

SHOWCASING BAR EXCELLENCE: UNIVERSITY OF READING

When you grow your annual turnover from £144,000 to £2.5million in the space of eight years, you know you're onto a good thing. But Matt Tebbitt, University of Reading's Head of Residential Catering and Bars, is not resting on his laurels.



When Matt joined in 2010, the University had 10 campus bars managed as separate entities. He and his team worked to centralise the bar offering and condensed them into seven outlets, focusing on different themes and a diverse range.

The key, Matt observes, is viewing the bars as a whole experience rather than just a place to drink. Equal time and effort must be put into improving the food offering in the bars as well as the drink, and not forgetting the social experience too. 'Grammability' (aka Instagrammable food and drink) is widespread amongst students, and Matt tells his team "if you're not proud to put an image of your food or drink on social media yourself, saying 'I did this at work today' then we shouldn't be serving it". Matt also draws on the diversification of the alcohol ranges as a factor in the University's success, with each outlet owning its own style: "Instead of running lots of bars that are all the same, we realised we had to offer something different to appeal to different groups of people and get multiple visits a week". Whether students fancy a quiet cocktail, a craft beer in a high volume setting, or a malt whisky sat outdoors, there's "something for everyone depending on your mood".

"Failing at things is part of succeeding", Matt states. He often comments on the positivity and 'get up and go' attitude of his 140+ strong team – all of whom are students or alumni. His team are actively encouraged to suggest new ideas, and don't shy away from doing so. "If someone thinks something is a good idea, there's a reason for that. Having the culture of trying, even if it ends up failing, means that we have a better understanding of what can work. Equally we can also recognise if something that has worked in the past, is no longer keeping up", which gives Matt and his team the opportunity to constantly strive for



An example of the self-service beer wall

innovation, implement new ideas and improve their offering.

One of these ideas has been so successful that it received national press coverage and immense social media chatter; the self-service Beer Wall. With 16 taps on the wall, offering 12 beers, the system has helped to reduce queues at one of Reading's busiest bars, and increased sales. "There is always a member of staff at the wall but they aren't preoccupied with other things, their one job is to monitor the wall, check IDs and that no one is too drunk to be served".

And that taps into the high ethical standards that the University adopts as well: "a strong bar operation means that people aren't drinking in halls as much which can lead to excessive and irresponsible drinking,"

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University of Reading



University of Reading's Ice Bar

Matt notes, "if you have lots of amazing bars for students to choose from, then they'll choose to come to you first – and we can measure the quantities."

Another key topic Matt continues to circle back to is the importance of quality products; "we sell some quite expensive draught beers and cool craft beers but we always make sure our price point is below the high street. We're trying to counteract the view that universities are cheap". By pricing their core group of products competitively, they build a belief of good value. This year will also see the introduction of more single price points; having a selection of gin at the same price gives them the flexibility to raise the overall price – "we'll have a house gin that's lower in price, then everything else we put at a single price so people are less scared of trying something new".

Constantly evolving the bar offering and trying to improve the food offering, means Matt and his team are always busy, so it's important that there are people on hand to support them when needed, and this is where TUCO come in. Matt notes: "having all the tendering already done is super helpful

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– it means we can focus on sales without worrying about admin and contracts. I'd have a lot more work to do without TUCO". The flexibility of the alcohol framework is key too "the best thing about the alcohol framework is the variety and flexibility; we're not tied to brands so we can shop around and product switch which gives us great value." It also means the diverse bar outlets don't need to use the same suppliers in every bar, they can mix and match and will always strive to offer students a different experience in every outlet. "The TUCO alcohol framework also means there's no need to go through a full OJEU procurement process again because nominated suppliers are already vetted", he says, "they're able to drive down prices for us and help with cost savings."

Another member benefit is having access to a wide range of subsidised study tours which Matt and his team have taken advantage of. Matt also headed up the New York Study Tour, designed to inspire bar staff to reignite their campus bars, where he came back with a wealth of ideas.

"We're not perfect, but I'm pretty proud of what we do here", Matt summarises. And it's clear to see why.

About TUCO

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