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EDUCATION & ADVOCACY REPORT
A DRINKS BRAND'S HIDDEN WEAPON

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HOW A STRONG BRAND EDUCATION STRATEGY CAN BUILD ADVOCACY IN THE ON TRADE

How Important is Brand Education?

While not the most visible or measurable element of strategy in the drinks sector, brand education plays an essential role in driving advocacy among trade and consumers – which in turn increases sales. It is vital for brands of any size, but there can be a lot of uncertainty around which strategies are the most effective. A good education programme can generate buzz for your brand, nurture genuine loyalty and help develop your category, so it's important to get it right.

Should brands focus on the On Trade or Consumers as the audience?

It is no secret that the trade loves trade secrets – from facts about production techniques to understanding flavour profiles – and are always keen to share their knowledge over the bar, often achieving consumer education in the process.

So it's no surprise that education of the On Trade has traditionally been the most essential form of brand education and a focus of major investment. By providing training and knowledge, brands can nurture the loyalty and expertise of bartenders who go on to become advocates.

In recent years though, brand education has also increasingly targeted consumers directly – with big immersive events, activations in the On Trade, brand partnerships and savvy brands making use of social media and the growth of the 'home bartender' to enhance expertise and the home drinking experience.

It is clear that both trade and consumer education are essential. But the events of 2020 have seen a dramatic change of landscape within the drinks industry, forcing a heavy shift

to consumer education. As a result, we feel the 'rise of the home premise' and education in the Off Trade deserves to be tackled in a report of its own. (So stay tuned!)

Within this report about the On Trade, we will examine the accepted core mechanics of brand education, execution best practice, common pitfalls and what works for different brands.

Whether directed towards the On Trade or consumers, a well-considered education strategy should come from a singular creative concept, delivering clear and powerful brand messages (stick to three or four nuggets of information), and be flexible and scalable enough to be executed in multiple formats depending on the audience.

It is also key that education is delivered as an experience, not a lecture. Getting people immersed in the brand, creating discoverable moments and encouraging genuine knowledge of what makes a brand special is crucial to success.

EDUCATION IN THE **ON TRADE**

To define what makes an effective education strategy, we will examine a set brand case studies and the relative strengths of each route.

We have also reached out to key figures within the On Trade to provide original insights into which types of brand education build true advocacy and which have room for improvement.



How can brands educate and engage the On Trade?

The key tactics used by brands to educate the trade generally fall into three categories:

Trade Training

In-venue sessions by Brand Ambassadors or larger immersion events open to bartenders.

Brand Trips

Distillery visits and days out for select groups.

Cocktail Competitions

From low key local challenges to high profile global events.



TRADE TRAINING - THE DRINKS INDUSTRY'S BREAD AND BUTTER

Brand trainings are a simple day-to-day facet of brand education that can easily be under-appreciated. Education in-venue or with larger groups of bartenders, where Brand Ambassadors or sales reps exchange knowledge and skills, helps to drive the relationship between brand and bar.



What do the experts say?

From speaking to people in the bar industry, one thing becomes clear: the need to make sure your brand training is engaging.

It's easy to get caught up in wanting to deliver the rich detail of your brand, but making the session feel like a lecture is a killer.

Remember that the bartenders you're talking to will likely have had many training sessions in their time, and often enough will have come off a late shift the night before. So find ways to get them involved, teach them something new and make it a conversation. Following up is a step so easily forgotten, but one that makes a huge difference in building advocacy.

Brands that see the most success with brand training tie their story in with teaching skills that will help bartenders progress in their career – be that bar prowess (shaking technique, ice carving, garnish classes etc) or broader job skills (photography, social media training or entrepreneurship).

“If you're going to do a training, make it interactive, make it a conversation. Don't make it feel like you're in a classroom”

Natasha Iny, Brand Ambassador for Casamigos

“Following up is key. Don't just speak to a bar, then never go back.”

Zahra Bates, Global Education Manager
at Beam Suntory

“The best cases are where the skills you can pass on are something that is intimately tied to your brand”

James Bowker, UK Brand Ambassador
for House of Suntory

Small scale example – St Germain Skills Classes

Investing relatively modestly, one brand whose training strategy has achieved a memorable mix of passing on skills tied directly to its brand story is St. Germain.

