

Coasters, or Bar Napkins?

Choosing the Right Surface Protection for Your Bar Program

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In the restaurant and bar world, the smallest details often influence the largest perceptions. One of the most overlooked decisions—yet one guests interact with constantly—is whether to use **coasters**, **bar napkins**, or a combination of both. What sits under a guest's drink can affect cleanliness, labor efficiency, branding, and even the overall guest experience.

Here's a consultant's breakdown of what every operator should know.

The Case for Coasters

1. Professional Aesthetic & Brand Elevation

A well-designed coaster communicates intention. It signals that the bar takes its presentation seriously. Coasters look clean, stay in place, and elevate the company's identity—especially when custom-printed.

2. Better for Moisture Control

While thin paper napkins often get soggy, a quality coaster absorbs condensation more consistently, preventing puddles and sticky bar tops.

3. Long-Term Cost Savings

Although coasters cost more upfront, they often require fewer replacements during a shift. Many last multiple drinks, and durable pulp-board or reusable coasters can drastically reduce waste.

4. A Branding Opportunity

Few front-of-house items give you more brand visibility. Coasters sit directly in the guest's field of vision, and guests often snap photos that inadvertently include your coaster—free user-generated marketing.

The Case for Bar Napkins

1. Versatility

Bar napkins serve double duty: they protect surfaces and act as a functional napkin for spills, cocktail garnishes, or the guest who inevitably drips simple syrup on their fingers.

2. Sanitation Advantage in Fast-Paced Bars

High-volume operations—sports bars, nightclubs, and quick-service bars—benefit from the disposability and speed of bar napkins. A bartender can grab ten at a time, drop them under drinks, and keep moving.

3. Lower Upfront Cost

Per unit, napkins are cheaper than coasters and easier to source. This matters in venues with high turnover or lower-margin drink programs.

4. Visual Cleanliness

A fresh white napkin instantly looks clean. A used coaster, on the other hand, can start to show wear halfway through service unless replaced frequently.

What Guests Notice (Even When Operators Think They Don't)

Guests subconsciously associate **coasters** with craft cocktail programs, wine bars, upscale lounges, and premium experiences.

They associate **bar napkins** with casual, high-energy, fast-service environments.

Place a craft Old Fashioned on a bar napkin and it feels out of place.

Place a vodka soda on a custom coaster in a nightclub and it may feel like overkill.

The medium matters.

Operational Considerations

Labor

Napkins are faster to grab and replace, but they often create more waste and require more restocking. Coasters reduce restocking, yet require someone to collect, wipe, or toss them throughout the night.

Waste & Sustainability

Bar napkins produce high volumes of waste—often thousands a week. Compostable or recycled-content coasters reduce this footprint and provide a sustainability talking point for marketing materials or menu inserts.

Durability in Humid or Outdoor Settings

Paper napkins wilt outdoors. Coasters—especially pulp or rubber-backed options—hold up better on patios, poolside bars, or humid environments.

So Which Should You Use? A Consultant's Recommendation

If you run an upscale, craft-forward, or brand-focused bar: Choose coasters.

They support premium positioning, control moisture better, and enhance brand storytelling.

If you run a volume-heavy sports bar, nightclub, or casual restaurant bar: Choose bar napkins.

They're inexpensive, functional, and support fast service.

If you run a mid-range, mixed-format operation: Use a hybrid approach.

- Coasters for signature cocktails, whiskey flights, wine service, tasting menus.
- Napkins for high-volume mixed drinks, soft drinks, or outdoor seating.
- Seasonal coasters for special events, brand partnerships, or limited-time menus.

Final Takeaway

Something as simple as what goes under a drink sends a message about your bar program's identity, standards, and operating philosophy. Whether you choose coasters, bar napkins, or a strategic blend of both, make the decision intentionally—not out of habit.

In hospitality, the smallest decisions often define the biggest impressions.