

A smiling woman with long, wavy red hair is the central figure. She is wearing a pink and white horizontally striped halter-neck top. She holds a clear glass filled with a light-colored beverage, ice, and a lime wedge. A red straw is in the drink. The background is a dimly lit bar with various bottles on the counter, including one labeled 'VEDKA'. A red and white striped awning is visible above her. The overall lighting is warm and ambient.

Personality & Style

How to Become a Better Bartender

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How to Be a Better Bartender

Lesson 3

A subtle smile... a light grazing touch as she runs past... and you feel special. She has no time for a conversation. but you know she is happy to have you on her bar. This is just one way a bartender interacts with the customers. Being pleasant and able to talk to strangers, is a necessary requirement; after all, every customer is a stranger to you at least once. Some bartenders are comedians and love to tell jokes; though telling a joke is considered an art; and not everyone can pull it off. Others are more concerned about their service level and will concentrate on the actual tasks at hand... only talking to customers when they have the time. A true Mixologist will concentrate on creating the “perfect” cocktail; believing their level of knowledge and expertise is considered entertainment. A good bartender can do it all, while multi-tasking, and still have a good time while doing it.

When a new bartender steps behind the bar after their initial training, most will be a little overwhelmed. Then after a few minutes they'll settle down and then the real fear sets in; between the drink recipes, the computer, interacting with customers, cocktail servers and managers watching your every move, its normal. The good ones will have a personality, and will show a little self-confidence, in spite of their lack of knowledge and experience. Their personality will get them through the rough patches and their confidence won't let them fail. It will only be a matter of time for them to accumulate the knowledge and experience to get them to the next level.

A good personality will offset the lack of knowledge almost every time. A customer that likes your attitude and enjoys your company will get past the fact that you didn't know the exact recipe of his favorite cocktail. After a few minutes, you will soon make him his next favorite cocktail.

Style, combined with your own personality can be the next level of your hospitality journey. A little this, a little that, a slight flourish as the bartender pours a “straight up” martini from the just shaken mixing glass to a freshly chilled martini glass, adding the freshly prepared garnish, and looking into the customers eyes while gently placing the drink in front of the customer on a napkin that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. It doesn't take much to set yourself a notch above the.

The corner of my bar

This was a special place, the corner of the bar where all of my regular customers and friends congregated, every day... before laptops... before cell phones... there was the “neighborhood bar”. All of my regular customers were successful, judging from the amount of time and money they spent with me; but they never seemed to go to an office for any length of time. The key was finding the right place, with the right group of professional customers that got along *and* the right group of professionals working the bar.

There are two wells behind the bar, one set up at the far end to service the main dining rooms; the other located at the other end to service the corner of the bar and the bar servers, that corner was my home. Many of our guests would use the brass railings on each side of the server station to hang on to; and there was the added benefit of keeping them steady. We had the prettiest and most professional cocktail servers in the area, they were the best; and just one more reason that our core group of regular customers were so loyal. The customers at this corner, on the same stools, everyday that I worked, for years; and whom I considered my friends, my family, and my guests were at the “*Corner of My Bar*”.

Tip of the day: This bartender owned it... worked it... and her customers never left her; even after she left and found a new place to work, her customers followed.

Switching Partners

It was only the third time that the other bartender and I were working together on another busy happy hour. My side of the bar was in great shape, my regulars were drinking and having fun, but her side of the bar seemed a little off. She was uncomfortable and her work was suffering; there were no jokes or stories, no smiles on the faces of her regulars, and she was starting to fall behind. There was a group of three sitting next to her well, giving her a hard time about “taking better care of them”. They were strangers to me and judging by the sexual undertones they were handing out to my partner, strangers to her as well.

It was the perfect opportunity to pull a switch, and I quickly took her place in her well and she started working my side of the bar. It didn't take long for her to be back to the amazing bartender that we loved, and the rude group quickly paid their tab and left; apparently my tight little ass wasn't something they were in the mood for. A few minutes later we gracefully switched back; as if nothing had happened, we made a good team.