Its series of trade training events capitalised on its unique selling point of using fresh elderflower in the production of its liqueur. Classes leaned in to this floral theme, with bartenders learning how to use fresh flowers to garnish cocktails at training events hosted at locations such as Dalloway Terrace (renowned for its year-round 'secret garden' setting).



Big scale example – The House of Suntory Dojo

On a much larger scale, The House of Suntory offered much more immersive training. The Dojo initiative focused on its core range of products, using The House of Suntory's heritage to bring education on world-renowned Japanese bartending techniques to the UK. The brand also adopted a tiered approach, targeting different levels of bartender and tailoring the engagement and education that went into their training – from hosted training experiences in each key city, led by James Bowker, the UK Brand Ambassador, to a six-month long intensive training programme for just 20 elite bartenders.



Image Credits: Anthony Tahlier, punchdrink.com; globalbartending.com

BRAND TRIPS - THE MOST VERSATILE TOOL

Often used as a supplementary component to trade training or cocktail competitions, brand trips are an extremely beneficial tool for both brands and bartenders.



What do the experts say?

Distillery visits, foraging trips or even just guided tours of the city where a brand comes from can be a powerful means of communicating brand truths and creating an experience that will stick with the invited bartenders.

Brand trips are not without risk, however. It can be tempting to make the experience all about the brand and nothing about learning new information or techniques that will ultimately benefit the bartenders.

A delicate balance has to be struck between creating a fun experience, communicating the story of the brand and delivering lasting value that the bartenders can take with them. If you can achieve that, brand trips become one of the most powerful tools to generate advocates.

“Giving an authentic experience is the number one way to get people to understand what your brand is at its core”

James Bowker, UK Brand Ambassador
for House of Suntory

“You don’t just want to feel like you’ve just been sold something. You want to feel included in an experience.”

Ross Bryant – Brand Ambassador
for No.3 Gin

Small scale example – Reyka Foraging

As an Icelandic product, communicating the spirit and identity behind a brand like Reyka to UK bartenders could be a challenge.

To bring the experience home, the brand organised a series of foraging trips for bartenders, taking them out of London to harsh, rugged landscapes to hunt for cocktail ingredients.

This embodied Reyka's positioning of 'inventive spirit', taught some unique and valuable skills, and entertained the bartenders with pop-up woodland bars and meals to complete the experience.



Big scale example – Grand Marnier Grand Alchemy

Grand Marnier masterfully balanced the essential elements of an immersive brand experience in their Grand Alchemy training programme.

The experience offered select bartenders the opportunity to learn advanced cocktail techniques in London by partnering with the first creative hub for the drinks and flavour industry, Crucible. This allowed access to advanced equipment like centrifuges, rotavaps and homogenisers.

The training tied into the level of alchemy that exists within Grand Marnier, and was capped off with a trip to Cognac to see the distillery and the work that goes into creating the brand.



Image Credits: Nick Caro, wearewonderworks.com; timeout.fr

COCKTAIL COMPETITIONS - ARE THEY WORTH THE INVESTMENT?

Cocktail competitions are one of the most high-profile education tools in the drinks business – and one of the most divisive. They can be an unrivalled source of PR brand awareness, genuine advocacy and desirability, but they can also be extremely costly and risk being inefficient if not properly executed. So are they worth it?

What do the experts say?

Cocktail competitions have become an increasingly desirable tactic in recent years, bringing bartenders together for the chance to win prizes and learn in the process. But with this popularity has come the issue of market saturation: bartenders are constantly bombarded with invitations, and so cocktail competitions must promise more and more.

Bigger prizes are often the solution offered by brands – but are not always the most attractive to bartenders if the competition is fierce and the experience doesn't appear worthwhile.

By talking with members of the On Trade, we have identified four key elements to make competitions more effective:



1. Engage more with the bartenders and be upfront – competitions are a fantastic learning opportunity, but bartenders can feel negatively towards the brand if they are eliminated from the competition without feedback on how to improve, or if the competition claims to be open to all but more support is given to higher end bartenders from big cities.

