

March 25, 2014

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Carolynne Gamble

Cell: 707-603-9303

707-963-1613

email: carolynnegamble@sbcglobal.net

Hospitality Trends Discussed at the 9th Annual Wine Country Hospitality Symposium

Hospitality professionals of Napa and Sonoma wine country converged at Napa Valley College Upper Valley campus on Tuesday, March 25 for the industry's cherished Hospitality Symposium. Trends and their corresponding challenges and opportunities were the primary theme, including both local and global concerns.

Event organizer Charlie Monahan explained "the symposium's goal is to provide the most-up-to-date tools of the trade – to champion best practices for hospitality professionals to engage their customers on all levels." Monahan, Director of the Business & Entrepreneurship Center at Napa Valley College, says "It's an important educational forum for both students getting ready to enter the hospitality field, as well and for seasoned hospitality professionals and business owners."

At the top of the list of trends: the growth of global tourism. Ben Stone, Director of the Sonoma County Economic Development Bureau, noted a growth in "favorable tourism" meaning leisure and hospitality motivated travel. With visitors spending an average of \$1,000 per person, the economic impact of a growing tourist population is considerable. "With the increase in global travel comes the need for international knowledge," says Stone, pointing out hospitality-driven businesses need to be culturally adept – to cater to a diversity of tastes and interests.

Drawing tourism from China remains a particular interest for many hospitality professionals, who are keen to capitalize on the rapid increase of the Chinese economy and its parallel interest in American experiences and products. In a panel discussion about catering to tourists from China, hospitality professionals were challenged to consider whether their organizations are "China-ready" including offering website content in Chinese, having a staff member who speaks Mandarin, and being visible in popular Chinese social media and review sites online.

Social media remains at the top of the list for anyone in the hospitality industry, as social media use continues to grow both domestically and globally. According to Melodie Hilton, Director of Marketing and PR for the Napa River Inn, the predominant trends focus on content marketing and measuring the "ROR" – return on relationship – to determine success of social media investment. Building awareness, she says, is not enough. Likewise, simply measuring the number

of people who view your social media is not enough; “followers may not be business prospects or [even] reliable business indicators.”

Of course, understanding the ROR means being able to measure and track customers as they follow channels both online and off to learn what they spend. Randy Martinsen of Grgich Hills Estate Winery discussed the importance of having the right tools to collect and manage customer information. According to Martinsen, using an appropriate customer relationship management (CRM) system is essential at all stages of interaction. The stages he duly noted included: interrupting, engaging, educating, offering, and tracking success of customer emails and other communications or campaigns.

With increased use of social media comes a need for risk and crisis management planning, according to Andrew Healy, Chief Social Officer of 3 rock marketing. Says Healy, once a post or image has been shared, the owner loses control of it, and even simple postings by an employee on their own time can be connected with the company they work for. The effects of a major blunder can destroy years of relationship and branding work.

Businesses need to take a strategic approach, including establishing a keychain document (a document that tracks who has access to all social media and a master login and password), creating a social media manual/handbook for employees, providing employee training, and establishing clear guidelines about what is acceptable in terms of online posting about sensitive topics such as coworkers, competition, and even major global events. Because the lines blur when employees network socially on their own behalf, he says, “you can’t tell employees what to do [in their own time/on their own sites] but you *can* tell them what you expect.”

Engaging employees was a topic specifically addressed by Don Shindle, General Manager at the Westin Verasa in Napa. While Shindle noted that “this is a time of incredible change,” working with employees remains a timeless issue for hospitality – and encouraging employees and celebrating their successes have no sign of trending out. The hospitality industry relies on creating an amazing experience, one that starts with employees who are empowered to do that.

When it comes to creating an experience, Clif Family Winery is a powerhouse. General Manager Linzi Gay and Director of Hospitality Meg Barkley shared the unique and innovative experience that is the core of the winery’s business model. Bringing together cycling and outdoor activities with wine tasting and food pairings – what they call “Spin, Sip and Savor” – Clif Family Winery is geared to resonate with people wanting more than a typical wine-only experience. Their next step in creating a unique experience will come with the winery’s launch of its own food truck, which is currently in production.

Wineries aren’t the only ones to embrace innovation in Napa and Sonoma Valleys. The increased interest in new beverage options has spurred another significant trend: growth of craft breweries and distilleries. Ron Limbusch of Lagunitas Brewery noted that there are 19 craft breweries in Sonoma County alone. Paul Martin of Napa Valley Distillery, added “there’s a push in craft distilleries mirroring [the growth of] craft breweries.” Consumer interest in

higher quality alcohol and a local and customer-centric experience (referred to a “back to hospitality” trend), presents an opportunity for artisan distilleries and brewers, as well as for mixologists looking to differentiate their beverage options.

Rounding off the symposium was a reminder that agriculture as well as tourism remains a calling card for our economy. Sustainability is increasingly important for visitors to the wine country; they are more environmentally-conscious and are eager to appreciate locally-made products beyond wine.

As Sandy Elles, Executive Director at the Napa Valley Farm Bureau, and Greg Clark, Napa County Agricultural Commissioner, indicated, “we need to diversify or crop production ...to create alternative and complimentary economic opportunities.” Yet with this growth come challenges of sustainability, such as managing traffic, water supply, the availability of affordable land for alternative use, and proliferation of government regulation and fees.

It’s a sound reminder that the ability of the hospitality industry to embrace the emerging opportunities and generate economic growth is more than about an individual business or even group of businesses: it’s about maintaining the successful regional character and branding that has made Napa and Sonoma Valleys what they are.

For more information about the Business & Entrepreneurship Center at Napa Valley College, visit www.becatnvc.com. For small businesses seeking assistance in launching and growing, visit the Napa Small Business Development Center at napa.org.