

US wineries uncork Internet innovations

July 12 2012, by Glenn Chapman



A visitor takes pictures of various bottles of red and white wine with his smartphone. From iPads in vineyards to virtual tastings on Twitter, the tradition-steeped US wine industry is increasingly turning to Internet Age innovations to improve vintages and profits.

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A Wine Industry Technology Symposium (WITS) that ended Wednesday in California's renowned Napa Valley featured sessions on using Square to rack up sales and Groupon to pack tasting rooms.

The idea is to bring wine into the digital age, with glass-swirling connoisseurs chatting online and sharing pictures and videos from vineyards and barrel rooms -- but the age-old industry has proved slow to change.

"There is more potential with social media in the wine industry simply because wine is social," Andrew Healy, chief social officer of 3 Rock Marketing in Napa, told AFP.

"The wine industry should be at the forefront of social media. Unfortunately we are not," he said. "We are rooted in tradition and very slow to change."

VinTank was established as a "digital think tank for the wine industry" and provides ways for wineries to track what is being said about them online.

"Looking at the wine industry, we see a product mired in antiquated laws, complex distribution paradigms, unique product qualifications, and innumerable complexities," VinTank says on its website.

"Through technology and innovative strategies, we are dedicated to finding the solution."

Wine makers in the United States face a mishmash of state and county laws regarding shipping alcohol directly to buyers.

"This crazy 50-patch quilt of wine sale laws is a problem," said Mark Vogler, self-described "social media maniac" and founder of Out In the Vineyard, which promotes Wine Country getaways in tune with gay lifestyles.

Wineries are keen to put [Internet technology](#) to work for "direct-to-consumer" sales that result in far higher profits than going through distributors, who still dominate the market.

The quest for Wine Country technology tools benefits from the proximity of Napa Valley to [Silicon Valley](#), which provides access not

only to new ideas but the people behind them, according to Healy.

"We get people here every day from Google, Facebook and other technology companies spending time and money in Napa Valley, so we are lucky," he said.

[Social media](#) was a hot topic at WITS, with wine makers and sellers urged to build communities at Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+ and other sites.

"Those brands that participate deeply are winning the market today," said Sean Moffitt, co-author of "Wikibrands," a book about how to transform one's company by mobilizing customer input.

The conference also focused on how tablet computers like Apple's iPad are changing the industry, with vintners using the devices for everything from monitoring grapes to making sales pitches to big wine buyers.

"The era of paying for a printed wine list is really coming to an end," said Alpha Lab chief executive Josh Hermsmeyer, who was part of a panel devoted to the growing popularity of [iPads](#) in the wine business.

"It's been wildly successful."

About 50 iPads are used at Hahn Family Wines in California, according to marketing manager Joshua Cairns.

"Our bottling line manager doesn't even have an office; he just carries his iPad around," he said.

Visitors to the Hahn tasting room are invited to use iPads to take notes and email them to themselves, feeding addresses to the winery's database.

The wine industry has progressed a bit since the first WITS here eight years ago but has more work to do, according to event organizer J. Smoke Wallin.

"Wineries and vineyards are used to planning what to plant now to be growing in a decade, and we are talking about how to respond to a tweet in 15 seconds," Wallin said.

"Think about the disconnect between the kind of long-term thinking in agriculture and the fast-moving responsiveness that this world of technology has created."

The reward for the [wine industry](#) is worth the effort, given the potential for ongoing relationships with customers, feedback on [vintages](#), and data about how wines are selling, according to Wallin.

"Master the tools of information ubiquity," Economaney.com founder Dave Maney told WITS attendees.

"There is no question that this information revolution is the largest animating force in the economy today... Surf it. Read it. Take the time to get it."

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Citation: US wineries uncork Internet innovations (2012, July 12) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-07-wineries-uncork-internet.html>

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