

Marketing The Boutique Winery: *10 tips you can't afford to ignore*

Christine Carroll

You've opened a winery. You've developed a sound business plan, put together a realistic budget and purchased quality equipment. But there's this one little problem: You're out of money.

So you hang out a shingle, throw a few ads in the local paper and hope the famous quote from "Field of Dreams" was more than wishful thinking: "If you build it they will come."

Don't count on it.

Getting people to visit your winery requires more than just luck—it takes strategic planning. Following are 10 marketing tips based on my family's experience at Crossing Vineyards and Winery in Washington Crossing, Pa.

Perhaps the most important lesson you can learn is this: When it comes to marketing, it's about what you *can't* afford, not what you *can*.

HIGHLIGHTS

- No boutique winery can prosper without a smart marketing plan.
- From the size of your tasting room to the look of your labels, don't think about what you can afford—think about what you *can't* afford to risk.
- Bring people to your tasting room with signage, and take advantage of free PR opportunities.
- Electronic communication will build your business. Keep your website updated and communicate with your customers via e-mail.

1. The Tasting Room: Size Matters

Make sure your retail area is large enough. When you're renovating, 600 square feet seems huge. Believe me, it's not. We allowed 850 square feet for our tasting room and soon realized we'd underestimated our needs by at least 50%. Customers were four deep around our tasting bar on our opening day. We knew we were in trouble.

We couldn't afford to turn potential customers away, so we compensated by reconfiguring the barrel room and using the extra space for events and for tasting on busy weekends. It's a

temporary fix. We'll have to add on to the building soon.

Our advice: Don't skimp on the tasting room. Do it once. Do it right. You'll save money in the long run.

2. Look Serious, Be Serious— Be Open

We researched the subject of business hours extensively before deciding to be open daily, year-round. Many Pennsylvania wineries are weekend businesses, and in that first year, we often doubted our decision to buck the conventional wisdom.

Now, after a brisk Tuesday or



Devote as much space as you can to your winery tasting room; owners at Crossing Vineyards wished they'd done so, when customers were four deep at the bar on opening day.

Wednesday, we'll say: "What if we'd decided to close mid-week? Where would these customers have gone? When and how would we have made up the revenue?"

Close one or two days if you must, but be there at least five days a week. And don't take Mondays off. Think "national holiday" and "long weekend." Even in winter, Mondays can be busy days.

3. First Impressions Count

It's important to have a firm understanding of your brand when designing the tasting room. Like it or not, customers will have a reaction when they come through your doors. And there's no second chance to make a first impression.

We hired a professional decorator to help us with lighting, finishes and furnishings. We wanted to project quality, and knew a low-budget look would deliver a confusing message.

Our designer charged us \$75 per hour, but offered discounts ranging from 10-40% on paint, furniture and accessories. She also helped us avoid costly mistakes, which more than justified her fees.

When it comes to the tasting room,

think about what you *can't* afford, not what you *can*.

4. Charge A Tasting Fee

Initially, Crossing Vineyards offered complimentary tasting. We felt we had no choice. None of the other local wineries charged for samples.

Through the first year, we tracked both sales and the amount of tasting wine used. We also observed buying behavior. How many customers tasted all our wines and walked away empty-handed? Too many, we decided.

At the beginning of year two, we introduced a new tasting policy. Customers paid \$5 to sample up to eight wines. If they bought a case, they got a 10% discount, plus a credit for their \$5 tasting fee.

Six months later, we noted the following:

- A 35% increase in sales
- A 40% reduction in tasting wine
- Less than a 1% walk-out rate because of the tasting charge

You can't afford to clog your bar with wanna-buys. Charge for tasting.

5. Image: Don't Cut Corners On Labels

Labels make an important statement. Resist the temptation to design your own. Many wineries do it themselves, and their packaging looks it.

We hired a full-service advertising agency to help develop a Crossing Vineyards image that said "quality." Their designers offered dozens of options, and worked with us until we found one we could live with and love.

Our labels have won numerous awards. More importantly, they convey the right message about our brand.

The ad agency's services cost more than \$7,000, but we've never regretted the time or money spent.

6. Apply For Public Signage Programs

The good news: Crossing Vineyards is tucked away on a winding, country road.

The bad news: Crossing Vineyards is tucked away on a winding, country road.

To make our business easier to find, we applied for "Tourist Oriented Directional Signs." TODS are found on noninterstate highways and provide motorists with the names of tourist attractions, mileage to the establishments and directional arrows. All tourist-related businesses are eligible for TODS.

Obtaining the TODS took almost two years and cost \$10,000. They resulted, however, in an immediate, dramatic expansion of our business.

Next, we looked into the "attraction" signs that advertise gas, food, camping, lodging and tourist attractions on interstate highways. Businesses can publicize their companies' names and/or logos, and in some cases, obtain additional directional markers on exit ramps and along feeder routes.

The installation of attraction signs set Crossing Vineyards back another \$10,000 but increased business volume more than any other method of promotion we tried.

For information on TODs and attraction sign programs, contact your state



Investing in a professional designer will provide the image your wines deserve, and can save you money on materials, and mistakes.

department of transportation. (And see the *New York Wine Trails* article on page 49 for another endorsement of this marketing approach.)

7. Advertise Consistently

Develop an annual advertising budget and stick to it. When you're out of money, you're out. Limits will help you to say "no" to persistent sales people.

Re-evaluate the plan each year. Are current publications delivering the results you expected? Do you want to expand into new markets? Is it time to consider radio spots? TV? Billboards?

You can't afford *not* to advertise consistently. Prospective customers will get used to seeing your ads. Eventually, they'll give you a try.

8. Take Advantage Of Freebies

Want to get publicity without paying for it? Here's how.

First, have plenty of activities going on at the winery. Then generate press releases and send them to the local media. Not only will your information reach a wider audience, it will appear more credible.

Make your notice stand out by having a unique angle. And keep trying. An editor could ignore the first 10 press releases, but No. 11 might catch her eye.

Don't overlook neighborhood, regional

and business publications. They have more space to dedicate to local groups and events than large daily papers.



Signage of all kinds will bring visitors to your winery and create a recognizable brand identity.

And don't forget the community calendar. Dailies, weeklies, TV stations and convention and visitors' bureaus will run your items free of charge.

9. Who Needs A Website? Every Winery—Yours, Too

Ten years ago, small winery marketing was about retail. Not anymore.

Twenty and thirty-somethings buy everything from cosmetics to cars on the Internet. Many are busy building careers and families, and may not have time to visit your tasting room. Invest in technology that makes it easy for them to spend money. Your company's future could depend on it.

Keep your website fresh. Include pictures of current activities at the winery. Post links to recent newspaper and magazine articles. If a prospect surfs your site a few times and finds it unchanged, he'll be unlikely to return. If he sees something new each week, he'll keep visiting. Sooner or later, he'll become a customer.

10. E-mail: Less Is More

Electronic communication is timelier and less expensive than traditional post cards or flyers, so start building an e-mail list today. Remember, your best prospects are your current customers.

E-mail your customers often, but not too often. There's a fine line between "keeping in touch" and "pestering." Restrict each e-mail to a single subject, and always create a subject line that's related to the topic of the message.

If a customer asks to be removed from the mailing list, remove him—pronto. Your business can't afford bad word of mouth. Don't share or sell e-mail addresses, especially if you promise not to. Take the high road always.

Getting the best bang for your marketing buck requires careful planning, discipline and common sense. Don't worry about the money. If you spend it, they will come.

That's advice you can take to the bank. ■

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