

## direct to consumer

# Rapport is the Core

The economy is down, but you don't have to be. Build relationships with tasting room customers, and you'll sell more wine.

*Pamela Personette*

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IT TAKES MORE THAN GOOD wine to survive these days. Tasting room staff and managers who take the time to build rapport with their customers are likely to sell more wine—and I'll show you how and why rapport is the core of relationship building.

In this article, I will illustrate how important it is to make a connection with tasting room customers and how that enables you to sell more wine. I'll examine the tasting room from the customer's point of view and look at what results in a sale, including what affects a consumer's decision to purchase wine. During these tough economic times, customers are more likely to buy wine from those who have taken time to build a personal link with them, ask them questions and guide them to make wise choices.

Research shows that happy customers are loyal customers. Establishing rapport and building trust greatly influence the buying patterns of tasting room customers. The **Cornell Hospitality Report** published in April 2009 by the university's **Judi Bronwell**, Ph.D., stated: "Interpersonal trust continues to emerge as a key to customer loyalty...employees who seek to understand the customer's perspective build lasting relationships."

As a trained Montessori teacher, I know that establishing trusting relationships and creating a welcoming environment benefit children. A Montessori classroom is a special place where children feel secure and respected. Lessons in grace and cour-



Lesli John of VJB Vineyards, Kenwood, California, knows the importance of making a connection with tasting room customers. She makes eye contact and smiles, a great start to making her customers feel welcomed and comfortable.

PAMELA PERSONETTE

tesy are the first ones learned and remain an integral part of daily interactions throughout the child's school experience (and life). As each child enters a Montessori classroom, the teacher makes eye contact, greets him, uses his name, shakes his hand and welcomes him. She makes the transition into the classroom easy and non-intimidating.

Everyone wants to feel important. It's a basic human need. Tasting room customers are no exception. Establish a relationship based on trust and respect. Make the transition into your tasting



room easy. Greet each person as they enter the room. Make eye contact. Even when you're swamped, it takes two seconds to smile, make eye contact and put up your index finger to symbolize, "Just a minute." Your customers will sense they're in a place that cares about them.

#### BUILDING RAPPORT WORKS

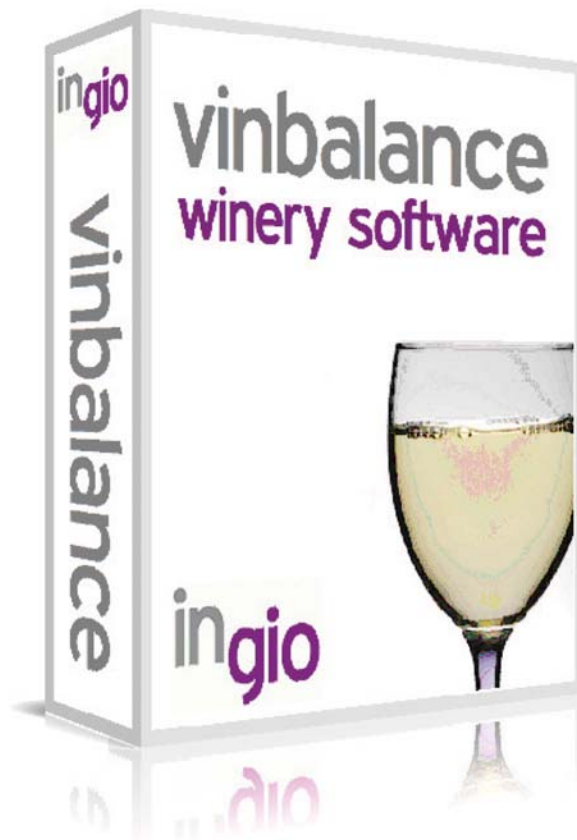
While working with customers one busy summer afternoon, a member of the **Bartholomew Park Winery**, Sonoma, California tasting room staff noticed a couple had entered the tasting room. He immediately made eye contact, politely excused himself, came from behind the counter, quickly introduced himself and welcomed them to the winery. He explained that the counter was busy but suggested they visit the winery's museum in the next room—and assured them by the time they finished enjoying the museum, there would be room at the counter. When they returned, they enjoyed a wonderful tasting experience and bought some wine. When it was time to leave, the staff member thanked the couple for their patience. They remarked, "Thank you!"

They explained what had happened to them earlier that day. They had been to two other wineries. As they entered the first tasting room, they were ignored. No one made eye contact. They looked around and left. They went to the winery down the road. The same thing happened. No one acknowledged them. They left. They came to Bartholomew Park Winery and were immediately greeted. They felt welcome. They had a wonderful experience. They bought over \$600 worth of wine plus merchandise! Was that money burning a hole in their pockets at the first two wineries? Yes. Could they have spent their money at those wineries? Right again.

