

Service is key to winery sales

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To buy, or not to buy? That is the question for the more than 5 million annual visitors to New York's wineries. Cornell University researchers found that customer service is the most important factor in boosting tasting room sales, but sensory descriptions of what flavors consumers might detect were a turn-off.

The findings stem from two studies on how the tasting room experience affects customer purchases and what [wineries](#) can do to create satisfied sippers, published in the current issue of the *International Journal of Wine Business Research*.

"On average, nearly 60 percent of New York wine sales occur during visits to tasting rooms," said Miguel Gómez, professor in the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management. "For this reason, they play a strategic role in the overall business and marketing strategies of New York state wineries."

Despite their importance as a sales venue and the significant investments wineries make in their location and appearance, few studies have looked at tasting room sales, and it is difficult to apply research from other foods and sales venues to wine.

"Wine is a complex product for consumers. There are so many attributes, and customers don't always know their own preferences, especially tourists who may be casual wine drinkers," Gómez said.

Thus, Gómez and Marin Shapiro surveyed 450 Finger Lakes winery

visitors in nine tasting rooms over four months on 25 aspects of their experience, from the elbowroom at the counter and the friendliness of staff to the prices and number of wines offered. Service was by far the most significant factor.

"You can make a customer happy or unhappy by the service you provide and the ambience you create," said Gomez. "Those factors were more important than quality or price of the wines as drivers of [customer satisfaction](#)."

Moreover, the researchers could quantify the effect of satisfaction on sales.

"If you can convert a satisfied customer to a very satisfied customer, they are likely to spend about \$10 more and buy an additional bottle of wine in a given visit," Gómez said. "And to increase satisfaction, managers need staff who are friendly and patient, who will spend time talking with the visitors and have solid knowledge of the story behind the wines."

The second study, co-authored with professor of enology Anna Katharine Mansfield, tested the effect of various adjectives (or lack thereof) on tasting sheets to describe the taste and aroma of wines in partner wineries. The wineries alternated use of two tasting sheets over the course of six weeks and tracked sales.

Controlling for variables that affect sales, such as the day of the week or the weather, the researchers found that sales were lower when tasting rooms provided sensory descriptions that consumers might detect, like "notes of peach or lychee," said Mansfield.

"The written descriptions may just be less important in tasting rooms than wine stores, since visitors are often allowed to sample several wines.

They may even frustrate the novice wine tasters, by setting up sensory expectations that are not met," she said.

The two studies concur that "relying on the staff as guides can create an intimate and more interactive experience," Mansfield said, and thereby increase [wine](#) sales.

Provided by Cornell University

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