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What I want from my suppliers

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The Oxford Wine Company



Too many reps know too little about the wines they sell

As independent wine merchants, one of our most important and challenging jobs is negotiating with suppliers. These might be large national companies or small boutique operations, and we could be dealing with anything from the old-fashioned rep to owners, directors or winemakers.

It is totally natural that we all tend to buy from people we like and with whom we have a certain empathy. The product has to be good, of course, and the price has to be right. But, more importantly, you feel you want to deal with a person prepared to go that extra mile. Someone who will attend tastings, show wines to staff, add value and support and be flexible and understanding when it comes to reaching critical price points.

Sadly these people are few and far between and, with many companies cutting down in this area, the sales staff of the bigger companies are often poorly trained in dealing with the vital independent wine merchant sector.

Getting to the point

One of the first things to establish is the sales policy of the company concerned. Here are a few factors I take into consideration when deciding whether or not to work with a particular supplier.

- There is no point dealing with a company intent on flooding the supermarkets unless the range you are being offered is available under a completely separate label exclusively for independents and the company is able to manage the distribution of the products. Lack of cohesion within large suppliers is a massive problem to the independent.

- There is no point dealing with a company that cannot tell you exactly where their products are placed or who they intend targeting in the future.

- There is no point dealing with a company that is not prepared to support tasting events.

HARPERS BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES: HOW SUPPLIERS CAN SHOW THEIR SUPPORT

The Harpers Best Practice Guidelines were set up in the autumn of 2011 in conjunction with both suppliers and independent wine merchants to create an agreed upon framework through which the two sides could work better together. The guidelines arose out of growing concerns among leading independents about how they were being treated by suppliers. In particular, they were concerned about suppliers not sticking to their channel management strategy, which resulted in exclusive, independent-only wines being sold through multiple and specialist retailers.

The guidelines are open to all suppliers operating in the independent sector. Signing up to them is voluntary, but they require suppliers to be open and transparent about

their channel management and sales strategy for the independent sector.

To date, 17 suppliers have signed up to the initiative. They are: **Hayward Bros, World Wine Agenices, Patriarche, Indigo Wine, Ehrmanns, Mentzendorff, Les Caves de Pyrène, Hatch Mansfield, Cavendish Wines, HispaMerchants, Grupo Codorniu UK, Las Bodegas, PLB, De Bortoli Wines, Bottle Green, Raymond Reynolds and Les Grands Chais de France.**

But a number of big-name national suppliers have yet to sign up and pledge their support to working with wine merchants. Any supplier that would like to sign up can contact Richard Siddle on richard_siddle@wrbm.com for more details.

- There is no point dealing with a company that only calls in to see you once a year to inform you of the new prices.
- There is no point dealing with a company whose wine rep knows little about the product he is selling to you.
- There is no point dealing with a company whose minimum delivery is so large it becomes an obstacle to buying.
- There is no point dealing with a company that will try to sell to you and then pop into the Dog and Duck down the road to tout the same product.
- There is no point dealing with a company that is not prepared to be patient, to adapt to your needs or work

with you to build a successful long-term partnership.

- There is no point dealing with a company whose rep wants to give you a laptop presentation. We all know what vines, cellars and stainless-steel tanks look like!

- And finally, there is no point dealing with a company that gives you little credence if your opinion on a wine differs from theirs.

- To sum up it all up, independents are looking for: flexibility, adaptability, knowledge, exclusivity (within reason) and support.

Could do better

There are many well-known companies out there that do not tick these boxes and fall well short of the criteria required. However the penny is beginning to drop.

My headmaster's report for suppliers would be: "This child is still lacking a critical edge and deep understanding of the issues involved as well as having delusions of adequacy."

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