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Independents lay down the law

Serious about working with independent wine merchants? Then this is a must read. Harpers Independent Wine Crew explain what they like and don't like about the major wine distributors. **Richard Siddle and Erin Smith report**

It didn't take long for our group of leading wine merchants to get down to business at the latest meeting of the Independent Wine Crew.

The sight of Tesco's Laura Jewell MW on the front cover of Harpers and her clarion call to the trade – "I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want" – was immediately put top of the agenda.

Ruth Yates, who runs her own five-strong chain of shops across the north west, was quick to pick up her copy and say: "This is what we want. This is what we need to do. We need the trade to understand what it is we want as well."

She said she is increasingly frustrated by the number of suppliers who come to see her but don't know her business. "They have not done their homework. Often they will sit down and expect me to start talking to them about my business as though I am selling to them," she said.

The other merchants shared Jewell's frustrations that too many suppliers simply do not understand how their businesses are run and what it is they could do to get more business with them.

Too many, they argued, continue to pay lip service to independents, talk a good PR game in the trade press and then fail to deliver the kind of service merchants are looking for.

Must do better

It will be hugely worryingly to some of the country's biggest wine suppliers how far off the mark they are when working with leading independents. Hal Wilson of Cambridge Wine Merchants said some of the biggest players often have the best-quality lists, but feels let down by "lazy" sales and service, and reps who lack knowledge about their products.

Doug Wood of WoodWinters in Scotland dismissed one major player for its "lazy wine buying and lazy wine selling" and the fact that too many of its products were packed with residual sugar. "The list looks lovely but huge amounts of it are just sugary muck."

Or "commercial wines" as Ted Sandbach at the Oxford Wine Company put it.

One major area of frustration was what the merchants referred to as "price creep" either on individual wines, or as the result of a vintage update. Here a supplier will agree to an initial attractive price on a wine, which after the first

WHO ARE THE INDEPENDENT WINE CREW?

The Independent Wine Crew is made up of leading award-winning multi-site independent wine merchants who are keen to meet up, work together, network and share best business practices, not only for themselves but hopefully for the rest of the independent sector.

The "Crew" is still looking for new members and is open to leading wine merchants with more than one shop. If you are interested contact Richard Siddle on richard.siddle@wrbm.com.



(From left to right from back) Hal Wilson, Matthew Hennings, Ruth Yates, Doug Wood, Ted Sandbach: distributors simply make little or no effort to understand their clients' businesses



(Left to right) Matthew Hennings, Harpers' Erin Smith, Kate Labate, Ruth Yates: Harpers interview with Laura Jewell MW at Tesco struck a chord with every member of the Crew

"Often they will sit down and expect me to start talking to them about my business as though I am selling to them"
Ruth Yates, Corks Out

year, will "creep" up in price, explained Woods.

Ruth Yates said it was an issue she came across time and again. "That is why we don't work with those suppliers," she added.

Vintage updates were a particular issue for Crew members. "It is infuriating," Sandbach said. "You agree a price at the beginning of the year and are selling it out to the trade and then suddenly because of a vintage update it is £3 more a case."

Such a decision can then have a serious impact on a merchant's relationship with the customer they have agreed the initial trade price with. "If you have agreed a trade price for a year then you end up losing £3 a case," added Sandbach.

Often the change will not be made clear and will only appear on an invoice. "You have to go through line by line to pick these up," stressed Sandbach.

Wilson employs a full-time member of staff just to keep track of invoice and product changes, and pick up any changes or inaccuracies.