

Working progress

BAR OPERATORS ARE PUTTING MORE FOCUS ON "SOFT" SKILLS SUCH AS CUSTOMER SERVICE, REPORTS MARK LUDMON

Running a bar may not be rocket science, but Stonegate Pub Company has enlisted theoretical physicist Albert Einstein as the face of its award-winning training. Introduced four years ago, Albert's Theory of Progression is used as a platform to engage the 12,000-strong workforce, from its Slug and Lettuce and Yates's bars to Popworld clubs and Missoula Montana Bar & Grill. "You have to make it fun, vibrant and engaging," explains Lee Woolley, head of learning and development. "We take training very seriously but we don't take ourselves too seriously."

With its wacky, colourful imagery, the programme starts with Albert's Own Little Book for new starters going through induction and continues with Albert's Award for staff to progress to being a team leader, which includes achieving an NVQ Level 2 and a personal licence. To become deputy managers, staff go through Albert's Accolade which includes two-day residential workshops and covers leadership and communication skills as well as employment law and business planning. The most promising go through Albert's Accelerator



Staff training at Missoula Montana Bar & Grill

which provides them with the skills to be a manager, including personal development such as self-belief and self-discipline – something that has produced 64 managers for the 600-strong estate. "They learn how to get themselves ready mentally to run a business," Lee explains.

Skills gaps are tackled by Albert's Master Classes while the best managers can progress to area and HQ roles through Albert's Aspirations. "Every time they move up a step, it halves staff turnover, all the way up to general manager. That's a huge benefit of training," Lee adds. It

is supported by reference materials on the company intranet, called Elsa after Einstein's second wife. "Many of our employees are the gaming generation. Putting information online and doing more e-learning has great benefits." Other needs such as cocktail-making are met by area trainers while IT skills are covered by 4,000 online courses provided by Lynda.com. This year will see the launch of Albert's App offering staff "how to" videos to teach specific skills such as making a Mojito.

With a mix of online and face-to-face training, Stonegate's e-learning is provided

THE ALCHEMIST

From the moment staff join Living Ventures, they learn how to know their job so well that they do not need to think about it, allowing "all conscious thought to be focused on a personalised approach to customer awareness and interaction". When it comes to The Alchemist bars in Manchester and London, bar staff go through a week of learning cocktail techniques and free-pouring every day alongside theory tests in areas such as the duties of running the bar and financial responsibilities, with written tests every morning needing a pass mark of 90%. One challenge sees staff put in pairs to run through different drinks by touching bottles as if they were making them behind the bar. Speed is important, training them so that, after two weeks, they can make 10 drinks at one time. For the full case study, visit www.barmagazine.co.uk/livingventures.

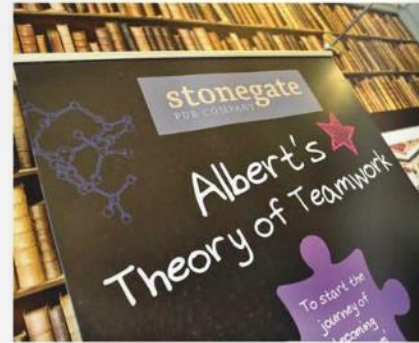


through CPL Training which works with many leading operators such as Living Ventures and The New Inventive Bar Company's Revolution bars. It is part of a trend towards "blended learning", says Paul Chase, director and head of UK compliance at CPL. "For instance, with cellar management, knowledge can be delivered online, which they can do in their own time, but the skills side has to be done face to face in the cellar. It reduces time out of the business for the learner and makes training more accessible and cost-effective."

As well as new training to cover legislation such as food allergens, CPL is meeting more demand for programmes

covering customer service, Paul says. "There is increasing recognition that, if people are to move away from drinking at home, operators have to give their customers a memorable experience that makes them want to return and a key part of that is the quality of staff. The environment, the fixtures and fittings, the offer are all important but the personal touch is essential throughout the customer journey, from the moment they arrive to when they leave." Other "soft" skills in increasing demand are marketing and merchandising, social media and conflict management, which is not just for preventing fights in late-night venues but dealing with customer complaints in a way that turns them into positives.

Training staff to provide a better customer experience is critical to continued success for any bar, pub or club, says Jill Whittaker, managing director of HIT Training. "Increasing the effectiveness of your staff, and enhancing the level of customer service, leads to quantifiable improvements and significant benefits for your business. Well-trained, skilled and competent employees are more motivated which means higher staff retention rates for you, while greater customer service encourages repeat business which of course maximises profit potential for the business."



Bar operators are increasingly recognising that their business will benefit from training that covers more than just compliance with legislation, adds Steven Pike, managing director of HospitalityGem, a specialist in solutions for the guest management experience. It helps employers to construct "development pathways" so that staff can visualise key milestones and how to achieve them, making sure that all training is measurable and engaging. "Getting the compliance right is a good start for operators, but don't stop there: consider how you can gain competitive advantage through developing and managing learning pathways that get your best staff more engaged, better skilled and more likely to stay with you."

THE APPRENTICE

After starting as a bar-back at The Plough Harborne in Birmingham, Josh Birch (pictured) has progressed to assistant manager in just three years, supported by HIT Training. He gained 12 months of practical experience at the pub while going through a Level 2 Food & Beverage Apprenticeship. He moved on to the Level 2 Team Leading Apprenticeship, followed by the Level 3 Management Apprenticeship. He is now learning about whisky to support The Plough's increasing range of small-batch, craft-distilled whiskies from around the world. "Having worked my way up, I have practical experience backed up with knowledge from my apprenticeships that helps me to support those around me and make sure we are all working together positively," Josh says. "I really enjoy what I do, and learning on the job has been a great way to develop new skills."