#### REMEMBER THIS

Build rapport by being sincere, friendly and professional. Remember a repeat customer's name. If you can't remember his name, remember something about him (where he lives or

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## Rapport is the Core

where he spent his last vacation, his love of Pinot Noir). **Lesli John**, director of sales and marketing at **VJB Vineyards & Cellars** in Kenwood, California, knows the importance of creating a personal as well as business relationship with her customers. “The majority of wineries that want to increase their direct to consumer sales have to value the personal relationship just as much as the business connection,” said John. “I hold **Melissa Ciliberti**’s wine shipments hostage until I get a picture of her adorable son, **Christian**. There are many choices out there, and without exceptional service, value and both a personal and business connection, people will make their decisions about which wine club to cancel.”

Customers like to feel they’re part of the winery family. They’re thrilled when they get to peek behind the curtain. Get your customers involved in helping you come up with a name for your newest release. Let your customers vote on the new wine club logo. They’ll feel special and valued.

**Morgan Twain-Peterson**, wine-maker/proprietor of **Bedrock Wine Co.** in Sonoma, California, knows the value of getting customers involved. “Creating a label is a hard and scary process—particularly for something so personal and so public,” he said. “Via the winery blog I was able to solicit opinions from folks interested in the nascent winery. This allowed me to both get a general compass on how the label was progressing and also to give those potential future customers some intellectual mind-share in the wine. The result has been a beautiful label that bears the strong imprint of my wonderful label designer, **Kathryn Havens**, but also reflects a dialogue between me and my customers.”

### “BE” THE CUSTOMER

To create a memorable experience for each person who walks through the tasting room door, look at your tasting room from the customer’s perspective. You become accustomed to *your* view from *behind* the counter. Take a few minutes and step out from behind the counter.

Here’s an easy exercise. Pick a day to “be” the customer. Start when you get in your car to drive to work. As you’re

driving, pretend you’re a tourist who’s never been here before. What do you see on your drive to the winery? Share these observations with your tasting room guests. These are the same views they just enjoyed. You already have something in common, and you’ll immediately start to make a connection with them.

As you approach the winery, ask yourself: Is it easy to find the driveway? Is the parking area clearly marked for cars, buses and limos? Once you park the car, is it easy to find the tasting room entrance? Is it clean and inviting?

**K.R. Rombauer III, Rombauer Vineyards** in St. Helena, California knows the value of investing in the physical environment of his winery. He walks the grounds. Making sure the outside grounds are beautiful improves the experience for the visitor. “Little things make a big difference for our customer,” he said.

When he walks from the parking lot to the tasting room, he notices if everything is ship-shape. He refers to the experience of a customer at a restaurant. If weeds are sprouting on a restaurant’s lawn or if the rest room is not clean, it turns people off. Perhaps something as easy as a new faucet or sink or a coat of paint will make a difference. The same thing applies in the tasting room. “Invest in the physical environment so the customer will adopt your brand,” said Rombauer.

Continue the exercise throughout the day. Walk back into the parking lot and approach the tasting room door. When you walk through the tasting room door, are you bombarded by merchandise? Can you see a clear path to the tasting counter? Is there someone to greet you and put you (the customer) at ease? Now stand at the counter. What do you see? Is there a mural painted on the wall? Photos of the winery owners, the family, the winery dogs? Wine club information? Look for the negatives: stacks of papers, dirty bar towels, coffee cups or empty water bottles.

Use what is positive as a springboard to make a connection. Here’s an example. **Larson Family Winery** in Sonoma, California has a custom-painted mural behind the tasting counter, depicting the history of the winery and the current Larson family members. One summer, while working



LEE SWEENEY

The custom-painted mural behind the tasting counter at Larson Family Winery was used as a springboard to tell stories about the winery's family, making customers feel relaxed and at home.

behind the counter, I used the mural as a way to tell a story. I had been the teacher of the youngest family members. Customers always got a kick out of the involvement of the two preschoolers at the winery: winemakers of the future. My first-hand experience with the Larson boys also established an immediate connection, and cus-

tomers felt like I was part of the family. They, in turn, sensed the unpretentious, family atmosphere of the winery and became comfortable. Remember, the wine tasting experience is about more than the wine. It is also about the *stories*. There's nothing better than hearing the inside scoop—feeling like part of the family.

#### CREATE A PLEASING ENVIRONMENT

Whatever your winery's style (barn, chateau, art gallery, front porch), accommodate your customers so they feel relaxed and comfortable. **Ryan Hill**, proprietor of **Hill Family Estate** in Yountville, California, faced a challenge in terms of finding the best use of their

retail space and making it comfortable for visitors. Their tasting room is located in a large building that for many years had been an antique shop. Now the building is a combination tasting room/antique shop.

Hill hired **Georgia Buck** to head up their VIP Services, who was confused as to why the winery was using so little space for the wine. "Under Georgia's direction she has been able to orchestrate a system. Beforehand we were only using about one-fourth of the space for wine. So we removed a lot of the antiques. We've created tables to sit down, and we're now utilizing more space in the room," said Hill. "I'm happy to say since we've implemented the ideas she's come up with, we've become a lot more profitable." It took a new employee's perspective to help create a more pleasing setting and increase profits at the same time.