Tip of the day: There will be times at the bar that a personality “switch” will make for a better working environment when dealing with new customers. this isn't about you... it's about what will make your customer more comfortable.

Too much to drink

Treat your guests like family and learn to take care of them. In all the years behind the bar, I never really cut anyone off because they were getting too drunk; but I knew my bar, my family, extremely well. As family, I would never embarrass them, but they all knew that when I place a bowl of soup and some bread in front of them, that it was time to stop drinking and start eating, and I usually would serve them water after that. I'm not exactly sure why they always did what I told them to do, but I like to think that they just knew that I cared enough about them to take care of them.

Every once in a while, I would ease up on their alcohol intake without them ever realizing that they were being treated differently; I loved “Hank,” but every so often he would start to “power drink”, drinking faster than I could almost pour them. On those rare occasions, I would cut the amount of alcohol I would pour in half, and float just a little bit on the tip of the straw or the top of the drink; that way he would get the first sip of the drink as pure alcohol and never realize I “short poured” him; then I would do the next drink the same way. He would get two drinks, with the same amount of alcohol as one, but the second drink I would gracefully “comp”.

"Hank" not only stayed sober, he stayed longer, he *thought* he was getting a free drink, which made him feel even more “special”, and he stayed out of trouble. I kept one of my regular customers safe and happy; the bar didn't lose any money because I only charged him for what I poured... I just divided it into two drinks instead of one.

Tip of the day: Keep your guests safe and they'll keep coming back for more. experience kept "Hank" safe, alive and out of jail. a simple DUI can keep a customer out of your bar for at least six months.

Inappropriate comments

Comments made to any woman about oral fixation while on the bar is a common occurrence, especially if the female bartender is attractive; but it still amazes me just how often the term is used in an attempt to get a sexual response from the bartender. That being said...

I was on my way to the bar to start my shift, when I looked over to see a woman in the car next to me smoking a cigarette; and from the way she was handling it, you would think that it was the most intense sensual experience of her life... so I started thinking, (always an issue), and by the time I made it to work, I had a plan. I asked my manager, Kathleen if she wouldn't mind if I took a poll of our female bar patrons; and after briefly explaining what I had in mind... she said it was no problem, as long as I asked permission first and *politely* ask the questions, and of course, using a little *respect*... it would be a great way to jump start my shift.

I was very polite, and asked only three questions of the women in the bar; "May I ask a slightly sexual question?" and if they said yes... "*Do you smoke, yes or no? Do you enjoy giving oral sex, yes or no?*"

Of the *one hundred* women that I questioned, only eight women did not smoke, and of those eight, only two enjoyed giving oral sex... even with my simple math skills, that meant that if a woman doesn't smoke I would have only a twenty-five percent chance of receiving the benefit. Of the ninety-two women that did smoke... ninety enjoyed giving oral sex; that works out to a 97.7% opportunity. Obviously, there are *huge* benefits to spending some time with women that smoke.

A few days later, on one of my rare days off, I was sitting next to one of the regular customers at the bar. He couldn't stop complaining that the woman next to him smelled like smoke. It was obviously bothering him... a lot, both physically and mentally. So being the gracious, caring, professional bartender that I am... I offered to swap places with him. A few hours and a couple of drinks later, only Kathleen understood... *as she watched me escorting the woman out to her car.*

Tip of the day: Personality and style with a little bar presence and awareness thrown in. I'd love to come up with something insightful for what this has taught me, so that it may help you become a better bartender, but hell, what I did should never have been tolerated... I just got lucky. Bar presence... always pay attention to your surroundings and keep your eyes and ears open, you just never know how much fun it could be.

