



Marketing Insights: A self-serving wine list

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In today's world, it's all about hybrid technologies – combining the best of all worlds so consumers and businesses benefit. The automatic wine dispenser illustrates one shining example of this type of union. It's debuting at retail stores and foodservice operations everywhere and surprise, surprise – this technology is proving to be quite a benefit to the bottom line.

These automatic wine stations operate via a fairly classic vending model with a twist. The stations use a debit /swipe card, which allows a customer to purchase wine samples to taste. The swipe card allows staff to ensure the customer is of age and in the proper state of sobriety to consume the wine.

Pours range from a taste (1 ounce or so) to a full glass. The card is inserted into the machine and the amount of the pour is selected. The glass is held under the spigot, the selection button is pressed and the wine pours into the glass.

The SAQ (Quebec Liquor Stores) utilizes automatic wine dispensers in its retail stores. In Ontario, a St. Catharines-area winery will be amongst the first to launch automatic wine dispensing in an Ontario retail venue.

The technology has proven very successful in foodservice situations as well. Ordering wine is for most folks a somewhat stressful situation. Unless someone is a certified "wine geek" and is familiar with all the latest vintages – they probably won't have tasted most of the premium wines on your wine list.

Once the bottle is opened, it would just about have to be smoking from the bottleneck for the customer to be comfortable returning it. What if the wine isn't corked or oxidized?

Your customer is no doubt wondering: "What if I just don't like it?" Chances are they'll default to a less expensive (less risky) bottle of wine and your restaurant has lost that opportunity to sell that premium product.

Nick Moezidis, managing director of Napatechnology, confirms that automatic wine dispensers benefit the bottom line. "Our data indicates that customers will spend

three times what they would have otherwise spent for wine if they've tasted it first."

These wine dispensers will keep a bottle of wine fresh from one to three months depending on the dispenser. The machines use argon or nitrogen to keep the wine fresh – as fresh as a cork. This allows restaurants a larger sampling window so it won't have to go down the drain in a day or two if there aren't enough samples dispensed.

The wine dispensers often reside behind the bar where patrons can offer their smart card to purchase a few smaller pours of various wines. This technology will also allow premium wines to be offered by the glass.

Let's face it – we'd all like to be able to tell our neighbours that we've tasted wine that costs hundreds of dollars for a bottle, but few of us can afford the whole bottle.

"A wine, such as Screaming Eagle, that sells for \$200 US can be purchased by the glass from the wine dispenser for \$30," confirms Moezidis. "The small indulgence is especially attractive to consumers in a tight economy."

These machines can also track customer preferences, providing solid data for further wine list development.

If interactive digital screens are part of the installation then it becomes a great training tool for staff able to use it to answer questions from customers regarding tasting notes or food pairings. No more running to the back of the restaurant to refer to the "big-arse binder" where tattered and outdated tasting notes are stuffed.

With the digital screen, the server can call up the information right in front of the customer and continue the conversation flow. The chance for pairing the customer with a more premium wine is greater.

The machines are easy to use and the company provides ample support and training. Bottles can be opened and staged ahead of time to easily transfer to the tasting station during peak dinner times.

The tasting program can be leveraged nicely as a loyalty program as well. It would be innovative to add a \$5 tasting smart card (adorned with your logo) with takeout orders of a certain dollar level.

Insert an invitation for them to come in and taste with their next meal. You've just given them a reason to choose you for their next dining experience and probably include a nice bottle of wine.

Technology has evolved to the point of being ... almost human. This twist of fate means we can shift from an "us and them mentality" and leverage vending options alongside our flesh and blood team.

Self-serving? Maybe.

Smart? Undoubtedly.