

When Harpers was invited to take part in a two-day seminar with some of Hatch Mansfield's leading independent merchants we jumped at the chance. **Richard Siddle** reports back on the wide-ranging debate

To say all independent wine merchants sing from the same hymn sheet might be pushing things a little, but there is certainly far more that unites local retailers than divides them. Which is why the seminar held last month by Hatch Mansfield with a group of its leading independent wine merchants, in association with Harpers, made for such a fascinating two days of debate and insights into this vital growing sector.

For a group of 15 independent wine merchants to take two days out from their business and for some to travel to the other side of the country speaks volumes about how much merchants respect and are interested in each other's views.

The seminar was held under the umbrella title of Sharing the Future, and resulted in a far-reaching discussion about the key issues facing wine merchants and a clear conclusion that events like this are going to be vital if the sector is going to grow to its full potential.

Full and open disclosure is always going to be difficult when you have a group of independent businesses together. But Hatch Mansfield had carefully selected non-competing merchants from different regions of the UK to ensure an open debate.

From the off, the merchants were in collaborative mode, chipping in to the formal presentations and picking up key areas of interest to ensure every nugget of vital information was carefully dissected.

As well as sharing their own ideas, the merchants were also able to catch up on the latest industry sales and data across the off-trade, with talks from Hatch Mansfield's Mark Calver and Lynn Murray; an insight into social media, with practical advice on each of their own web and online offers by internet consultant Bernadette Costello of Costello Media; and I hoped to give my insights into some of the key overall consumer behaviour trends being seen across all sectors of retail, which merchants might want to latch on to in their own businesses.

NEED FOR DATA

The industry data insights proved to be more interesting in what they didn't reveal about the independent merchant sector than what they did. While the sales and trends data from the major multiple and impulse sectors stood up in its own right, there was little faith in the data held by the major research houses for the independent sector, which, for example, reported a downturn in sales – the ▶

Great minds think alike



Hal Wilson, Cambridge Wine Merchants

"I found it a very creative session, and came away with lots of ideas on things I need to do better and have a clearer strategy for. The session also showed how we must all try and be more than just a local wine merchant. We should not just be finding ways to work together to make more money, but how we can come together to promote ourselves as a distinct group of retailers in our own right. A group of retailers that cares passionately about wine but also how our sector is represented to the wider public. As a wine merchant we can be trusted to give independent expert advice. We need to get the message out to the public that they can't trust the larger players to give you the best prices.

"If we are 600 voices then people will not listen to us. But if we speak as one voice then we will be heard right across the country. This is why it is so important we find a way to collect independent sales data so we can demonstrate the importance of the independent sector to the trade. We are not following trends; we are making them.

"It was also very interesting to hear about what the consumer now expects from their local retailer and that you can never underestimate them. It also confirmed the need to be both approachable and not to take ourselves too seriously, while at the same time being able to give the expert advice people come to us for. We need to be able to cater for all types of customers.

"The seminar also demonstrated that social media and online retailing are something we need to consistently get better at. It also got me more excited about Twitter and how you can use it for business purposes. This was best demonstrated in how the #wineripoff hashtag we discussed was suddenly picked up by so many people. We can also use Twitter to challenge people to use their local independent store more."

