people through the front door!

Partnerships prosper

Any partnership will only prosper if both parties are willing to back up their ideals with action, investment and, most importantly, training. Staff turnover is notoriously high, but basic training must be given, even if it's only to explain putting

the right beer in the right glass. I advocate appointing someone to take responsibility for ensuring all staff are trained in the basics. This would include knowing their brands, how they should taste, and be poured. The same applies to cellar management – a trained and motivated champion appointed to keep the cellar well maintained would bring huge benefits in quality, leading to better business performance.

Vertically integrated brewing companies are more fortunate in that they more directly control their outlets. They have an advantage over the major players if only they can get the strategy together to bring their offering to the highest level. The opportunity is there, but the desire and vision to do it must be paramount. The most successful independent brewing companies are already doing this. Many companies are spending a small fortune of refurbishments and new builds, but are they investing sufficiently in staff training?

Another black cloud for the industry is the link between alcohol and anti-social behaviour. The 'job' culture fuelled by cheap booze is doing nothing for the image of beer, and certainly nothing to bring beer along side wine as an offering for a civilised social occasion.

Strategies for enhancing the consumer experience must take account of environment and occasion. Doing away with 'happy hours' and 'all you can drink' type promotions might well reduce volumes and footfall, but will in the long term make for a better experience.

For some, the future may look gloomy, but for companies with the vision and desire to consistently enhance their consumer's experience, it will certainly look a whole lot brighter – especially if they pour their beer into the correct branded glass!

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