On the negative side, a messy tasting room puts off most customers. At another winery, a staff member noticed that a disheveled stack of wine club

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## Rapport is the Core

“When people go into a winery and say hello to somebody they know and have a relationship with, that’s worth millions. Every time they come to the Valley, they’re going to look to their wine buddy—someone they have a connection with.”

Tom Trzesniewski, Retail Manager, Chimney Rock

applications had become an eyesore. She organized the area, storing the applications in a beautiful wooden wine box. Problem solved. It’s hard to build rapport when a customer is pre-occupied with a messy counter. Take away the obstacles and you’ll be able to concentrate on what matters: connecting with your customer.

### ASK QUESTIONS AND LISTEN

Have you ever been bombarded by retail salespeople spraying perfume at you when you walk down a department store’s perfume aisle? “This is the per-

fume for you.” “Fresh gardenia scent.” “Your husband will find you irresistible.” “Your wife will love this.” They don’t know what you like. They haven’t asked you. You probably walk past these salespeople as quickly as possible or avoid the area completely.


Without realizing it, many tasting room staff members become the perfume salesperson. How does your customer feel when you tell a customer he’ll love the Merlot before you’ve had a chance to start a conversation, or when you start to explain what a Rhône varietal is, later learning the customer just

returned from a trip to that exact region? How does the customer feel when you start telling her the history of the winery before she gets a chance to tell you she visits the winery every year on her California wine-buying trip?

Ask questions and you’ll find out your customer’s needs. Let him know how the winery will meet those needs. People like to buy, but they don’t like the feeling they’re being sold. Lesli John of VJB Vineyards & Cellars knows the importance of listening to customers and taking action. “With technology giving us a million new ways to market,

we try to incorporate some of the new trends; but at the end of the day, the personal phone call or e-mail letting someone know that I remembered they love our Syrah, and I want to be sure they get some before it is gone goes farther than any sort of tech marketing solution,” said John. “It does take time, but the retention levels we have tell me and the owner it is worth it.”

Great tasting room salespeople have the ability to listen. Making sales is not about reciting facts and figures. It’s about taking an interest in the customer and having a conversation. This



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is how you build rapport. Once you get to know your customer, he'll have trust in you and know that you'll help him make wise choices.

Find out what the customer expects from his experience.

- Does he want to learn about wine-making?
- Is he interested in the winery's history?
- Would he like to see the bottling line? How about the vineyard?
- Does he need a special occasion wine or a souvenir?
- Is he adding to his collection?
- Do food and wine pairings interest him?
- Does he want to know where the locals eat or about local history?

Take a genuine interest and listen to the answers. When answering questions, the customer verbalizes his wants and needs. During the course of your conversation, it's easy to say, "By the way, you mentioned your wedding anniversary is approaching. Would you like to surprise your wife with a bottle of the Cabernet you just tasted and loved?" "You told me you're going to barbecue tonight. Our Zinfandel would pair beautifully with the ribs you're making. How about a bottle or two to enjoy with dinner?"

#### KEEP IN TOUCH

Good friends keep in touch. Whether by a phone call, a note or an email, good relationships need nurturing. Keep in touch with your customers. Send a hand-written thank you note when a customer places a large order. Send a birthday card. Send an email regarding the newest release. During the winter months, invite local customers to come in for a wine and cheese pairing.

The staff at **Chimney Rock**, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley, sends birthday emails to wine club members. Chimney Rock retail manager **Tom Trzesniewski** said, "When people go into a winery and say hello to somebody they know and have a relationship

with, that's worth millions. Every time they come to the Valley, they're going to look to their wine buddy—someone they have a connection with."

Wineries are using Facebook and Twitter to keep connected with customers. According to **Liz Lease**, manager of hospitality, **Sterling Vineyards**, Calistoga, California, "We're driving information that way. We're using new media like **Facebook** to reach out to Sterling's passionate consumers, and they in turn reach out to us. Working on a Saturday, I saw a group of customers enjoying themselves and taking pictures of their group and immediately posting them on Facebook. The pictures of our South View Terrace were going out to their friends."

Sterling Vineyards had a "Summer of '69" event to commemorate the winery's 40th anniversary. The information was posted on Facebook.

Hill of Hill Family Estate has a strong e-marketing campaign, including Facebook. "We have huge attendance based on Facebook awareness. The millennials and even the 40-year-olds are totally tuned into it. They grasp it. For millennials, it's a way of life, not just a tool," said Hill.

When customers put a face to a name, they understand that wineries are run by real people who are passionate about wine. When you personalize your interaction with your customers, they become part of the family.

#### THE RESULT OF CREATING RAPPORT

The economy is down, but you don't have to be. Take action. Go that extra mile. Make sure your relationships are solid. Take a day and "be" your customer. It has been my experience that when you build customer relationships based on trust, your customers will respond by buying your wine and coming back. They'll order your wine online and when they see it on a restaurant wine list. And they'll tell their friends about your wine, your winery and the wonderful experience they had with *you*. Rapport is the core! **wbm**

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