Bar talk

Bar talk, the usual conversations you hear and sometimes participate in when going to a bar. It doesn't have to be intelligent banter and it sure doesn't have to make sense. Whether the discussion is about sports, politics and religion, or if you think it's going to rain tomorrow, the subject is irrelevant; and all a bartender has to do is show up. Most customers just need a starting point, and they will do most of the talking.

If you are dealing in one of those situations that your customer happens to be someone you don't like.... *it happens...* get over it, start a conversation, and then introduce him to anyone sitting near him. He'll keep talking and you no longer have to worry about entertaining him. If you're *really* lucky, you'll be able to introduce him to many customers sitting at your bar... that you also don't like, or doesn't like you... *that also happens*, and then they can all entertain themselves and you can go back to enjoying your job.

Tip of the day: Whether you consider it a personality trait because you can start a conversation with almost anyone; a creative moment because you get your bar involved with each other; or it's just your personal style: it's an excellent tool that will keep your bar entertained while you get busy pouring drinks.

Foul mouth bitch from hell

One of my regular customers, Libby, was a strong willed, intimidating woman, in charge of the emergency room of the local hospital. As the head nurse, she spent her mornings involved with some of the most traumatic life and death situations imaginable; but at the end of her shift, she would make a beeline for my bar.

The pianist had just arrived and the lounge was starting to fill up with our normal Happy Hour crowd when Libby found her usual place next to the servers station. It must have been tough in the emergency room that day because Libby was in a real foul mood. On a good day she was hard to handle, on a bad day, she could put a foul mouth, truck driving ex-marine to shame... and this was obviously one of those bad days.

The place was rocking, the piano player was *"on fire"* and the entire crowd was loving it. I looked up from my well and noticed that half my bar was lined up three deep to get a drink, the other half had only one patron, Libby. She was cutting loose on anyone within earshot, and just about every customer in the room moved as far away from her as they could get. Now, in my past life, I survived four years in the Marine Corps with thirty-three months of combat in Vietnam. I considered myself relatively fearless, but when Libby was on a roll, I was scared to death, (and I had no doubt that physically, she could kick my ass).

As the bartender, I had to make a quick decision, talk Libby into a calmer state or ask her to leave the bar. I had determined that I would take the forceful approach, (there were a couple of dozen regular customers at the bar that would have loved to jump her if she came after me... *I was feeling almost safe*).

"Libby", I commanded, "Sit Down and Shut Up. You paid \$2.20 for your drink.... that bought you twenty-two inches of space. Now. Sit. Down." With the sternest look I could muster... *"and I don't want you looking left... I don't want you looking right. You sit there, drink your drink, leave the other customers alone, and keep your damn mouth shut.... and I expect a better tip when you leave... any questions?"*

At the time, I had no idea why, but she did exactly what I told her to do. When the stool at the far end of the bar opened up, I moved Libby over so that she would have a little more room and she would be a little farther from the rest of the crowd, but she was behaving. She seemed to physically calm down, and I was amazed when she politely requested another drink. When she finished it, she stood up, left a \$5 tip, and disappeared into the night. (Up to this point of our relationship, she had never left more than a couple of bucks).

Tip of the day: She was a frustrating mean bitch; and when you got to know her, she was still a frustrating mean bitch; but with experience and a little style and common sense, it all worked out for the best.

Ma and Pa Kettle

It was a Saturday afternoon, and my bar was empty, and the only customer entertaining me was Libby. I looked up when the back door opened and in walked an elderly couple that looked as if they walked right out of the American Gothic “Ma and Pa Kettle on the farm” painting. The only thing missing were the bales of hay in the background and Pa Kettle’s pitchfork. Naturally, they had to sit next to Libby, (there were *only* twenty-one additional, empty bar stools, but the two next to Libby were obviously the better choice). “Pa Kettle” had just ordered a beer for himself and a margarita for his wife when Libby opened her mouth with a few choice adjectives. I immediately leaned over to remind her of our past conversations and to keep her fucking mouth shut. Well, I guess “Ma Kettle” took *huge* offense with both my tone of voice and my language.

