

Exploding the myths of the BAR SCENE

Christina Hammett
Venture Magazine

Glasses clink and music emanates from a pay-n-play plastic jukebox just a notch below concert level. Smoke billows through the dense crowd as people mill about, talking loudly and laughing, arguing, and even on occasion, crying.

This is the habitat of the bartender.

At a glance, bartending may seem like an easy job, but the responsibility and liabilities involved make it more difficult than it sometimes appears. "You think it'd be an easy job, but it's not," said Becky Lukesh, 29, a bartender at Pub 181 in Portland. "But it can be a pretty good job if you treat it professionally."

There are many aspects of the bar scene that make a bartender's life interesting and difficult. But what makes the job everything it is? What goes into running a bar?

Here is a behind the scenes look at the corner pub, the local hangout - your friendly neighborhood bar.

Bartenders: Akin to Catholic Priests?

Like a Catholic confessional, many bartenders experience their fair share of customers who have the tendency to communicate just about anything that comes to mind.

From drug addictions to sex lives, nothing seems off-limits when alcohol is involved.

"It's very therapeutic for people," said Jeremy Klein, 22, a bartender at Geno's in Gresham. "They talk to you and share their stories with you because they don't know you and maybe you have a nice smile. It could be any number of things. I think most just need the therapy and they do that with a drink and a bartender."

Lukesh said she hears a lot of crazy things everyday. "I do the same thing though, so it's a give-give situation. I have a huge group of regulars and they get to know you, and even though you may not have a relationship outside the bar, you're still friends here," she said. "(After all,) alcohol is the truth serum."

If your problem is loneliness...

Being a bartender usually means receiving a lot of unwanted and sometimes wanted attention from the opposite sex on a daily basis. Lynette Larsen, 28, a bartender and cocktail waitress at B&I Buzz Pub in Rockwood, said she gets picked-up on during every shift.

"It starts when I walk in and it doesn't stop until the door closes," she said. "Even when I'm standing out front after work (it continues)."

Lukesh said the same happens to her regularly. "You get used to it. There are professional ways of dealing with it though."

She added that the most amusing pick-up line she had ever received was the classic standby, "You're pretty."

"Usually it's when someone is really drunk. It's pretty ridiculous but it makes me laugh really hard," she added.

Larsen recalled one incident involving the worst line she had ever heard. "At work one day, this guy came up to me and said, 'how does it feel being the finest bitch I've ever seen?' I said, 'did you call me a bitch?' I mean, really? Does that ever work?"

Pushing the Limit

Every person is different; therefore each person's tolerance level is different too. Bartenders must be able to read people and realize when they have reached their own personal limit. However, this task can be rather daunting when facing an overpopulated bar.

"For the majority of people, there are tell-tale signs, but everyone is different. Usually I notice how people are when they get here and then I gauge from that," said Klein. "The best approach to cutting someone off is to talk to them about it before they get drunk and let them know that you are going to serve them this amount of alcohol in this many hours and that you will limit them once they reach that point."

"You have to be delicate and you never say the word 'cut-off'. Usually they just end up walking home because their friends take their car keys," he added.

When customers have reached their limit, Larsen said she and her co-workers try a number of things to avoid the possibility of them driving home. "A lot of people are told they can't drive home and it causes a lot of problems. (But) we have really good security guards here," she said. "We call them a cab. It's good because the owners know most of the customers and they work on getting them home."

Fakin' It

While dealing with making drinks, monitoring customers, and basically keeping order, bartenders must also be on

the lookout for fake IDs and counterfeit money. As technology continues to grow, these items become far harder to detect. Lukesh, who works day shifts at Pub 181, said she used to see a lot of fakes when she worked the evening shift. "Fake IDs used to happen a lot when I worked at night. Now that I work days, I don't see it as much. With counterfeit money, we're pretty diligent, so it doesn't happen a lot. I've never taken fake money but it (comes up) maybe once a year."

Klein said counterfeit money has never really been an issue at his bar, but fake IDs are a constant issue. "We get fake IDs usually once a week on special nights (evenings with drink specials)."

Who Hits on Whom More?

Many people go into bars searching for a little adventure and romance, but do men mainly take charge in the initial pick-up or do women do most of the work?

Larsen said mostly men hit on women, but there are a few exceptions to that rule. "Random women will come in that get drinks bought for them. Some women don't ever buy themselves a drink," she said.

Lukesh said the same. "There are more men in the bar, just by sheer numbers, but I see women do it too. I have seen it work, but I have also seen it not work."

However, Klein said it could be about equal. "Mostly we get a lot of guys. There are a select few who have been here so long and those guys go after the girls," he said. "But if they're strangers, the girl will usually go after the guy. With women, it's mostly about eye contact, and then they move in closer to the bar area. If they want something they'll usually go for it. It's pretty slow progress, but it's progress."

Shady Business

Occasionally, customers will come in that have absolutely no reason to be there - except for drugs. Whether they are obvious or not, bartenders need to be up to par on what to look for and how to keep it from happening.

Larsen said she has dealt with many shady customers at work. "You see shady things every once in a while. We had this pretty interesting group of guys that would come in, and they don't drink any alcohol. Every once in a while they would play a game of pool, but

mostly they would just sit and pass matchbooks around. Mostly all of them have been kicked out; at least all of the obvious ones have been."

Cocaine has been a problem within bars in the area because it can be difficult to detect until after it is already used. "The bathrooms are a pretty popular place because they're private and no one is in there. There is residue left sometimes in the bathroom when we're cleaning up in the morning. I'm pretty sure it happens a lot in the parking lot too. It's pretty obvious when people will come in and someone will close out their tab and leave with them, then come back in ten minutes later and open a new tab. We usually just ask them to leave or say, 'if you want to be here, then stay in here and don't keep coming in and out,'" said Klein.

Fight!

When alcohol is a factor, anger can follow closely behind and bartending requires that you notice such conflict before it escalates. Klein said if people get violent, the best thing to do is just kick them out. "If I know them and I want to be nice, I'll get between them and try to stop it. But you can't be pushed around. You can't leave room for that kind of stuff."

Lukesh said the best fight she ever witnessed at work was about six years ago when a man broke a bottle and gashed open another man's head. "He launched himself up over the pool table and a cocktail waitress grabbed him by the shirt and body-slammed him. The best thing was his face when he saw that a woman had taken him down," she said. "I just remember high-fiving her."

But she said she prefers to catch it before it reaches the point of violence. "I usually try to stop it before it is escalated. They need to be separated and I don't care who is right sometimes but go on whoever is being the most aggressive," said Lukesh. "If you can't control yourself, you can't drink here."

These are only a few of the mysteries surrounding the bar scene, but there are many more issues lurking within the dim light and shadow of the local bar. Lukesh said that despite the responsibilities and difficulties involved in bartending, she enjoys her job. "There are a lot of benefits, like freedom of schedule and extra money. That's probably one of the best things - you can make as much money as you want, you just have to take extra shifts. The best things (about working at Pub 181) are meeting my husband and a lot of friends. (Despite the bad), there are a lot of good people you come across in this business."

Graphic by Evan Green

