

Things can only get better



It's important that you as the bar operator constantly review how your business is running and how it could be improved

OPENING YOUR BAR IS ONLY THE START. YOU NEED TO CONSTANTLY ADAPT AND EVOLVE TO BE SUCCESSFUL. WILL BECKETT AND HUW GOTT EXPLAIN HOW

You're open. The pain and misery of the set-up stage has been replaced by the pain and misery of running the thing.

In the build-up to opening the Redchurch we were working 70 to 80-hour weeks, doing some serious multi-tasking (one minute a labourer, the next project manager, the next quickly changing into dusty suit and going to see the bank manager). When we finally opened the doors we were exhausted. But the hard work had only just started and we had to put in long hours behind the bar and in the office to keep things afloat.

A BIT OF PERSPECTIVE

The best moment of the first year by far was going on holiday – the first few days were spent sleeping, then finally managing to switch off for a few hours and get a bit of perspective.

Away from the daily battle for survival you can start to think about what you could be doing better. From the moment you open your bar you should always be looking to improve. Not dramatically, not suddenly, but constantly, gently and that process shouldn't stop until you finally sell up and go on holiday for the rest of your life (or whatever it is you plan to do. Probably take a week off and then start again).

During the frantic opening period you're probably running around fighting fires, fixing everything that urgently needs fixing. Even at this stage it's vital not to get bogged down in 'urgent' matters and neglect 'important' ones. You need to make the time to address those things that would make a real difference to your

business but don't require immediate attention. So when you do manage to catch your breath, take a cold hard look at yourself, your venue and your business. What products could be improved? What processes could be more efficient? Which people need more training and guidance?

BE OBJECTIVE

Looking at your business objectively can be really difficult. You're so caught up in daily hectic-ness that you can't see the wood for the trees. We've found that mystery shoppers can come in useful here.

We sometimes invite 'been-there-got-the-T-shirt' industry pros to come in for dinner and a few drinks with their partners. They (hopefully) have a nice enjoyable time as an average customer and then report back their thoughts.

Getting someone who you know will be brutally honest is key. They might spot things you miss, or remind you how important it is to sort out things you've known about for ages but have never got round to doing anything about. Or they might spot an issue with a member of staff that you've missed because they're always on their best behaviour when you're around.

Keep an eye on the décor. Do a repaint just before the place starts to look tired and unloved instead of just after. And always look to improve your offering. Read magazines like *Theme* to keep up with what's happening in the bar world, go out to new bars and see what they're doing – but at the same time don't chase fleeting trends. There are lots of good ideas out there waiting to be 'borrowed'.

RUNNING YOUR BAR

Look at your staff. Think about what you could be doing to make their lives easier and make them more efficient. What training could you do to make them better at their jobs, improve their knowledge base and increase their job satisfaction?

Effective, continual training is crucial and it's as much about staff retention as it is about improving performance. In this industry staff turnover is crazily high, and every time someone leaves it costs you money in lost productivity as they wind down, lost productivity as the new person starts and potentially in advertising or agency fees. Do everything you can to make sure members of your team are happy and that they will want to stay with you as long as possible. Think about how you recruit people – are you interviewing people effectively? Have you identified the best (and most cost-effective) recruitment channels?

Are your back-of-house systems working as effectively as they could? How long does it take you to produce P&Ls? Are they easy to use, and can you identify issues early? Can you easily compare one month's results against budget, against the previous month or, if appropriate, against the same month the year before? Are issues you identify improving? If not, why not? If the answer to the last one is "I don't know", then try

MIND THE PENNIES...

An easy way to improve the health of your business is to pay less for your products. A couple of per cent on the GP can make the difference between profit and loss or profit and lots of profit.

But you already get the best prices you can possibly get, right? I bet you don't. We run supplier audits for clients all the time, and you'd be amazed how much you can save.

Most recently we saved one group of four sites £80,000 a year, and a stand-alone pub £12,000 a year. Not to be sniffed at.



to talk to someone who might have dealt with similar issues before, a previous boss or someone you respect in the industry.

LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE – OTHER PEOPLE'S AS WELL AS YOUR OWN

This last point is important. Whatever the problem, someone else will have gone through what you're going through. They might be able to spot a solution in minutes that you might have to struggle with for months and still never resolve. A mentor can be really valuable. Maybe not an official one, but someone who is at the level of business you want to get to, someone who understands and likes what you're trying to do and is willing to



Will Beckett and Huw Gott

give advice, someone who works in a similar way to you or, if not, who challenges you without winding you up.

Look at yourself. No one is good at everything. What are your weaknesses? How can you improve them? If you can't, how can you cover these skill sets so your business doesn't suffer? We're lucky, we're both acutely aware of our failings and, as if by magic, we tend to cover each other's weaknesses. Huw can't stand staring at a spreadsheet for more than a few minutes, whereas Will loves them with an unnatural passion. Who needs porn when you've got Excel?

The most important thing here is constantly evaluating why you're in this. There's no correct answer (although if the ultimate answer is not money, bear in mind none of it can happen without profit); some people are in it for kudos, some for lifestyle, some because they want to work less, some for themselves, some want to enjoy a cash-rich lifestyle, some want to sell for millions much further down the line.

Unless you know the answer to that then you don't know what you're working towards. If you do know the answer then work out what you need to do to get there and don't get distracted from it. ■

Staff only: what could you do to make their lives easier and make them more efficient?



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