“How dare you speak to a woman in that tone of voice, that’s disgusting. You should be ashamed of yourself. A real man would never use that kind of language when talking to a lady” and just at that exact moment, Libby spun around, looked at the formidable “Ma Kettle” and exclaimed... *“Shut the fuck up bitch, he knows what he’s doing.”*

Well, “Pa Kettle” lost it, he was laughing so hard that he spilled his drink. “Ma Kettle” was speechless, and was either too embarrassed or too mad, but she just got up and left the bar. They must have been kindred spirits, because after “Pa Kettle” composed himself, he and Libby spent the rest of the afternoon drinking and telling dirty jokes... as “Ma Kettle” sat diligently in their car waiting for Pa.

Tip of the day: The bartender had cared enough to say something when she was out of line, and she was thankful. Most would have thrown her out, but I enjoyed the interaction; and it was all about the delivery...

“dancing diamond joe” on an island

First impressions are so important, and so hard to repair. I had arrived on the island a little early to get accustomed to my new surroundings. I was about to start my first shift at a Club on Catalina Island and I thought I had dressed appropriately, clean white shirt, black bartending vest, and diamonds, everywhere. I had a diamond necklace with a matching diamond pinky ring on one hand, and a ring, with the initials J P, in diamonds, on the other. It took only fifteen minutes for me to realize my huge mistake. The next day I deposited **all** of my jewelry in a safe deposit box at the local bank, but I spent the next two years with the label “Diamond Joe” thrown at me every time a local customer thought I was making more money than he was. *“Why tip? He doesn’t need the money... did you see those Diamonds?”*

The bar was shaped like the bow of a boat, with the cash register located at the front part of the back bar. When standing in front of the register, I could spin in a circle, delivering drinks, while picking up the money from the customers, and ringing the order up on the register, often, without leaving my spot. I became so good at “spinning” in circles that before every shift, I would pour salt on to the wood slats behind the bar to make it easier for my leather soled shoes to spin. On my first Christmas on Catalina, a few of my regular customers bought me a ballerina’s “tutu”, for a Christmas present; they felt that with all the spinning I was doing behind the bar, that I was a natural. The tutu was never worn, but it looked fantastic hanging on the wall in front of the back pool table.

A customer will join you at the bar for a drink, they will stay at the bar for another, and then another, only when they are comfortable with the bar and you. If they are uncomfortable, for any reason, they leave, there is always another bar, and bartender, close by.

Tip of the day: Experience gained, but at what cost; i should have left my ego in my apartment and used a little common sense. on a side note, don't be too concerned with your ego, because sometimes being the brunt of the joke can often lead to great financial reward and keep your customers coming back for more.

"Flair" can cost you

When it comes to *Flair*, before the movie Cocktails, before its ongoing popularity, bartenders were flipping and *sometimes*, actually catching bottles of liquor. A restaurant on the Balboa Peninsula in Southern California was an excellent vehicle for showing off, and working a circular bar places the bartender "on stage" from the moment he steps behind the bar. Flipping bottles, picking them up two at a time, spinning the mixing tins, throwing ice and catching it in the just flipped glass, all came natural to me. It's not until you break something that you realize the repercussions.

It was my fourth Wild Game Night, and we were all pumped up and ready to go. It was also the only night of the month that we needed two bartenders. George was a frail, sixty year old man, but he had spent enough years behind the bar that I found him to be extremely competent and useful. What he lacked in speed, he more than made up for with his knowledge and experience; he knew instinctively what had to be done, what I needed for backup, and he easily managed the bar behind me, keeping our customers entertained so that I could stay focused on all of the server's drink orders, and the bar section directly in front of me... As I was finishing my prep work, I looked around... *it was getting very busy.*

