



Nightclub & Bar

August 18, 2009
Oxford, MS
Circulation: 24, 624

The Best in Bar Management

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Promoting Upward

“The crucial thing not to do in a recession is cut down on marketing. That’s where you really get into trouble. This year, we actually bumped up our marketing and offered promotions with a more premium drink offering,” says Jeremy Merrin, president and founder of Havana Central, with three locations in Manhattan.

While other operators in his market are following the trading-down trend and also cutting prices, Merrin made a strategic decision to go upscale with two drink promotion programs that involve premium spirits. And instead of discounting, he co-opted with above-premium brands to create multi-faceted weekly events at his restaurants that deliver a value experience for the guest. The result is a surge in guest traffic and increased sales of premium-priced cocktails.

Since March, patrons at the three locations of the mid-priced Cuban eatery have enjoyed weekly Partida Margarita Night events. “During happy hour, anyone who purchases a Partida Margarita, which is made with their organic agave nectar, is given a ticket. They take the ticket to a display cooking station where the chef will make them a dish of paella to order,” says Merrin. “The Partida Margarita is \$12, which is a 30 percent premium over the \$9 house Margarita, but it’s really been successful. We’ve got a great drink made with a great spirit, there’s live salsa music playing and you get the theater and smells and sounds of the chef making the paella. It’s value on a lot of levels.”



The Partida Margarita is now the third best-selling drink at Havana Central – behind the Mojito and Sangria – and the restaurants now move 12 cases of Partida per week on average.

The other weekly promotion at Havana Central that’s drawing loyal fans is 10 Cane Mojito night. Happy hour patrons who purchase a 10 Cane Mojito, priced at \$12, also receive a free shoe shine and a hand-rolled cigar. “We’re now the biggest 10 Cane seller in Manhattan,” claims Merrin.





Secrets to Success

Forging strong partnerships with committed suppliers and also training staff to sell the promoted cocktail are the keys to the success of both programs, according to Merrin. “It was really important to have suppliers step up to the plate and commit to a lengthy promotion. We plan to continue both until the end of the year and possibly beyond, so long as they are going strong,” he explains.

To identify good partners, Merrin and his team first determined that rum and tequila were two spirits that resonated with the Havana Central guest and fit with the concept. They then set about identifying which brands had the flavor, quality and image they desired, as well as enthusiastic reps and a willingness to support the promotions. “The brands had to put some money against the events, which we did also, of course,” says Merrin. “They have skin in the game, but are getting a great ROI because we’re moving product.”

Havana Central bartenders and servers also were trained to describe the promotion to guests on the event nights and to upsell patrons to the premium cocktails on non-event nights. “Both drinks are available at all times. The servers were excited because they are offering a great cocktail and building their checks, so they really got behind it.

“This is a real win-win-win,” says Merrin, explaining that the guest gets an experience and a great cocktail, Havana Central is driving traffic and realizing greater sales and profits, and the brands are moving product. “Now is not the time to market down. Now is the time to market upward, but do it strategically.”

