

# Guess What? Your Customers Are Talking About You!

*If they were asked, what would your customers say was the best and worst things about buying beer in your store?*

*You've noticed a sales increase in Baltic Porters for the last two months; is this just a fade or is it the next big beer style?*

*Displays and promotions that worked well in the past don't move product today, what is going on?*

Although these might be great topics to cover at a staff meeting, they are actually the kind of questions better answered, not by your sales team but rather by your store's beer customers.

On a day to day basis we make a lot of decisions based primarily on our past experiences. But we need to be mindful that over the last five years the brands, buying trends, and most likely even the demographics of your customer base, have changed dramatically.

Since the majority of our decisions around inventory, displays and promotions directly affect a consumer's buying experience, we need to remember to take time to consult our current customer base: knowing that it is less expensive to gather a few opinions than it is to dismantle an initiative gone wrong.

## Beer Retailers: What do the Best do Right; the Worst do Wrong?

Market research can take on many forms, but it doesn't need to be expensive. One way to quickly find out what customers are saying about your store (and believe it or not they are saying things about your store) is log on to [www.beeradocate.com](http://www.beeradocate.com).

Once you have created a user name and password, you are good to go. Just enter a search for your store's name and you should see your rating, which will range from a "C" to an "A+". You will also be able to read what customers have written about your store, your services and your staff. Although not profane, the Beer Advocate community does not hold back, so usually even those stores with an "A+" will have room to

improve. (It is also a good place to check out how the competition rates as well.)

Another feature of this site that is great for customer research is the capability to post questions to the Beer Advocate Forums. We posed the question above to the Beer Advocate community and received a good 30 replies within 24 hours.

So, what do the Best and Worst beer retailers do:

### The Best have:

Knowledgeable, honest staff (especially about current stock)

Accurate posted pricing (no surprises at the check out)

A fresh selection (rotating inventory)

A great selection (big variety over a large inventory)

Reasonable pricing

"Singles" and "Mixables" (allow customers to create their own six pack)

### The Worst have:

Staff that "pretends" to be beer knowledgeable

A tendency to sell marked down, out-of-date and "dusty" product

Products stored or displayed inappropriately (clear bottles stored in the sun)

Staff that recommends brands that they have not sampled and know nothing about

## Making this Work for Your Store

Other customer survey options that will take a little more time, expense and effort are phone surveys, focus groups, or even the utilization of outside consultants. Customers can be compensated by offering loyalty discounts for their time and confidentiality.

**1. Phone Surveys:** Follow-up with your customers using a phone or a written survey after their purchase and find out what they liked or didn't like about your store. Phone calls take up a lot of time, but the interaction will be very valuable and eye-opening.

**2. Focus or Advisory Groups:** Approach a small number of your customers to participate in a focus group, and ask them questions about what they currently like about your store and what they don't like. The group could meet in the store or on a teleconference. Either way, input from a group will offer better ideas because participants will feed off of each others ideas.

As you grow and make changes, reconvene the group. This approach builds loyalty and helps you check and recheck your vision for the store with a group of people who know where you have been and where you want to go.

**3. Consultants:** If you want the information, but don't have time or the expertise, consultants can help frame the questions, gather information and assist you in implementing changes with your staff. Just like any other vendor, costs are tied to the number of services required and the consultant's expertise.

Although investing time and money into customer research can be a sobering and humbling experience, resolving lingering business questions and improving your understanding of your customer base can improve your bottom line. Remember to listen with an open mind, don't get defensive, and be committed to making the necessary changes if they make good business sense.

## Are You Thinking Out-of-the-Box?

How innovative is your store at selling beer? We would like to know. If you have promotions that go beyond refilling the cold box, we would like to hear from you and share your "out-of-the-box" thinking with our fellow *Beverage Network* readers.

E-mail me at [mkuderka@mcBasset.com](mailto:mkuderka@mcBasset.com) with your successful ideas for selling beer, along with your contact information. If we write about your program in our column we will send you a free copy of The 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition of *The Essential Reference of Domestic Brewers and Their Bottled Brands*.