

marketing matters



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Tasting Room Strategies For Small Wineries

Whether a tasting room is set among lush vineyards or in a downtown storefront, attracting visitors is a priority for every winery. For smaller wineries that fly below the tourist radar and have limited advertising budgets, it's even more important. Through a variety of techniques—from word-of-mouth marketing to selecting the right merchandise—lesser-known wineries can effectively attract and retain a strong visitor base.

Build Community Support

Word-of-mouth advertising is critical for smaller wineries, not only within the wine community, but among cus-

tomers and visitors. At Bennett Lane Winery in Calistoga, Calif., hospitality and marketing department representative Stefanie Longton reaches out to the larger community in the upper Napa Valley. "We talk to people at local B&Bs and inns and other wineries in town," Longton says. "We have our own little network up in Calistoga. Everyone is really supportive of one another. Our goal is that once the visitors come to town, they visit everyone."

Castle Vineyards in Sonoma also lets local companies know that it's ready for visitors. Tasting room manager Toni Anderson, who joined the winery in March 2006, came to the job with plenty of ideas on how to maintain and increase visitor numbers. "We work with local car and limousine companies, B&Bs, we advertise—all of it. We've got a 2 for 1 coupon, where customers can buy one tasting and get one free. It's a way to get people in," she says.

Navarro Vineyards, in Mendocino County, has established itself as a popular winery destination for visitors to the Anderson Valley, despite the fact that the winery's only advertising is a sign that has been in place since 1980.

According to tasting room manager Pat Daniels, Navarro relies on local associations and community support to promote its tasting room. "We're

part of the Mendocino Winegrowers Association and the Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association," she says. Daniels notes that word-of-mouth recommendations have been crucial to Navarro's success. "We hand out information on local hotels and restaurants, and they send people our way. We have Mendocino restaurants and inland restaurants sending people. They pour our wines and recommend us," she notes.

With no advertising budget, Preston

HIGHLIGHTS

- For smaller wineries that fly below the tourist radar, building and maintaining a steady stream of tasting room visitors can be particularly challenging.
- Word-of-mouth advertising and community support are critical for smaller wineries. Let local hotels, restaurants and winery associations know you're there, and encourage them to send visitors your way.
- Set your winery apart and establish a unique draw to boost visitor numbers. This can mean promoting a unique product, a friendly staff or a welcoming atmosphere.
- Put some thought into choosing retail items for your tasting room. While most wineries sell logo T-shirts and hats, locally made food items often are the best sellers.



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The smiling faces of the tasting room staff greet 25,000-30,000 visitors each year at Oregon's Argyle Winery.

to your cellar door. At Bennett Lane, Longton's focus is on creating a reputation for friendliness. The tasting room has been open since 2003, and Longton feels that more customers will visit Bennett Lane if they know they will be treated well. "We pride ourselves on being the friendliest winery in the valley, so that people will know they have to stop here," Longton says. "We are a little off the beaten track, and sometimes people don't venture north of Calistoga."

Hospitality and atmosphere can also be compelling draws. Eric Ross Winery, in Sonoma's Glen Ellen, chose to differentiate itself from other wineries by departing from the

Vineyards in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley also relies on recommendations from customers and local businesses. "Most of our business comes through word-of-mouth, and we have a lot of repeat customers," says co-tasting room manager and sales director Kenny Blair. "Certainly, having our wines served at local restaurants helps us," he says. "We get a lot of visitors through other wineries, and we also refer people to other wineries."

Establish A Unique Draw

Setting your winery apart and establishing a unique draw can also be successful in boosting visitor numbers.

"One advantage we have is that we focus on sparkling wine," says Valerie Cutz, tasting room manager for Argyle Winery, in Oregon's Willamette Valley. "The product alone sets us apart." Argyle attracts between 25,000 and 30,000 visitors to its tasting room each year.

If product differentiation isn't an option, providing exceptional customer service can help bring visitors



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traditional tasting bar format. In March 2006, the 2,500-case winery moved from a space inside a gourmet market at the Jack London Village to a new tasting room across the street. Dennis and Denise Mitchell, who manage the tasting room, say they are pleased with the outcome, which creates a living room atmosphere for visitors.

“We have found it has a completely different feel from the old one,” Denise Mitchell says. “We’ve made it into a living room with a fireplace, a couch, and a chair. (Customers) sit down on the couch and we bring the wine to them. It seems to be going well.” An outdoor patio provides a picnic area for visitors.

