



BEHIND THE BAR

How to Stand Out in a Saturated Market



For example, even if your bar isn't the only one in Scotland that focuses on whiskey, there are ways to set your bar apart. (Photo: [puchkovo48](#) /iStock)

If you're looking for bourbon in Louisville, you won't have to look hard, and you won't have to go far in Edinburgh to find [good Scotch whisky](#). This is great news if you're heading out on the town, but if you're trying to run a bar in an area with a high saturation of similar places, it might be the last thing you want to hear.

We caught up with several bar owners and general managers on what's worked for them, even when the competition is stiff.

Be specific (and excellent)

For Chris White, general manager of [Usquabae Whisky Bar](#) in Edinburgh, and editor of

the [Edinburgh Whisky blog](#), it all starts with the back bar. “I really wanted to focus on bottles that people wouldn't normally be able to get their hands on,” he says. “Obviously, you've got to have the big guns, but I thought, as a whisky geek, when I walk into a whisky bar what do I want to see? It's single cask bottlings, it's discontinued bottlings, it's whiskies released by independent bottlers. A lot of these things are only available at auction or if they are available in retail, they command a very very high price. I wanted to create an environment where people could come in and try things that they'd never normally have the opportunity to try.”

Matthew Landan, proprietor of [Haymarket Whiskey Bar](#) in Louisville Kentucky, also takes his back bar seriously. “You can't find a bar in Louisville that's not going to have twenty different bourbons on the back bar, so in that sense, every bar in Louisville is a bourbon bar,” he says. “But there's nobody in Louisville but one or two places that are going to have anything close to our bourbon list, which is over 300 different expressions of American whiskey and counting.”

Staff matters

“We make sure, first and foremost, that we acquire and keep the most important asset we have, which is our staff,” says Eric Lingenfelder, co-owner of the [Verant Group](#), which holds two San Diego beach bars in Pacific Beach and Mission Beach, among other properties. “I think that becomes very critical, because places come and go, and as places open up that are bigger or newer, the one thing that doesn't change is the quality of your staff, so that's something I think that we keep at the forefront of our thoughts on a daily basis: how can we keep the happiest staff?” Lingenfelder's oldest bar, in Pacific Beach, has lasted nineteen years and is still going strong.

Within six months of opening, Usquabae was rated number one on TripAdvisor in Edinburgh for places to eat and drink. “A lot of that was based on the staff and on the service,” says White. “I spent a lot of time training the staff up so they were comfortable chatting to customers at all ends of the spectrum, from novices right through to real connoisseurs, and geeks like myself, about the absolute minutiae of whisky. When I was recruiting I wasn't necessarily looking for people that had loads of whisky knowledge, because that can be taught, it was more about getting the right personalities in the bar. You can bring the knowledge to them from there.”

Keep to your core

“I think if you believe in your concept and you're doing it well, and you have that community support, because you've actually been in the community, at the end of the day it's all about service and being someplace where [people can go and build their own community](#),” says Landan. “I think if you're doing all of that, then I think that you don't have a lot to fear from the next copycat or the hot new bar because of your history and your dedication to the craft of hospitality. People go to the hot new place but they always come home.”

When Natasha David opened **Nitecap** along with her partners, in New York City's Lower East Side, she wanted to differentiate the bar from others in the neighborhood, but also from its sibling bar, Death & Company. The concept was simple: they wanted a bar that didn't feel snobby. "I feel like people are drawn to coming there because they can get something that's really delicious and has a lot of care and thought behind it, but they don't feel like they're being talked down to if they don't know an ingredient," says David. "We wanted it to feel very relaxed."

Although there are others attempting a similar setting, even in the same neighborhood, David is optimistic about standing out and continuing to thrive. "Maybe this is very idealistic of me, but I think every single person has something very different and unique about them, so the vision that they have is going to be different from somebody else," she says. "I think overthinking it and constantly thinking of everybody as your competition and trying to outsmart everybody isn't going to get you anywhere. I think working in harmony with your environment is much more productive."

Community not competition

Rather than shying away from saturated markets, Lingenfelder embraces them. "I have a lot of people who have asked me over the years: 'Are you worried about this guy opening up right next door?' or 'There's a new bar going in around the corner.' I'm not worried because I truly believe that business breeds business. The more quality locations that we can get around us, the better, as a whole, the area is going to do," he says. When he's put bars into slower areas, he's noticed that business isn't as brisk. "If you can switch around your mentality to embrace the businesses that are around you, and hope that everybody continues to raise the level of the product and the service, you're going to create an environment with a lot more longevity. I think that's good for everybody."

"All the other whisky bars in town, we know the staff quite well, we see them at different trade trainings that **brand ambassadors** might do, at trips to distilleries, or we simply visit each other's bars just to see what's cool," says White. "It's a very very friendly town in general, but certainly within the hospitality industry, and once you narrow that down farther, to the whisky industry, it is quite small. Everybody does know everybody, and everybody's very supportive of each other, so it's quite easy to fit in."

"Maybe I should see all these other cocktail bars in my neighborhood as competition, but I don't," says David. "I feel like it draws more people into the neighborhood, which then draws more people to my bar, so I actually think it's great the more cocktail bars that open down the street from us because I think, rather than having people seek out this one bar, and coming all the way down for this one thing, you're more motivated to come if you can experience a few different bars."

Grow organically

While it can be tempting to rely on slick advertising, promotions, and other expensive endeavors, organic growth is often the most sustainable over time. “You've got to be patient,” says Landan. “If you're real and you're authentic, that wins the day.”

“We don't spend a lot of money on advertising, we don't have a lot of magazine or radio ads,” says Lingenfelder “We've really tried to stay true to building it organically. A lot of that is through the hospitality industry, making sure that when other bartenders around town come into our location they are taken care of above and beyond. Also, making sure that our staff is there with us, because I think that's your biggest word of mouth,” he says. “I think that's what will help you get the longevity. It doesn't mean we don't try specials, or we don't try any promotions or adapt to things, but it's rooted very deep in the way that we try to build our culture and our clientele.”

While there are never any guarantees of success, White encourages perseverance and **maintaining passion for your concept**. “As long as you've got the drive, the passion and the enthusiasm, and you've got a sound knowledge base of the category you're in, don't cut corners, and work hard, you will get there,” he says. “There's no secret. There's no magic recipe. As long as you believe in what you're doing and you put everything you can into it, then there's no reason why you shouldn't succeed.”