

Industry expert:

Comment from Phil Mellows

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Standing out from the crowd



Ye Olde Mitre is a City of London pub that's famous for its cask beer. But it has another unusual weapon in its armoury. It's a dog biscuit. One of the customers uses a guide dog, and every time he drops by the licensee slips the dog a biscuit.

"He's not going to go past my door now without the dog bringing him in," says the guv'nor with a mischievous glint in his eye.

It may be a devious method of converting an occasional customer into a regular but, like any gimmicks that work, it's really just one expression of a grounded, consistent approach to running a pub business. And it's the kind of approach that could see you through these difficult days.

Over the last few weeks I've been going all over the country helping to judge The Publican Food & Drink Awards. I ask the finalists how they're coping with the recession. "What recession?" sums up their response.

So what are these pubs doing that others aren't?

Between them they're doing a huge variety of different things. Some are food-led, others 90 per cent wet. Some have lots of events and entertainment, others plain hospitality. Some are big enough to offer a choice of experiences, others are too small to offer more than one.

If there is one thing they have in common, though, it's the attitude of the licensee, the way they think of their business.

Take that dog biscuit. It's giving the dog a reason to keep coming back, and it's also a device to fix that pub in the dog's mind. The pub and the dog biscuit are inextricably linked. They become one.

Every pub needs its dog biscuit. Or, to use trendier terminology, you need to think of your pub as a brand.

Branding has acquired a bad name, thanks to the identikit retail units that were rolled out relentlessly into our high streets during the 1990s. But in its simplest form branding is a dog biscuit, fixing a definite image of your pub in a customer's mind.

There are pubs lucky enough to be born branded. On my judging list for The Publican's Pub of the Year was, the Royal Standard of England in Beaconsfield. It's 900 years old and a fantastic building – a gift to any publican – yet the Royal Standard is a winner because the owner has built around it a whole offering that builds on what he's got to create a consistent brand.

As he puts it: "It's the pub that's the brand, not what you're selling."

And you can do the same without the natural attributes of 13th century architecture. Another pub I visited was a newish freehouse in Aylesbury called the Broad Leys. Interestingly I had to check the name just then. It's not very memorable. Doesn't sound like a pub at all. But you can see the beer garden from the road, and in the middle of it stands a rather peculiar water feature, a life sized stone adonis, dripping wet.

The pub ran a competition among the regulars to name it and they came up with Rusty Lee. I bet when people are wondering where to go for something to eat and drink in Aylesbury they think of the pub with Rusty Lee in the garden.

And if that doesn't work the Broad Leys has also created a signature dish. Nothing too fancy, but its fish and chips comes

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with battered salmon that bursts with shocking pink when you stick your fork in. You might forget the name of the pub, but you won't forget that.

Another example of a signature dish is the Nottinghamshire Pie, invented at the Waggon & Horses at Halam. That's a small tenancy in the middle of nowhere, but the pie, and the PR it generated, has put it on the map.

Now that I've mentioned PR, let's get that out of the way. With a bit of time and thought you can use PR to get cheap publicity for your pub. That's all good. But your priority must be to get your pub, your brand, right first before inviting all and sundry to visit it.

Nearly every pub I spoke to on my trip had built their trade through word of mouth. There is no more powerful marketing tool than this. Not even dog biscuits. It's real people voluntarily recommending your pub. And they'll only do that if they've had a good experience. If they've had a bad experience they're even more likely to tell their friends about it (they almost certainly won't tell you) and that's far worse than not mentioning your pub at all.

So as well as branding you have to get the basics right.

There's a pub near me at the back of Brighton, not in the awards, called the Druids Arms. It's not especially attractive, inside or out. I believe the term is grungy. But clean grungy.

"Do something different that sets you apart from the competition and that people will remember you for, and do it well."

Anyway, I was on my way back from the city centre where I'd been checking out Friday night trade at the big brash venues and reflecting on the fact that the recession had finally reached us, they were so quiet. It was one in the morning but I knew the Druids was open till three so I stopped for a nightcap.

The place was bouncing off the floor it was so busy. Young people, older people. And while I drank my pint it just got busier. The recession, so painfully evident earlier, had suddenly evaporated.

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I know, too, that other 'ordinary' local pubs like the Druids are doing OK. For tenants this is encouraging. At a recent conference organised by M&C Report, titled The Future of Pub Retailing, it was explained in theoretical terms.

The recession has had a subtle psychological impact on people. Paul Flatters, who works for a research outfit known as the Trajectory Partnership (don't ask), believes we are seeing "a new seriousness" among consumers who recognise they "need to be responsible".

They are turning away from big exciting occasions and towards "simple propositions with no surprises and no decisions to make to add to the stress".

Sounds like the local pub. But note that the new sense of responsibility also means people, even if they've got plenty of money, will be looking for good value.

Value, as you don't need to be told, is not the same as price. Customers just need to feel they are getting what they pay for.

The combination of simplicity and value carries a simple message for publicans – do the basics well.

Take cask beer. The annual Cask Report that came out in October showed the category is back in growth in 2009, outperforming almost every other drink on the bar. What's more, cask drinkers go the pub more often and spend more when they're there. Serving a great pint could be your brand. It will keep customers coming back, as many pubs are discovering. Every one of the pubs I've judged served good beer.

Yet cask beer is a fragile product. Its quality in the glass relies on the skill and care practised by the licensee. Get it

wrong, and a whole bunch of valuable customers, not to mention their mates, will never come back.

It's not that difficult to keep a good pint of ale but the margin for error is tiny and the consequences of serving a bad pint are large.

What about food? Wet-led community pubs are increasingly adding a dry profit stream to their business and it's easy enough these days to get an off-the-shelf package of dishes, even if you've no kitchen.

But again, think of your brand. Is there an offer that could set you apart?

The Anchor Inn at Nayland, Essex, another of my finalists, is lucky enough to have a farm attached where it grows all its own vegetables. It's the ultimate in local food and a great attraction.

You probably don't have a farm, but what you can do, whether you're in the town or the country, is buy from local butchers, bakers and greengrocers. It isn't necessarily more expensive. Develop a relationship with your fellow small businesses, guaranteeing them a regular trade, and you can do deals. You're all in the same recession, so help each other out.

An ethical element of "new seriousness" is buying local to reduce carbon footprints so shout about what you're doing and advertise your supplier on the menu.

Keep it simple. Specialise in a few things that don't demand cheffing skills or take up loads of time but are nourishing and natural. Home-made soups, bread and cheese, that kind of thing. It's easy and will help create your distinct identity as "the pub that does..."

However you think of your pub's brand, do something different that sets you apart from the competition and that people will remember you for, and do it really well.

To pick up on an insight from the Trajectory research, people don't want to make hard decisions. A good pub makes it easy for them.

Guide dogs certainly don't have to think twice before going into Ye Olde Mitre.