Create An Inviting Atmosphere

For Iris Rideau of Rideau Vineyards in Solvang, Calif., creating a welcoming atmosphere means offering food, wine, relaxation and “a lot for (visitors) to see and do.” Rideau emphasizes her Southern hospitality, handing out Mardi Gras beads from her native city of New Orleans. “We always have food from the kitchen, with nice French bread and music that plays in the house and in the yard,” Rideau says. An acre of lawn provides an opportunity for visitors to picnic, and box lunches are available for purchase from the winery.

Tasting fees are another way to attract more serious visitors.

In an effort to avoid tour-bus crowds, many small wineries choose to limit the number of guests who may visit the tasting room at any given time. Preston, for example, discourages groups larger than eight, in order to maintain an intimate tasting and

learning environment. “We don’t like the feeling of having large groups that leads to a party-type atmosphere,” Blair says. Preston’s picnic area encourages visitors to relax and enjoy the rural location.

Rideau requires reservations for tastings and for use of the picnic grounds for groups of 10 or more, in order to limit the number of groups coming through.

Tasting fees are another way to attract more serious visitors. “We used to do complementary tastings, but we would be hit on the way out and you can get some pretty happy people at that point,” Argyle’s Cutz says. “To diffuse some of that we had to start charging.” Argyle offers two flights—an all-sparkling flight for \$5, and a flight of variety wines for \$7. Customers can also choose to pay \$1.50 per taste. The tasting fee is refunded with a six-bottle purchase.

Creating a memorable experience for visitors is also an effective way to ensure repeat business. Often, this includes educational elements and special tours.

Although Castle’s tasting room is located miles from

any vineyards, Anderson plans to arrange custom tours for guests. Educating the visitor is crucial to Anderson's strategy. "We will also be bringing in educational tools to the tasting room, including tasting seminars," she says.

Tours are also an important part of Bennett Lane's strategy. "They're technically by appointment only, but we offer anyone who walks in the door a tour of the winery," Longton says. "We work to create a very welcoming and very intimate experience."

Magnetic Retail Items

When it comes to choosing merchandise for a tasting room, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. While most wineries sell an assortment of logo T-shirts and hats, often food items are the best sellers. In addition to wine, Preston Vineyards has created a unique merchandise profile by offering fresh food items and a selection of books. Preston sells

house-baked bread, house-made olives and olive oil and locally produced cheese, as well as books, T-shirts, and hats. Klein notes that while T-shirt sales are just "OK," the food merchandise sells "very well."

Argyle's tasting room sells items such as sweatshirts and wine stoppers, but as Cutz says, "Most of the retail is concentrated on the wine."

Rideau offers options for the nonwine drinkers who visit her tasting room. "We carry what I call 'bling-bling' gift items that ladies can pick up if they're not interested in the wine," Rideau says. However, Rideau relies on tasting room sales to sell her entire production. "I only sell through the tasting room and through my wine club. One hundred percent of our sales are retail," she says.

Navarro has a similar strategy. While it sells merchandise such as T-shirts, hats and food items such as bread, cheese and salami, the main focus is wine. "A major portion of what we sell is out of our tasting room,"

Daniels says. The wine club, called the "Pre-Release Program," which sells wines to members before they are released to the general public, provides the bulk of sales. It's a similar situation at Eric Ross: shirts, hats and aprons are available for purchase, but Mitchell notes that the nonwine merchandise "doesn't sell tremendously well." She also notes that the wine club contributes a big part of wine sales.

Building and maintaining a steady visitor level doesn't require an upscale, trendy tasting room, a huge advertising budget or a tasting line-up of 20 different wines. By capitalizing on the individual strengths of your winery—whether it's a product, location or simply a friendly attitude—expanding your visitor base is easier than you think. ■

(Laura Holmes Haddad is a cookbook writer and editor whose freelance work is focused on food, wine and spirits. Contact her through edit@winesandvines.com.)

Napa Growers Supported Boycott

Many grapegrowers in Napa Valley supported the Day Without an Immigrant work/purchase boycott May 1, despite timing made more inconvenient by a delayed growing season. Many vineyard managers allowed crews to take the day off, understanding that proposed changes to U.S. immigration laws would have serious consequences on farm workers and farmers alike.

Several vineyard management companies owned by immigrants shut down for the boycott, including Ayala Farming Company, which provided all 40 of its workers with white shirts to wear to the protest march, and Campos Vineyard Management, whose owner Leonel Campos marched with his employees. "We closed down and didn't make any money...but this was more important," Campos told the *Napa Valley Register*. "In the future, we will all gain more because of this."

Other growers and vineyard managers permitted staff to alter their hours in order to participate in marches around Northern California.

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