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Ask five brand ambassadors—and the operators that they work with—what they do and you'll get five different responses. Even Charlotte Voisey, portfolio ambassador for William Grant & Sons and the unofficial “Queen of All Brand Ambassadors,” has difficulty providing a definitive response: “I’ve even had my mother out on the road for a week watching me, and at the end of it she turns around and says, ‘So, what do you do for a living?’”

So how is a bar or restaurant operator expected to figure out how to make the best use of brand ambassadors, if these individuals defy categorization? Especially as the role continues to evolve? And how can they best use their services without having their brand mix changed significantly?

THE BRAND AMBASSADOR, EXPLAINED

“For us, a brand ambassador is someone who entertains, educates and passes on the message of the brand,” Voisey sums up. “It’s the embodiment of the brand.”

Although brand ambassadors have been around since the early 1990s, the role got a bump in 2010, when *The New York Times* wrote about the growing trend of bartenders making the leap from drink-slinger to spirits brand promoters. Since then, the number of brand ambassadors has surged, and many modern bartenders actively seek out opportunities to represent different brands.

However, the role remains a fluid one. “We wear so many hats,” explains Borys Saciek, who has been the 42Below Vodka

Brand Ambassador (part of the Bacardi portfolio) for the past three years. For example, he lists judging or hosting cocktail competitions, creating cocktail menus and drinks to showcase the brand, educational speaking, hosting parties, attending conventions and even the odd media appearance among his many and varied responsibilities.

The strategies also vary depending on a brand's existing (or target) demographic and a restaurant's specific promotional and educational needs. Almost all major suppliers and brands are bringing on experienced brand ambassadors to market their portfolios. Many of the services they offer can greatly benefit a restaurant's drinks program and help beverage directors come up with good, new ideas.

THE BRAND AMBASSADOR, EVOLVED

Meanwhile, the spectrum of "ambassadors" has widened, encompassing beer and wine (not just spirits); part-time and regional roles; and other creative variations.

In addition to full-time ambassadors, it's become increasingly common for working bartenders to moonlight as brand reps, often providing their expertise within a specific region. Almost every major supplier these days has a brand ambassador, or two, who they are eager to have work the on-premise market.

Some ambassadors also work full-time in a bar or restaurant, giving them added integrity. For example, brand liaison Kate Grutman retains her usual position running Sotto, a bar in Los Angeles, even as she promotes Pink Pigeon rum, a brand that debuted in the U.S. earlier this year. "We're just getting started, so I'm able to do both," she explains.

Grutman also notes that being a working bartender is helpful in gaining the trust and respect of peers. "It's super important not to be a hired spokesperson, but to be part of the community," she says emphatically.

Since Pink Pigeon is an emerging brand for U.S. drinkers, and has an unusual style—as a spiced white rum—Grutman has centered her efforts around "research and development," tweaking classic recipes like the Daiquiri and educating bartenders how to work with the product.

THE WINE TAKE

Spirits ambassadors have been so effective as marketing tools that wine and beer companies are adding them to their roster. Consider Buena Vista Winery's mold-breaking variation on the "ambassador" role. In Sonoma, CA, George Webber, a trained professional actor—not a bartender—dons historical costume and accent to morph into "The Count of Buena Vista," conveying the winery's history while staying in character.

Webber's goals align perfectly with those of traditional brand ambassadors: educate, entertain, and personify a brand. For example, when Webber travels "I introduce myself to everyone,"

Webber says. "People remember him. I take photos of everyone with the Count," which he later sends, along with an invitation to visit the winery. Ultimately, "It's about trying to break through to form a personal connection with people."

So devoted is Webber, he even wears the costume while in transit. "The Count gets a LOT of looks as he walks through airports," says Webber, with apparent glee.

One measure of success: after a mere six weeks, the Count is so in demand that Buena Vista is strongly considering hiring and training other "Counts" to man the winery while Webber is on the road.

WHAT CAN BRAND AMBASSADORS PROVIDE TO OPERATORS?

"My relationship with brand ambassadors is crucial," says Jennifer Cooke, corporate beverage director and trainer for Phillips Foods, where she oversees seven locations based from Washington D.C. to Newark. In particular, brand ambassadors are valuable for providing "the essence of the product and knowledge base I can't get from anywhere else."

However, that knowledge base can manifest in a variety of ways, and operators need to be vocal and communicate their establishment's needs. "The idea of education is first and foremost," Grant's Voisey agrees, "but it needs to change with the audience." In other words, a rep for Hendrick's Gin may spend one day explaining the fine points of distillation to a group of 10 bartenders and the following day provide a broader,



Kate Grutman is the brand ambassador for Pink Pigeon Rum and a bartender at Sotto in L.A.