

Operations

How to 'Cut Off' a Patron

May 8, 2012

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Bartenders and servers are in the best positions to decide whether or not to serve a patron another drink. Considering the legal ramifications, it is imperative they consistently make the right choices. Failure on their part to exercise sound judgment can have severe consequences. Everyone involved in the operation must have an unwavering commitment to serving alcohol responsibly and protecting the safety of the clientele, as well as that of the public at large.



The intent of alcohol-awareness training is to provide bartenders and servers with a sound, factual basis to make informed service-related decisions. It is critical they become comfortable exercising their right and obligation to refuse further service to anyone visibly intoxicated and to have the skills to handle this type of situation confidently.

The primary service rule regarding the sale of alcohol should always be, "When in doubt, don't serve." While this may seem slightly oversimplified, it is the best guideline available. It is important to forego the sale if there is any doubt as to the sobriety of the patron. You can ask no more from your staff than to exercise their

best judgment in these situations. There is too much at stake to base the decision whether or not to serve alcohol on anything less.

It is advisable for servers to keep a mental count of how many drinks a patron has consumed. The number of drinks consumed will provide an approximation of how much alcohol a patron has ingested. This information will prove beneficial when supporting the decision to refuse further service.

Bartenders and servers also should be instructed never to serve alcohol to someone not yet present. Frequently, two customers will sit down at the bar and order three drinks, one of which is for a third person out parking the car or perhaps in the restroom. In this situation, the bartender should only serve the two patrons present, and wait to prepare the third cocktail until the other person arrives. This third individual could very well be a minor or someone already intoxicated. Unfortunately, this is an all too common ploy to illegally obtain alcohol.

It is essential that the staff understand that management will support their decision to refuse further service of alcohol to any customer. This support will make it considerably easier for them to exercise their judgment and cut off a patron when necessary. In nearly every instance, the server is in a better position than the manager on duty to assess a customer's sobriety. Therefore, management should always be willing to support a server in his or her effort to refuse further service.

What makes refusing further service complicated and often intimidating is that alcohol has a destabilizing effect on a drinker's emotional state. It is difficult to anticipate whether a customer will acknowledge the refusal calmly or react in an agitated or belligerent manner.

Tact and diplomacy are the two strongest attributes a server can possess. When refusing further service, it is important to avoid using inflammatory language or assuming a judgmental, disapproving attitude. Telling someone under the influence that he or she is drunk or intoxicated will likely provoke an incident.

Bartenders and servers should make a concerted effort to avoid embarrassing the patron by keeping their voice quiet and remaining sensitive to the customer's feelings and predicament. However, they are to remain firm about refusing the individual further service of alcohol. Their tone should be authoritative without being overbearing or condescending.

Regardless of what is said when "cutting off" a customer, the simpler the approach the easier it will be to intervene in the future. An important part of intervention training is for bartenders and servers to be

familiar with how to best accomplish the task in the fewest words. The more automatic it becomes to deliver the lines, the more comfortable they will be when obliged to refuse a patron further service.

Essentially, a patron can be refused further service of alcohol either before or after he or she has become intoxicated. The approach the bartender or server takes will depend on the customer's level of impairment.

Informing a guest that he or she is being refused another drink is better received and less involved when done *before* the person reaches the point of intoxication. The best tactic to adopt in this situation is to serve the guest his or her drink and then inform the patron that it will be his or her last drink of the evening. For instance, a person orders a drink and the bartender knows that it will be the last one that can be safely served to the person that night. When the bartender serves the customer the cocktail, he or she should lean forward and quietly say, "Here you are: Drink this one slowly because it's the last one I can serve you tonight."

In essence, the person is only being denied further service of alcohol and is not being deprived the opportunity to "nurse" what will be his or her last drink of the evening. This approach will cause little embarrassment for a patron and usually will not cause a negative response.

Telling someone who already is intoxicated that he or she will not be served any more alcohol is a straightforward proposition. In the fewest words possible, the bartender or server should inform the patron that in his or her best judgment, the person already has had enough to drink and therefore will not be served any more alcohol. There is no need to add anything else to the statement. It is direct and to the point.

The message says that it was the bartender or server's decision based on his or her best judgment. It does not accuse the patron of being drunk. If the statement is delivered properly, it will probably not foster a negative reaction. If the refusal is met with a negative reaction, the manager should be notified immediately. It is management's responsibility to handle these kinds of customer situations.

After a customer has been "cut off," the other bartender(s) on duty should be notified of the refusal of service so they do not mistakenly serve the individual another drink. In this case, miscommunication can be as damaging as inaction.

The bartender or server's role in the procedure ends when the owner or manager is informed of the situation. It is then up to management to see that the situation is handled correctly, allowing the bartender or server to resume his or her duties.

At this time, management should arrange alternate means of transportation for the guest to get home. The options available are to either call a taxi cab to drive the customer home or assist the patron in calling a friend or relative to take protective custody, so to speak. It is important that the intoxicated person not get behind the wheel of his or her car.