

complete opposite to the experiences of the merchants around the table.

The issue sparked a wide-ranging debate around how the independent sector could be better served if suppliers and merchants alike were more informed on the true sales and trends data going through their stores.

Calver said it was a key area for companies like Hatch Mansfield that have a business commitment to supply the independent sector the best they can. But it was hard to do so if the proverbial arm was being held behind its back for the lack of robust data.

"It is really hard for us to interpret the full independent sector, and feed that information back to growers and producers. We are having to do a lot of second guessing," he conceded.

It was also clear there is a wide range of capability within the independent sector to be able to collect sales data for both off and online sales. Different computing and reporting systems have made previous attempts to bring independent data together difficult and expensive. But surely there was a way forward, urged Hal Wilson of



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Cambridge Wine Merchants, for independents to work together and share and collate data.

Even around the merchants present it was estimated there was at least £30 million of buying power to harness. But it was quickly apparent those merchants were working with very different systems across a range of prices. While one merchant said his e-commerce site initially cost £2,500 to set up, other merchants said they were paying considerably more.

Greg Sherwood MW at Handford Wines in Kensington, London, said it was also important to find a flexible enough system that allows you to grow and take on more capacity. "Otherwise it could hamstring your business," he warned.

Rupert Pritchett at Taurus Wines near Guildford said the issue of computing and systems control "was 10 times more important" than, say, social media.

Get it right, he said, and you can use it to run tailored e-mail promotions to key customers, and help build a better understanding of what your customers want.

Jayne Morris of Noble Green Wines in Twickenham agreed: "It helps me serve my customers better by building up profiles of them."

All of which was a step too far for Vince Fusaro of Luvians Bottle Shop in St Andrews. "Why be simple when you can be complicated?" he asked. "Do you need a machine to tell you; surely you know what your customers are buying?"

Where computer knowledge stood out for Taurus Wines was in its corporate business, where it could look back on historical data to show a particular company what they had ordered in the past.

"It really depends on your business model," added

## MAKING THE MOST OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Merchants were urged to ramp up their social media activity, and not look upon it as a "chore" but a fundamental part of their marketing and business strategy.

Get it right, stressed Bernadette Costello, who runs her own social media agency, Costello Media, and you can drive people to your business that it would be impossible to reach otherwise. These so-called "untouchables" could quickly become regular customers if they find you through social media sites like Twitter. Your website, she explained, should be seen as the hub of your communications wheel, with all the spokes being the various types of social media that can bring people to your site.

But to make the most of social media takes time and effort. That time and effort should be spent using key search terms to get your website up the Google rankings or using the various free online web analytics services to analyse your traffic and see how you can make it better.

Facebook and Twitter, she argued, offered potentially "huge" marketing opportunities for wine merchants

at virtually no cost to implement.

Look at what your competition is doing. Follow the people they follow on Twitter; go, for example, to the local Majestic Twitter feed and follow their customers. Look to create a Twitter relationship with key people in your community, be it the MP, your local newspaper, or food and drink journalists. All help build noise and traffic to your site, she stressed.

Merchants were also urged to look outside of wine, and think about overall consumer trends and how relevant they might be for their business.

Do not ignore the potential of affiliate marketing and the widespread use of coupon schemes such as Groupon to again reach out to a completely new audience. Food and drink offers are one of the most popular areas and, if handled carefully, can drive large numbers to your business.

Open up your social media to your customers and invite them to post up comments, tasting notes, even vote for particular wines or offers. It needs to be a two-way communication.

## BEHIND THE SCENES: OXFORD WINE CO

The seminar also included a look behind the scenes at Ted Sandbach's new Oxford Wine Company store in nearby Cirencester. Sandbach was able to share his experiences on the lessons learnt from opening two stores in the past two years. Expanding a business, he warned, might be vital to move to the next stage but needs to be taken with great caution and a big deep breath.

The greatest benefit, he said, of taking on more stores is the cash flow and volume it brings into your business. The downside is the increase in costs and overheads.

He warned that as stock levels go up so does your own personal exposure to them as it is harder to get finance out of banks. He estimated each new store costs around £100,000 to set up, with the aim of breaking even after a year.

More stores also means more people, with the Oxford Wine Company now employing 31 members



of staff. "We place a lot of emphasis on staff being well travelled and knowledgeable about wine. We want them to be able to talk to people about wine, adapt to their needs and be honest," said Sandbach.

The key, he said, was to get the right team working in the stores with you. You cannot be there seven days a week and it was vital you had the discipline to leave the day-to-day running to your hand-picked team.