

# Drinks for the Driver

By James E. Peters

Can I get you something from the bar? Would you care for wine with your dinner? Can I bring you an after-dinner drink? How about another round? Would you like a cup of coffee?"

These are all statements made by servers to promote sales and increase tips. Yet more frequently they are hearing "Just bring me a glass of water," or "No, thanks, I'm driving tonight."

While many alcohol-serving businesses have instituted "designated driver" programs and give alcohol-free beverages to drivers at no cost, others have seen the opportunities for cashing in on the growing number of guests who have changed their drinking habits and are providing "drinks for the driver."

Someday, it will not be unusual to hear servers say, "A glass of water? We carry a variety of flavored bottled waters. Would you like to try one?" or "We are concerned about our guests who drive and have a wide selection of alcohol-free and low-alcohol beverages. Here is a menu. May I suggest the Cranberry Rose?" And while servers respond to requests for coffee by saying "With or without caffeine?" requests for beer or wine will be answered with "With or without alcohol?"

## Less Is More

In 1982, the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States recognized that Americans are drinking less. The following statement was made in the DISCUS Fact Book:

*Modern Americans recognize the growing respectability of the sensible use of alcoholic beverages, society at large increasingly emphasizes wider adoption of acceptable drinking practices. In this heterogeneous society, there is increased evidence of the respect for both drinkers and abstain-*

*ers. This is most obvious in classrooms encouraging responsible decisions about alcohol and in the presence of both alcohol and non-alcohol beverages at social gatherings.*

Research over the past thirty years supports this statement. Gallup Polls show a steady decline in the number of drinkers, approaching the level of the late 1950s when only 55 percent of Americans reported drinking alcoholic beverages. The year with the highest reported percentage was 1976 when 71 percent stated they imbibed, while in 1987, the number dropped to 64 percent.

In a 1985 nationwide poll, Gallup found that younger people are more likely to drink than are persons past 60. By the time a person reaches 50, alcohol use tends to slow down. Only 59 percent of those in the 50-64 age group drank, according to Gallup. Data collected by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism finds that by the time a person reaches age 60, only 12 percent of the men and just over 1 percent of the women can be classed as heavy drinkers, compared with 25 percent of men and 7 percent of women in the 18-29 age group.

Although concerns about drinking and driving have affected how people drink, a more important factor may be the changing demographics of the population. The "baby-boomers" were entering their adolescence in the late 1950s. Their parents were paying off mortgages, buying cars and furnishing their houses. The divorce rate was low, and there were few options for eating or drinking outside the home.

The late 60s and early 70s brought many changes. The "boomers" became young adults and got the right to vote at eighteen, as well as the right to drink alcohol in many states where the drinking age had been lowered. The

divorce rate skyrocketed, more women entered the workforce, which gave them greater mobility and freedom, the sexual revolution began and people broke the bonds of conservative lifestyles. It was during this period that the modern nightclub and bar industry was born.

Alcoholic beverage sales boomed. The "happy hour" was a marketing strategy designed to get people into the bars earlier on weekend nights, and concern about drinking and driving was minimal.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 brought a new conservatism to the country. The public became concerned about the growing number of fatalities on the highways caused by drinking and driving, and citizens groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) organized to combat this national tragedy. President Reagan added impetus to the efforts of groups such as MADD by forming the Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving. In 1983, the Commission made many recommendations that have had and will continue to have an impact on the alcoholic beverage industry.

Raising the drinking age to twenty-one, imposing liability against alcohol servers' and urging state alcoholic beverage control commissions to encourage licensed businesses to train servers are just a few of the recommendations of the Commission.

At the same time, the "Boomers" got older, became concerned about their health and weight and began to have babies of their own. They bought houses, cars and furniture. Their jobs became careers, and they changed their attitudes about drinking alcoholic beverages.

"Drink charts" were distributed by thousands of organizations, supported by major stories in newspapers and on radio and TV. National magazines presented similar infor-

mation in cover stories reaching millions of readers. Alcohol education programs now begin in the first grade, and this year high school graduates in some parts of the country now receive alcohol education in each year of their school careers.

The growth rate of abstinence as a choice is rising in America, while many of those who continue to drink closely monitor their consumption and set personal limits or switch to alternatives, consisting of low-alcohol or alcohol-free beverages.

#### The Power of the Veto Vote

The challenge for the retailer is to tap into this growing market of consumers seeking alcohol-free alternatives. The producers of alcoholic beverages have begun to adapt, as demonstrated by the recent purchase of Tropicana by Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, the expanding distribution of Sundance beverages by Stroh Brewery and Anheuser Busch's venture into the snack business and their purchase of Saratoga Bottled Waters as well as rumors about the development of an alcohol-free beer.

Five years ago a typical response to the suggestion that a bar owner expand the selection of alcohol-free beverages was, "If a person doesn't want to drink, they shouldn't go to a bar." Server attitudes were, "People who don't drink alcoholic beverages don't spend money, are lousy tippers and take up space that could be filled by real customers."

Many people who may not have wanted to drink an alcoholic beverage were intimidated by this attitude and ordered one. Others simply stopped going out. But like the non-smoker, the non-drinker has become more vocal and demands there be a selection of alternatives. The power of the "veto vote" has become more apparent, and the successful nightclub or bar is now paying more attention to the customer who does not drink.

