



## DO YOUR BREWERY OPERATIONS REFLECT YOUR BRAND?

A brewery's brand goes well beyond a sharp logo or catchy tagline. It's the story of why a brewery is in business. Everything should reflect that story. That starts with the beer. Sustainable success will only come by consistently producing a high-quality product.

Great beer alone, however, is not enough.

"Whatever the essence of your brewery is it needs to be projected in every single activity that touches the customer and your team," said Joel Hueston, who heads the commercial practice for First Key. "That's how you can stand out from the brewery across town or the other 8,500 that now dot the U.S. and Canada."

The look and feel of the brewhouse and taproom, how the product is packaged and displayed, the customer experience, and every other aspect of how a brewery is operated must speak to the brewery's brand. When done well, "living the brand" will be a key factor in earning loyal consumers and, ultimately, driving longer-term profitability.

### It begins with the beer

Connecting the beer to the brand takes diligence. For example, breweries that focus on a small stable of popular styles – such as IPAs, lagers and stouts – must make as much of an effort as possible within their means to brew, package and distribute high-quality beers to customers consistently. This may be more challenging for smaller breweries that don't have access to advanced control tools. However, brewery owners that have delivered successful results over long-term periods find a way to invest continually in the whatever is needed to deliver on their brand promise.

"Excellence in operational execution is critical," said Mark Benzaquen, a master brewer and senior consultant at First Key. "Many people believe that as long as you have a 'killer' recipe you will brew a 'killer' beer. There's more to it, though. Brewers must focus on every aspect of the supply chain – from the materials to the recipe, from brewing to packaging, and so on, until the beer arrives at the consumer's hands. And every piece of equipment used during the process is critical as well."

Indeed, the brewing equipment available and processes in place should be taken into account before a brewery selects the beer styles it wants to brew to reflect its desired brand. For example, one brewery wanted to make a mango-infused IPA. Though the beer tasted great in the end, the mango puree used during brewing impacted the fermentation process and made packaging more difficult. As a result, a beer the brewery had hoped to sell resulted in huge losses and was eventually scrapped. With planning, the situation could have been mitigated by taking a number of steps, including a thorough feasibility assessment and robust trial processes prior to brewing and packaging the beer.

Aside from the functional aspect of producing the beer, the brewhouse is often a focal point for customers. It may be visible from the taproom or the centerpiece of brewery tours. With this in mind, the brewhouse should always look clean and organized, Benzaquen noted. "The cleanliness of your brewery is really important. It goes beyond safety and guarding against contamination. A clean brewery is a reflection of how you make your beer. If you take the time and effort to maintain a clean and organized brewery customers will feel confident that you also take the same time and effort to brew the best beer possible."

## The taproom tells a tale

More and more breweries are leveraging taprooms to sell beer and interact with customers. According to the Brewers Association, an industry trade group, beer sales sold directly to consumers through taprooms grew an estimated 15 percent in 2018.

To maintain or improve the appeal of this important channel, breweries must ensure the taproom décor, ambiance and functionality fit like hand in glove with the overall brand. As an example, Hueston likes to tell the story of a Vancouver, B.C. craft brewery opened by two brothers who grew up in Colombia and wanted to express their native culture in harmony with their new home region. Their taproom features a welcoming bright yellow mural along the outside wall and unique South-American-style merchandise for sale inside. The menu features Pacific seafood and local vegetables prepared with traditional South American recipes. Vibrant Colombian music fills the air and the beer names – as well as ingredients – reflect the brothers' roots.

Also operational aspects cannot be taken for granted, even in the taproom. The draft system, for example, should be designed for the kind of beers being sold at the brewery. A server pouring more highly carbonated beer – such as a saison – through a standard draft line and faucet can lead to issues. The higher carbonation level can result in increased CO<sub>2</sub> gas breakout in the draft line, leading to excessive beer foaming, making pouring the beer more difficult and increasing beer loss at the taps. This leads to an overall bad experience for both the server and the customer. Those outcomes can be avoided by installing a draft line specifically designed for highly-carbonated beers. Bottom line: One should take the time up front to make sure the equipment purchased and installed meets operational needs and is built for the beer style(s) being served to the public.

The people who operate the brewery and taproom also influence the brand, so they should be chosen carefully. In some cases a head brewer is the face of the product or the taproom. As a result, it's important to hire someone who not only brews great beer but can naturally convey the "why" behind the brewery. All team members should be trained, knowledgeable and, to further improve engagement, feel like they are part of something special.

To make it easier on the staff, Hueston suggests creating beer menus with simple, easy-to-understand descriptions. "Jargon can alienate people." Although not every experience will be perfect, he added, even unhappy customers can be won over when their complaints are fielded appropriately. "In the end," said Hueston, "every interaction is an opportunity to stand out...to elevate the customer experience in ways big and small." Though there are a wide range of things to keep in mind, here is a handful of questions brewery owners and taproom managers can ask themselves:

- What does your staff do when they are not busy with customers?
- What are staff members wearing and does it fit with your brand?
- How do team members greet customers when they walk in?
- Do they know how to closely engage with customers in the taproom?
- Are team members aware of the attention to detail the brewing team has put into the quality of the beer being served? Can servers talk about it?

Breweries that rely on distribution for a big chunk of their sales should put in place a sales team and field quality program that reflects the brand. Those breweries must also find partners that understand their values and are capable of delivering on the brand promise. That means partnering with distributors that will train their staffs and retail accounts as well as keep and display the product properly.

"It takes time and effort to find the right external partners," said Hueston. "But it's worth it in the end. A distributor or promotional partner represents your brand. It's like hiring a key employee."

## All together it creates the customer experience

The beer. The space. The service. That collective experience is how customers grade breweries. Breweries that create a thoughtful plan that connects each of those elements to its brand will reap the well-earned rewards. Breweries that don't will be left, well, crying in their beer.

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