

Winery Tasting Room Experiences after COVID

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Abstract

◦Purpose – The idea in this paper is to explore why some wineries have decided to maintain this new model even after the pandemic restrictions are fully lifted, and why some wineries are anxious to return to the operations ex-ante.

◦Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews with tasting room managers, directors of marketing, or others with the responsibility to make the decision on what model the tasting room experience will follow. The interviews use the means-end methodology to elicit the core values that drive the winery's decision and categorize those values into major categories. The purpose of this line of research is to determine the core values that wineries seek to exemplify through the tasting room experience and that drive the decision of what approach to take as pandemic restrictions are relaxed and, eventually, lifted.

◦Findings – This study is in the design phase. By the time of the conference, we expect to have preliminary results to present.

◦Practical implications – Winery tasting room managers (and others in charge of creating customer engagement) will be more successful if they explicitly identify and understand the core values they are trying to create in the winery experiences. This line of research has the potential to enhance the different essential models that wineries may follow and how the different models appeal to different sets of customers. In the process, they may better align the tasting room experience with their target markets.

Key words: Tasting room, customer experience, appointments

1. ABSTRACT

The government-mandated response to the COVID pandemic in the U.S. resulted in many wineries changing the model for the customer experience in the tasting room, generally moving from operating on a first come, first served basis to requiring appointments for tastings. Guests moved from standing at a tasting room bar to seated at a table. Often, the winery pre-poured the wines for the tasting.

The idea in this paper is to explore why some wineries have decided to maintain this new model even after the pandemic restrictions are fully lifted, and why some wineries are anxious to return to the operations ex-ante. The first stage consists of semi-structured interviews with tasting room managers, directors of marketing, or others with the responsibility to make the decision on what model the tasting room experience will follow. The interviews use the means-end methodology to elicit the core values that drive the winery's decision and categorize those values into major categories.

2. INTRODUCTION, AND THE PROBLEM OR ISSUE UNDER CONSIDERATION

Previous research has examined the use of the winery tasting room to develop loyal customers (see examples below). Prior to the COVID pandemic, many tasting rooms tended to operate on a first come, first served basis, and tasting rooms could get to be hectic during peak times. While some wineries had tables available for a sit-down wine tasting experience, most customers were served while standing at the tasting room bar, which could get crowded during peak times.

When the COVID pandemic hit the United States, the winery tasting rooms in the major wine regions of California, Oregon, and Washington initially were forced to close. When they were allowed to reopen, wineries had to change the model for their operations. Of primary interest in this study are requirements for the tastings to be held by appointment only and while seated at tables. Of secondary interest are requirements that the wines be brought to the table pre-poured, that restricted capacity, and that set time limits on the tasting experience.

Numerous wineries discovered that the new model allowed them to offer the customers a better experience to the customers, with more time and space to present and explain the wines better than was possible with customers crowded around the tasting room bar. They often realized that they could make a more personal connection with the customers in the process, and many wineries have said that they intend to maintain the new model—or something closely resembling it—even after all restrictions have been lifted. Other wineries, however, do not effectively enforce the requirement to have an appointment and seem anxious to return to serving customers around the tasting room bar.

The purpose of this line of research is to determine the core values that wineries seek to exemplify through the tasting room experience and that drive the decision of what approach to take as pandemic restrictions are relaxed and, eventually, lifted.

3. RESEARCH BASIS (E.G. LITERATURE REVIEW, RESEARCH STREAM, ETHNOGRAPHIC ENGAGEMENT)

Previous research has examined the use of the winery tasting room to develop loyal customers. For example, Newton and Nowak (2006), Fountain, et al., (2008), and Bruwer, et al., (2013) all explore the connection between the tasting room experience and consumer or brand loyalty.

Based on the seminal study by Rokeach (1973) on the nature of human values, Gutman (1982) developed means-end research based on the assumption that values play a dominant role in guiding consumer choices and the assumption that consumers categorize products into sets or classes, depending on which features they emphasize and which they ignore, to reduce complexity of choice and allow them to compare non-identical stimuli.

Interviewees are generally asked to identify several (e.g., three) meaningful aspects of the experience at the heart of the study. After they provided the answers, researchers asked participants' a series of questions about each answer using the laddering technique, which assists participants in moving from concrete attributes to more abstract values. According to McIntosh and Thyne (2005), "rather than forcing [participants] into predetermined categories," means-end theory "enables them to define personal values and attitudes in their own terms and context."

4. DISCUSSION, INCLUDING RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEW PROBLEM STUDIED

To the best of my knowledge, the means-end methodology has not been used to study the wine tasting room experience. This study also takes an unusual approach to means-end research in as much as we will be probing the values the designers of the experience seek to create rather than the values the consumers seek to obtain.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Winery tasting room managers (and others in charge of creating customer engagement) will be more successful if they explicitly identify and understand the core values they are trying to create in the winery experiences. This line of research has the potential to enhance the different essential models that wineries may follow and how the different models appeal to different sets of customers. In the process, they may better align the tasting room experience with their target markets.

6. CONCLUSIONS, INCLUDING PROPOSITIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The conclusion is to be determined. We hope that this study provides the basis for developing a classification approach for tasting room experiences and that the classification system provides the groundwork for further research into how wineries may use the winery experience to engender customer engagement and enhance brand loyalty.

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