To understand the "veto vote," consider this example. A group of five people are planning where they will go out for the evening, and one of them does not drink alcohol. A club is mentioned, and the non-drinker says "I don't feel comfort-

able there." So the group chooses another place. Not only did the first club lose the business of the non-drinker, but also the four friends who do drink. The "veto" by the non-drinker is a growing economic force against the insensitive club manager and licensee.

#### Drinks for the Driver

Once the commitment is made to pursue the alternative beverage market, promotional strategies are no different than for other new products. Tentcards, server buttons, taste testings, recipe contests and bonuses for servers are just some of the techniques used. The options for beverages are becoming almost unlimited and include juices, mixed "mocktails" or "softails," waters, beers, wines, coffees and teas. Lack of creativity is the only obstacle to success.

The popularity of Perrier is a demonstration of the reality of the new market of non-drinkers. Who ever thought five years ago that someone would pay two or three dollars for a bottle of water. In supermarkets, where shelf space is closely monitored, bottled waters and flavored seltzers are encroaching on sodas and other soft drinks.

Fruit and vegetable juices also represent a growth category. Orange, tomato and grapefruit were the mainstays of the bar stock because of their availability and mixability. Today, there is blackberry, raspberry, cranberry, apple, pear, peach and many more. The Prune Association in California has even developed a variety of beverages made with prune juice.

Developing a successful "Drinks for the Driver" campaign involves five steps:

1. Announcement
2. Taste testing
3. Server training
4. Marketing
5. Evaluation

The announcement is a pre-promotion step, seeking input from customers and staff on ideas and suggestions for alcohol-free beverages. Some might suggest recipes for fruit juice drinks, while others will suggest a brand of alcohol-free beer or wine.

The next step is to stage a taste testing. One week might be for

beers, another for wines and a third for mixed drinks. Customers rank the beverages for flavor, presentation, quality, creativity, thirst satisfaction, value and overall preference. In contests for mixed drinks, award prizes to winners with the name of the drink creators printed on the future menu. A booklet containing the recipes of all entries can be published and sold or given away to community groups as a promotion with the club's logo, address and entertainment prominently displayed.

Once the most popular beers, wines and mixed drinks have been chosen and menus printed, table tents should be developed and servers should be trained in how to promote the drinks. It is important that they learn how to recognize potential sales opportunities, such as when customers order a glass of water, or say "I have reached my limit" after drinking alcoholic beverages. They also must remember to provide the same level of service to the person drinking alcohol-free beverages as to the one drinking alcoholic beverages.

A personal experience demonstrates subtle ways an establishment can intimidate and alienate a customer. In a popular Mexican restaurant chain that serves margaritas and daiquiris in large, saucer-stem glasses, I ordered a strawberry daiquiri without the rum. The server brought it to me in a tall tumbler glass. When I asked why I didn't get the fancy glass, she just stared blankly at me. While there may be a valid reason for the server to use a different glass, such as making it possible to distinguish between an alcoholic and alcohol-free beverage, the impression I got as a customer was that I was different because I did not drink an alcoholic beverage and that I was less important.

After the preliminary promotions, taste testing and server training, it is necessary to market to the general public. If your club or bar has not actively promoted alternatives in the past and there have been few requests from your current clientele, it is likely that there will be little demand for the new beverages. You must appeal to those people who have not come to your

establishment because they did not feel welcome or believed there were few alternatives.

Target markets for promotions might include health clubs, women's organizations, treatment centers for alcohol abuse business organizations and civic groups, especially those working on drinking and driving issues. If you serve lunch, alcohol-free beverages are becoming increasingly popular among professionals who do not drink alcohol while working. Many major corporations, such as IBM, do not permit their employees to drink alcoholic beverages at lunch.

During the holidays, at special events or at the "taste of the city" day in the larger metropolitan areas, your establishment could sponsor an alternative beverage bar, serving your most popular beverages and giving away coupons, passes and recipe booklets promoting your club and its activities.

Hosting "youth nights" or special events for alcohol treatment groups on slow nights is a way to introduce your club to future customers. Remember, every person who is a non-drinker can bring in many drinkers to your club.

The final step in the "drinks for the driver" campaign is to evaluate the impact of the program. Get feedback from your staff, your customers and members of the community. Is the beverage selection appropriate? Does your staff properly promote the beverages? Are customers satisfied? What more can be done?

And like any promotion, it is necessary to up-date and change with the times. One beer may lose popularity, while another one gains it. Providing customers with a choice is important, and having more than one brand demonstrates that you care. Also, make sure that you maintain a proper inventory. There is nothing worse when selling a new product than to be out of it when someone requests it.

One out of every three adults in this country does not drink alcoholic beverages, and that percentage is increasing. They either stay home, go to the movies or go to a bar or club that makes them feel welcome by giving them the choices they demand.

In today's marketplace, giving away alcohol-free drinks is like having a sale on air conditioners in the middle of summer. The club or bar that survives the decade will be the one offering a wide selection of alternatives at reasonably competitive prices. It will require an investment of time and money, but like any business venture that is properly planned, implemented and evaluated, there is an opportunity to reap rewards equal to the effort.

## About the Author

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James E. Peters is the president of the Responsible Hospitality Institute, Springfield, Massachusetts, and a founding charter member of RHI's Responsible Beverage Service Council. He is a noted lecturer, consultant and author and is the recipient of the American Hotel and Motel Association's 1988 Pearson Award for Excellence in Journalism.