2. Offer greater PR exposure – competitions offer amazing opportunities to raise participants' profiles, so maximise the potential by publishing more pieces about the competitors in trade publications and social media.

3. Enhance networking by bringing along star bartenders – forming connections is a key element for bartenders, and getting to meet their heroes will drive engagement.

4. Make the experience itself enjoyable – for bartenders, competitions can sometimes end up being a lot of standing around waiting to present, so make sure there are spaces where participants can relax, talk and enjoy some food.

“I think competitions are super-effective because they get people to do their own research on the brand beyond the training and become an advocate for the brand”

Natasha Iny, Brand Ambassador for Casamigos

“The most interesting experiences within competitions are the ones where you get to meet your idols”

Andrei Marcu, Bar Manager at Coupette London

“The best competitions I've been involved in were ones where I wanted to take part regardless of whether I won”

James Bowker, UK Brand Ambassador for House of Suntory

Small scale example – Italicus “Art of Italicus”

The Art of Italicus competition demonstrates beautifully how a smaller brand can generate excitement and engagement in the On Trade without the resources available to major competition organisers.

The core theme of celebrating art ties integrally to the brand’s identity, getting bartenders to create cocktails based on the art that inspires them to present before a panel of star bartender judges.

The brand extensively promotes all competition finalists through social media and PR, and the prize for winning is an internship placement with one of the world’s top 50 bars where the victor can promote their winning cocktail and hone their skills.



Big scale example – Diageo World Class

World Class is the largest and most globally-renowned cocktail competition. It celebrates and inspires the highest level of cocktail creation.

The competition demands excellence, testing every element of bartending including technical ability, speed, creativity and presentation skills. Diageo also offers training to bartenders to help them develop their talents, and exposure for all finalists with profile pieces and social media coverage.

The competition brings together the world’s best bartenders, and features celebrity guest judges to raise the profile of the event even more.

The grand prize is also unparalleled, worth the equivalent of more than EUR 15,000 in 2018. The winner travels the world representing World Class and visiting Diageo’s key distilleries for a one-on-one masterclass education in spirit creation.

CONCLUSIONS

By delving into the world of brand education and interviewing some of the top figures within the drinks industry, we have been left in no doubt that a good On Trade education strategy is vital for brands of all sizes.

No matter what stage your brand is at, education can help to raise the profile of your brand and build momentum.

It has also become clear that successful education is not as simple as more investment equalling more return. Whether you're contemplating a global cocktail competition like World Class, or setting up a series of in-venue training sessions, brands have first to understand their own value clearly, and then in turn identify what unique value that provides.

How do I create a successful education strategy?

We have identified three key considerations that should be evaluated before building your programme:

1.

Map your customer's needstate

It is essential to give bartenders the training they need and tools that will help them progress in their career and add value to their venue.

The surest way to gain an advocate is to make them feel like you have genuinely helped them, so don't just use one approach for every bartender. Understand where they are coming from and what information will be useful.

2.

Stand out from the crowd

While passing on skills is essential, there's a lot of competition out there, so make sure you tie your education to the unique story of your brand.

3.

Make it a conversation

Once you understand your audience's needs and have defined the unique value you can provide, the most important final step is to truly engage with the trade. Bartenders will always know when a brand's only goal is to make the sale and leave, so be the brand that goes above and beyond.

So what is the future of Brand Education in the wake of Covid-19?

The drinks industry has seen a critical shift this year with lockdown and the temporary (or unfortunately, in many cases, permanent) closure of venues around the world. Brands have had to shift their focus more fully direct to consumer education and sales.

We will examine how brands have managed to pivot their attention on to consumer outreach and what this will mean longer term for brand education in our upcoming report, **The Rise of the Home Premise**.

But we have faith that, post Covid-19, we will see the return of the drinks industry we know and love – perhaps with enhanced levels of creativity, digital reliance and adaptability than before.

We hope this report has been as interesting for you to read as it was for us to research.

Watch out for our thoughts on consumer education, coming soon.



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