



THE SMOKING SECTION

Steven Brown, Inn-Formation, offers advice on catering for your smoking clientele
(reviewed May 2012)

Steven Brown answers more questions from readers, including ‘how can I take advantage of the smoking ban?’ and ‘how should I train my food and beverage staff?’

Morgan Mead, Wiltshire: Even though the smoking ban is just a few days old I am already experiencing a down turn in business in the bar and restaurant. Do you have any suggestions to get around this?

Steven Brown: At last the long awaited ban has hit us!

It will come as no surprise that your trade has been affected. Recent history tells us that the licensed trade in general has suffered an average of 14 per cent in loss of trade.

However, this loss of trade has affected one area in the main – beer and lager sales. All other areas of wet sales have shown increases ranging from minimal (spirits) to substantial (wines and minerals). I am surprised to hear that your restaurant sales have been similarly affected as reports from the trade highlight a major growth opportunity for outlets to increase their food sales to make up for the wet sales losses.

Here are a list of comments and suggestions from around the trade of how the industry has responded. Please note that not all of these comments appertain to golf clubs! Your responsibility is to consider them all and possibly apply them to your own business.

1. Have you communicated the change in law to all members and visitors clearly and precisely?
2. Have you offered an alternative area to facilitate smoking? Are you providing help to give up or are you now selling snuff (don't laugh; sales are rising).
3. Does this area provide cover as legislated for under the act, for example 50 per cent open, and additionally, other comforts, for example, lighting, warmth by means of heating, seating, a waterproof television and table service. ‘More expense,’ I hear you cry but you must weigh up the pros and cons. How many regular members, visitors or societies will you alienate if you don't respond to their wishes! Eighty six per cent of adults believe the smoking ban is a good move and fifty six per cent will be more encouraged to visit licensed trade outlets more often.

4. Ensure that your cleaning personnel extend their service to the outside areas so as to maintain the same levels of cleanliness.
5. Make sure that you have the correct planning consents before proceeding and ask an environmental health officer if he or she has any guidance to offer. Permissions can take up to 12 weeks.
6. A short term response could naturally be the provision of the larger, retractable umbrellas until permissions are obtained or funds made available.
7. Seek greener patio heaters to counter backlash from the environmental camp. Gas heaters will emit more CO₂ than radiant heaters once the ban is enforced. Viable alternatives being used are wood-burning chimeneas, braziers or (more usually) electric heaters or radiant that come on only when movement affects them and that give more focussed heat with less CO₂ emissions.
8. There is no doubt in my mind that where your club rules allow, a continued growth in food sales will occur. Perhaps now is the time to consider re-allocating drinking areas to dining areas redesigning the menu and re-assessing the times that food is made available to your members. Even sales of tea and coffee will be affected so make the offering more exciting.
9. The lowest trade estimates are that an extra 1.8 million people will visit licensed premises directly because of the ban! How will you attract them to visit you?
10. Seventy two per cent of customers surveyed said that licensed trade establishments would provide a more pleasant place to visit and even 55 per cent of smokers agreed.
11. Here is what's most important to your smokers in rank order:
 - i. Heat and shelter
 - ii. Close to the main building
 - iii. Cleanliness
 - iv. Somewhere to rest my drink
 - v. Somewhere to sit down
 - vi. Safe (CCTV)
 - vii. Music
12. Additional comments and concerns from smokers: "To feel welcome as a smoker"; "Not to be treated as second class citizens!"; "Waiter service to replenish our drinks".

This may seem like a mountain to climb but I for one don't see it as an insurmountable one. Yes, it will have an affect but if recent history in Ireland, Scotland and Wales is anything to go by this set back can be turned around by:

- a) Providing your smokers with first-class facilities; and
- b) Diversifying into other areas of trading.

The first is not really an option. You have to provide your members with this facility. The latter needs great care but undoubtedly offers you potential growth opportunities.

Perhaps you should take a watching brief for the next three months and then make a decision based on commercial grounds and the needs of your client base. One thing is for certain: this issue will not just disappear in a puff of smoke.

Peter Burkill, Wales: You have often written about the need to train and develop front line staff. We are seriously considering setting up an internal training programme. What subject do you think we should cover and how will they best be delivered?

SB: Can I believe my eyes? A convert to the idea that staff are worth investing in! Bless you! I have always been an advocate that the success of any retail business lies in the hands of the people your customers encounter most – your front line staff.

Many of you reading this response will acknowledge that our industry should invest more on the development of its key personnel. That said, many employers will simply employ the cheapest pair of hands available and will suffer the consequences of that action accordingly!

I believe that the training of staff, whilst having a financial impact in the short term, can have a dramatic impact on the long term profitability of your food and beverage outlet.

So what must be taught and what might be taught.

Training musts:

- ⌘ Legislation (licensing law, health and safety, first aid and so on)
- ⌘ Customer service/care
- ⌘ Dealing with customer concerns
- ⌘ Simple selling skills
- ⌘ Product merchandising
- ⌘ Product knowledge (particular in wines and foods)
- ⌘ Product dispense
- ⌘ Customer communications

- ⌘ Standards maintenance
- ⌘ Operational procedures (for example, till technology, cellar work, in-house procedures and regulations)
- ⌘ Waste reduction methods
- ⌘ Blue sky thinking (ideas generation and recommendations of how your service can be improved).

Training might:

- ⌘ Chalkboarding
- ⌘ Financial understanding (implications of stock results)
- ⌘ Conflict management
- ⌘ Merchandising back bar displays
- ⌘ Wine appreciation.

You can add to this any particular units you deem appropriate, for example, IT. Some of these programmes can be delivered in short, sharp sessions perhaps in an hour or less. Others need a programme of activities that may run over a number of weeks.

The provision of training needs to be given out at times that suit your employees, both full and part time, and this in itself can cause problems. Perhaps the best bet is to rota training into the normal working day by adding 30 minute sessions to the start of the working day, or the end of it, whichever suits.

The best way to communicate the information you need to be remembered is by means of a mixture of visual, verbal and practical demonstrations.

Make your session fun-filled with mini tests and team activities. Offer prizes for right answers and assistance for the wrong ones. Pair less experienced staff members up with buddies to help develop them with on the job experience.

Consider rewards for increased efficiency and reduced waste.

You must comply with due diligence by keeping and maintaining training records. Investigate if any local authority funding is available to assist you with the programme but don't be put off if it isn't. Remember that we at INN-FORMATION provide courses for staff on all of the subjects mentioned.

I fully appreciate that our staff are transient by their very nature (we don't keep them for long due in the main to the seasonality of our trading patterns) but that is not an excuse not to provide your front line staff with every help and assistance to perform the role to the best of their abilities and the best of your expectations.

Remember – If you think training costs money – what does ignorance cost?

Steven can be contact on:

07785 276320 or 01604 843163

E-mail: info@inn-formation.co.uk

[This document is prepared for guidance and is accurate at the date of publication only. We will not accept any liability (in negligence or otherwise) arising from any member or third party acting, or refraining from acting, on the information contained in this document.]