

HIRING FOR THE HOLIDAZE

POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN ADDING SEASONAL STAFF

BY JEFF SIEGEL



Each year, the news trumpets seasonal hiring—such as “Target to add 100,000 part-time employees for the holidays....” Which is all fine and good for a company that can afford to handle the holiday rush by throwing money at it.

But what if you’re a small wine, beer and spirits retailer facing the same sort of problem? It’s your busiest time of the year, too, but you don’t have massively deep pockets. It’s all about planning.

“We start looking at what we’re going to do with our employees for the holidays in October,” says Cathy Sagle, who works for the 4,000-square foot The Corkscrew in Springfield, IL. “It makes a difference in knowing what to do because we’ve been doing it for so long, 24 years. Experience has been our guide.”

Should you hire seasonal staff?

“You may need to add seasonal employees if your employees are feeling overwhelmed,” says Ladan Nikravan Hayes, a career advisor for CareerBuilder, the hiring and employment website. “Or if you’re missing opportunities or passing on projects because of limited time, and you don’t see a light at the end of the tunnel.”

That’s where experience comes in: Were you able to make do in the past, or did last year’s holiday rush show that this year needs to be different? It’s not just whether you expect business to be better, but also whether you’re going to try more things—promotions, tastings, and so forth—that will strain your current setup.

Not to be forgotten, says Hayes: Know your state’s laws regarding seasonal help—how they’re classified, regulations regarding overtime, and the like.

Or can you make do with the staff you have?

“We don’t like to hear ‘seasonally,’ because we don’t want to reinvent the wheel and hire employees for just a couple of months,” says Ertan Sener of West Side Wine & Spirits in West Hartford, CT. “They wouldn’t know our products, and they wouldn’t be able to provide the service we expect our employees to provide.”

How do you make the best seasonal hires?

Hayes suggests asking current staff for referrals and to fine-tune your seasonal job description.

“Make sure you’re writing clear job descriptions that say exactly what you’re looking for in a seasonal employee, as in job duties and length of contract,” she says.

Wayne Belding, MS, the former owner of the Boulder Wine Merchant in the Colorado city recommends looking for older or retired people, perhaps among your customers. They may know your business, and they certainly know your inventory.

Plus, he says, “they often have an easier time engaging older customers than younger employees. If you are selling fine wine, having at least some staff members older than the wines being sold will lend some credibility to the process.”

And Sagle recommends continuity: The Corkscrew has been able to re-hire seasonal employees from year to year, people who only want to work three or four months at time. These hires know the job and know the customers, saving the need for extensive training.

If you make do with current staff, how do you divvy up the extra hours?

Transparency is all. Be fair, be straightforward, and let the employees know you’re in this with them. “We did increase the number of shifts for our part-time employees during the holidays,” says Belding, “but we as owners put in many extra hours just tending to on-the-floor sales.”

How many hours depends on the retailer’s size, of course. West Side has two full-time employees in Sener and owner Gregory Nemerget, plus six part-timers. The latter’s weekly hours can increase to 30 to 35 during the holiday season; the employees, many of whom are college students, are happy to have the extra hours.

The Corkscrew—with two full-time employees in Sagle and owner Danielle Anderson and 11 part-time—usually doubles the number of people working at any one time. The key to this, says Sagle, is more planning. Anderson will post the entire holiday season schedule eight to 12 weeks out. That way, says Sagle, the part-timers know far enough in advance when they’re working to minimize any problems or conflicts. ■