I had just walked behind the bar, when I saw George collapse in front of his station, and about five minutes later, the paramedics were wheeling George to the ambulance, (thank God the fire station was just a few minutes away). I looked around and felt like throwing up; the busiest night of the month was about to start, and I was one bartender short. I immediately converted my workstation into a service bar and asked my boss Max to remove the bar stools in front of me. I then set up my well with as many extra glasses and ice buckets as I could find. Once it started, I was going to have my head in the ice for about four solid hours and I couldn't leave anything to chance. Max took up a position next to my impromptu service bar and started to power down his Vodka rocks. He would sit for hours, watching his customers and keeping an eye on his bartenders, but I knew that it was the number of times that we would put money into *his* cash register that really turned him on.

We were getting busier, it was already two deep on the bar and my servers were ordering drinks, two trays at a time. I was in "the zone", moving quickly, smoothly, and keeping up with the demand. The busier I got, the better the service seemed to be, servers and customers alike were having a good time watching me work the bar... later, I was told that *"It was a thing of beauty"*, but I was way too busy to notice.... or care. I was in the process of making four margaritas and had a bottle of tequila and a bottle of triple sec, two bottles in each hand, when it happened. One of the bottles in my left hand slipped and it hit a couple of the glasses that I had set up. My hand came down on one of the pieces and it sliced open my hand while the rest of the shattered glass fell into the ice bin... I immediately started to use one of my backup ice buckets and was pouring drinks with one hand, as the blood was pouring out of the other. As the drink orders were starting to pile up.... I looked over at a very bleary-eyed Max and almost died when he reminded me of his two basic rules... the *only* two reasons for not working your shift. *"Are you drunk? Are you getting laid back there? No? Then I expect you to finish your shift and do your job"*.

I was fighting a losing battle trying to keep up with the drink orders when I took a step back and asked one of my waitresses to wrap my hand to stop the bleeding. While this was going on, one of my regular customers jumped behind the bar and started to clean out the ice bin to get ready for some clean ice, they both finished about the same time and I was back in business, granted, with only one hand, but I was still able to pour. Even one handed I was still faster than most.

It has been said that a bartender's "flair" can actually result in a customer ordering on average, one more drink per stay, and that makes sense because most of our guests are at the bar for the social interaction and the "show". Unfortunately, too much flair can result in broken glass, whether in the ice, or when it results in cuts and bleeding, it has the opposite effect. The drinks stop, the ice needs to be replaced, the cuts need to be bandaged, and the bartender will be a little slower.

Tip of the day: If you plan on Flair being in your wheelhouse... practice... then practice again. i would never flip a bottle again; but learning to do the job with just a *little flair* is less dangerous, almost as entertaining, and far more rewarding, financially. It's hard to make money if you are on your way to the emergency room to get stitches... and the doctor tells you that won't be able to work for three weeks.

A "Flair" Fail

A friend and I were enjoying a couple of cocktails at a favorite spot of ours in Fashion Island, a large outdoor shopping mall in Newport Beach, California. It is a beautifully appointed Mexican restaurant with a large rectangular bar and usually two to three beautiful bartenders to keep us entertained. As we were about to order lunch, one of the bartenders started to practice his Flair moves. We found it amazing that one bartender chose not to pour drinks and help with the service of a very busy lunch crowd; just to practice flipping bottles.

As our food was delivered, the other two bartenders were in total control and took care of all of the customer's experiences during the lunch rush... they were great; but the "want-to-be flair bartender was a mess. It became obvious very quickly, that he had no clue... dropping more bottles and glasses than he caught... and it was not a pretty sight. The other two bartenders were constantly ducking while trying to maneuver around the clown flipping bottles. The good news is that that bartender lasted only another week.

Tip of the day: Becoming a flair bartender takes practice... and lots of it. training with plastic bottles can be the first step, but there is so much more to consider. Flipping bottles, glasses and twirling the mixing cans is an amazing show when done correctly; but can drive customers away very quickly when it isn't. take the time... put in the effort... and practice, practice, practice.