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## OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE

Mark Calver, Hatch Mansfield's sales director, said it was also important for merchants to understand the intense pressures their suppliers were under to protect whatever margins they have when servicing the independent sector.

He described the wine trade as currently being in such a state of flux that "it was a little like the Wild West" with companies all trying to find their "own little niche, their own gap in the market".

Hence finding constructive, mutually productive partnerships with merchants to drive more premium wine sales was to everyone's long-term benefit.

He also cautioned merchants to look carefully at their own business models to determine the right way forward for them and not to diversify into new areas unless they were confident they were right for them.

Sherwood. "We have a huge customer base and it would be very easy to miss those quiet customers who just come in to the store if we did not keep and analyse our records."

It was certainly the topic that split the merchants down the middle, but whichever side of the fence they sat, they were united in calling for simpler, more integrated, cost-effective systems all merchants could use.

### COMMON GOALS

The real success of the seminar was how open and transparent the participating merchants were in sharing their own experiences. Rather than sitting back, listening and playing their cards close to their chest, all were happy to get involved, and share and share alike.

Common areas of interest quickly came to the fore. Particularly around how merchants could join forces to use their collective buying power to get more competitive rates from service providers, such as courier and dispatch and credit card companies. Around the room credit card charges ranged from 0.9% to 1.9%.

"You could, for example, find out quotes from other merchants, and then go back and challenge your provider," said Wilson. Like freight forwarding, added John Chapman at the Oxford Wine Company.

### BY THE GLASS

The debate also turned to the effectiveness of Enomatic-style tasting machines in store. While some were highly enthusiastic, others were not.

You cannot afford to be complacent

In the positive camp sat Tom Jones of Whalley Wine Shop near Clitheroe, Lancashire. "I've been really excited about having them. For us it demonstrates the kind of shop we want to be - we want to be a bit more cutting edge. But it brings other benefits like keeping the staff up to date with new styles," he explained.

But for those merchants offering a wine bar or food offer, then sampling machines were the way forward, argued Andrew Morris of Cheers Wine Merchants in Swansea. "We would not be where we are without them," he claimed. "It is a great way to introduce customers who are a little intimidated to new wines and encourage them to try them first."

Wilson agreed: "It makes people see you as more of a destination store. We see them not as a profit driver, but more as a point of difference."

Wilson has gone further than most and has been able to introduce sampling wines for his sherry and whisky bar offer at Cambridge Wine Merchants.

### FOOD OFFER

Even if you do not want to risk the investment in a standalone tasting machine, introducing a simple plate of cheese or charcuterie with a glass of wine can make a big difference, urged Peter Minshull of Clear Back Wine in Wrexham. "I have got people who have not been in my shop for 18 months coming in because I have cheese available."

But don't get too carried away with your artisanal meats and cheeses, warned Fusaro. He said you need to be turning over £2,000 a week from a deli operation to make it viable. "Only do it if you are really passionate about the food, and like to talk to people and get them to taste. Otherwise forget it," he said.

### BEERS AND SPIRITS

All the merchants were agreed about the huge potential and growth in premium ales and spirits. It was the one area in which they also agreed with the trade data showing very healthy increases in sales for golden rums premium vodkas, gins and dark spirits.

But sourcing good quality, consistent spirits at the right price was not as easy. Chapman described it as trying to find that "little golden nugget of information" you need to find the right supplier with the right spirit at the right price.

But with nearly 30% margins available on premium spirits it was a key area for merchants to grow into, said Wilson, and the same goes for ales. Luvians Bottle Shop is stocking 400 ales in a store serving 800 people in St Andrews.

Noble Green Wines carries a range of real casks, where customers can come in and fill up their own cartons. "We started with one cask a year ago and now we have 16," says Morris.

It was refreshing to see so many independent businesses openly share ideas and discuss future plans. But although successful in their own right, there was certainly no sense that they had all the answers.

As Ted Sandbach of the Oxford Wine Company neatly concluded: "Any wine company that thinks it has got it right is going backwards. You cannot afford to be complacent." ■