


# Spirits Training: costs & rewards



With the tremendous growth in premium and superpremium spirits and the rebirth of the cocktail, a staff spirits-training program is absolutely essential for bottom-line success. But how do we go about educating our front-line people about what's inside all those beautiful bottles on the backbar and how to sell them?

If your operation has a staffer who really knows his or her stuff and has the time and energy to put together a comprehensive training program, consider yourself blessed. If not, think about hiring a beverage consultant. The best are highly trained, passionate individuals whose goal is to turn your troops into spirits experts and star salespeople. Consultants' rates vary and generally reflect the individual's experience. Clients are charged per hour, per day, or per project. Although the up-front cost can be hard to swallow, the positive returns can be exponential and immediate. Here is a plan for spirits training that works.

**Allot enough time for basic training.** I recommend one of two approaches. Establish a mandatory intensive four- to eight-week spirits course, meeting once a week for no more than two hours. Alternatively, schedule one or two long days, of no more than four hours each. For both, allow time for short breaks; minds and palates tire quickly.

If you're opening a new concept, schedule as much training time as possible. Five days for beverage training, interspersed with food, service, POS, and HR, is ideal.

**Spend ample time covering the basics of distillation,** which can be a tricky topic to teach and must be broken down to the lowest common denominator if it is to sink in. Use simple visual references. Also, incorporate a historical overview of the proliferation of "water of life" around the globe. Focus on the important key points that differentiate each spirits category, but be concise. In-depth training can follow an initial overview.

**Taste, taste, taste!** First teach your staff how to taste spirits properly, explaining that they are much more aggressive on

the palate and cannot be treated like wine. Sample at least two bottlings from every category. Choose distillates that are distinctive and that display the nuances that differentiate brands.

Taste some spirits on their own and *urn some into cocktails*. Allow your servers and bartenders to experience how different spirits affect the profile of a drink. This knowledge will enhance their ability to suggest and *sell* with confidence. For example, have them taste blind and compare two daiquiris side by side, one made with a light Puerto Rican rum and the other with a rhum agricole. Do the same with a martini made with a potato vodka versus one that's wheat-based. To showcase whiskey, I like to demo Manhattans, one made with a sweet, round bourbon and one with a spicy rye.

**Structure your training to be as interactive and personal as possible to ensure better retention.** Use role playing to build confidence and sales ability. Develop questions that guests might ask, such as "What's the difference between London Dry and Genever gins?" During tasting, encourage servers and bartenders to describe their experiences in their own words. If someone says, "It's like a giant Cadillac in my mouth," run with it and have that staffer try to break down what he or she means. The staff will develop personal buzzwords that it can add to its sales bag of tricks.

Once you've covered the basics, **provide as much specific information for each brand as possible**, including interesting histories and unique ingredients. Customers love a good story.

**Follow up with short review sessions** one or more times a week during preshift. Have staff members taste a new spirit or cocktail each time and discuss. Create an incentive program where the top seller of the featured spirit or cocktail for the shift gets a tangible reward (e.g., a pair of movie tickets). Develop concise, focused quizzes and reward the high scorers. These are great ways to maximize ongoing profit potential while keeping labor costs down.

Of course, the costs of training the entire front of house for a few hours at a clip and providing each with an ounce of several spirits can mount quickly. If you can, use relationships with distributors to procure training samples to offset pour costs.

The bottom line is that *knowledge is power*. Any expenses associated with a cohesive spirits-training program will yield tremendous immediate results and lasting returns.

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