



Cobb Underage Drinking Task Force

REPORT: EFFECTIVENESS OF ALCOHOL SERVER TRAINING PROGRAMS

Introduction

The merchant education sub-committee reviewed available research literature on the subject of responsible alcohol server training programs. This activity was part of the Cobb Underage Drinking Task Force’s strategic plan and was designed to meet two objectives:

- Increase merchant’s use of commercial best practices
- Increase business compliance with alcohol sales laws

The committee also reviewed the Responsible Alcohol Sales/Service Session Evaluation prepared by Wellsys Corporation (re: the RASS Policy Workshop developed by the Cobb Underage Drinking Task Force and Evindi), and funded by the Governor’s Office of Highway Safety. (The RASS Policy Workshop is NOT an ‘alcohol server training program’. *This workshop presents information to business owners and alcohol licensees about how to establish comprehensive commercial compliance programs, of which effective alcohol server training programs are just one component.*)

This report summarizes the results of the committee’s findings, with the hope it can help policy makers and business owners alike in their search for more effective alcohol server training programs.

However, please note: *alcohol server training* in just one component of effective researched-based commercial compliance programs; *effective written policies and monitoring and supervision of employees* are the two other components necessary. Evidence suggests significant compliance and sustained results can be expected when businesses implement all three components.

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Overview of Findings

- The purpose of alcohol server training programs is to teach alcohol establishment personnel how to serve/sell alcohol in ways which avoid sales to underage and intoxicated patrons.
- Alcohol server training programs are popular, though their effectiveness is limited at best.
- Few such training programs test or assess whether or not they have met their intended purpose.
- Many programs provide knowledge based information rather than skills and incentives necessary to change and/or support desired behaviors.
- Alcohol server training programs focus exclusively on server/seller behaviors, ignoring the role management behaviors and policies have on server/seller behaviors.
- Management can influence the degree of responsible alcohol sales and service by staff.
- Without specific policies and enforcement in place, alcohol server training programs are ineffective.
- Alcohol server training programs are not standardized and vary widely in content, use of behavior change methods, and quality of training.
- Simply having manager discussions with employees, or having employees watch a brief training videotape at the start of employment, is not adequate.
- Alcohol server training programs need to motivate participants to change and/or support desired behaviors. Behavior change is predictable based on certain beliefs; i.e. there is a credible risk if behavior is not changed, and perceiving risks and consequences as serious.
- Components of successful alcohol server training programs include:
 - Addressing the proper audience (wait staff, clerks, managers, etc.),
 - Covering relevant content areas,
 - Use of behavioral change techniques (interactive exercise, role-play, etc.), and
 - Use of appropriate communication methods (credible messengers, skilled trainers, cultural appropriateness, etc.).
- Evaluation findings re: RASS Policy Workshop – participants said; (98%) they would recommend the workshop to others, (99.7%) they met their learning objectives, and most responded they would change the way they do business to reduce their risk and liability by developing written guidelines/policies, providing more staff training, and checking IDs more consistently.

Components of Successful Alcohol Server Training Programs

Target Audience –

To increase likelihood of server/seller refusing to sell alcohol to underage and intoxicated customers, programs must be designed for the proper audience.

- There is no “one size fits all,” programs must be tailored to their audience. Who is being trained; wait staff, clerks, or managers? Is audiences’ culture/language/level considered?
- The best alcohol server training programs include and involve management. Without management support and involvement, alcohol server training programs are less effective.

Content –

Effective alcohol server training programs provide information about why exhibiting and/or changing desired employee behaviors is important, yet do not overwhelm an audience with too many details. Key content factors successful programs include are listed below.

- Legal issues – The legal framework for alcohol sale/service to minors or intoxicated people; including criminal, administrative and civil liability and specific consequences for seller/server, manager, and owner.
- Physiological effects of alcohol – A brief overview of how alcohol affects the body and skills to recognize cues of intoxication.
- Perceptions of norms – A facilitated discussion about social norms surrounding underage drinking, intoxication and associated consequences. Emphasis must be put on refusing sale/service to underage and intoxicated patrons as the norm.
- Policies and practices of the establishment – Demonstrate and practice skills required in order to comply with establishment policies for responsible alcohol sale/service. Discuss how seller/server practices will be monitored, by management and law enforcement.
- Support for specific types of preventive, proactive interventions – A description of risks and rewards/consequences for meeting, or failing to meet, specific management expectations.
- Age verification techniques – Demonstrate and practice skills required to verify the legal age of customers and how to refuse sale/service, if necessary.
- Pre/Post test – A written test to determine whether learning objectives were reached. What knowledge, attitudes and skills were acquired and by whom? Written tests can alert management to employees who may put them at risk and identify warranted and specific follow-up actions necessary.

Behavioral Change Methods –

In addition to content knowledge, specific techniques for refusing an illegal alcohol sale/service requires skill development.

- Preventing intoxication – Demonstrate and practice desired seller/server behaviors using realistic situations. Show (not just ‘tell’) how seller/server can prevent customers from becoming intoxicated; i.e. promotion of food and non-alcoholic beverages, removal of alcohol, and calling a manager, etc.
- Preventing underage drinking – Demonstrate and practice desired seller/server behaviors using realistic situations. Show how seller/server can request proper ID of all customers under age 40, and how to verify customers’ legal age, etc.
- Build skill level and self-efficacy – Break down desired behaviors into smaller components and have seller/server repeat and practice components through role-play exercises.
- Incentives and penalties – Develop and implement penalties and incentives for desired seller/server behaviors. Ask seller/server what kinds of rewards might motivate desired behaviors, then use as incentives consistently.

Communication Methods –

Training programs need to capture and maintain participant’s attention. Major points of the training program should be repeated many times through multiple channels such as videos, lectures, discussions, role-plays, exercises and activities.

- Realism – Use real life situations, relevant scenarios, and credible role models.
- Respectful of audience – Use tone and attitude that respects the audience and respectful attention getting techniques such as; appropriate humor, quality visual aids, video montage, even music, etc.
- Production quality – Overall packaging and production values; ease of use, layout, support materials, training manuals, pre/post test, etc.

- Credible messages and trainer – Training messages must be relevant to the audience. Audiences need to respect and relate to trainers; the messenger is as important as the message. Quality trainers exhibit confidence and competence in delivering the training program content and have experience in managing group dynamics and a genuine interest in serving groups' learning objectives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Alcohol server training programs alone cannot deliver desired responsible alcohol server/seller practices. Training programs must be supported by policy and enforcement strategies.

Developing alcohol server training program standards based on the components of successful training programs, listed herein, is in the best interests of policy makers and business owners alike.

Business owners can take the lead and use this report to assist them when selecting an alcohol server training program to implement in their business, as part of a comprehensive commercial compliance program.

Business owners can ask critically important questions of prospective alcohol server training program vendors, to ensure that programs they consider include all the components of successful training programs, as listed herein.

Taskforce members can share this report broadly with interested stakeholders: business owners, policy makers, law enforcement, and training program vendors.

Bibliography

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