



A Brief Guide to Being a Wine Rep

By The Wine Rep

An outsiders view of a wine representative is often one of a free soul, not tied down to an office, free wine on tap, long lunches, golf days and endless tasting sessions with excited customers. If only that were true!

Yes, there are many perks to working as a wine rep, and certainly every day is spent somewhere different but behind the scenes the work of a wine rep is very serious and very unglamorous: wineries produce a fast moving consumer good (FMCG) called wine and it is the wine rep's job to continuously sell that FMCG to customers new and old.

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What is a Wine Rep?

A wine rep can have any number of job descriptions on their business card, including:

- Business development manager
- Area manager
- Sales manager
- Territory manager
- Account manager
- Sales consultant
- Area sales executive
- Key accounts manager

Whatever they are called, there is one word that encapsulates the entire sphere of their responsibility and purpose for employment: sales. Wine reps are salesmen, just like a door to door Japanese knife salesman, a used car salesman, a TV advertorial presenter or a real estate agent. Certainly the average wine rep likes to think of himself as something more, but when you boil it all down, a rep is employed to sell product – the title ‘wine rep’ is a shortened version of ‘wine sales representative’ after all. Please understand this important distinction as many applicants for wine rep positions do not understand what the core role involves.

Who does a wine rep work for?

It is important to understand there are different types of wine rep based around their employer, each with a different focus and style.

A rep that works directly for a winery will generally only sell wines from that winery and will often be a bit more 'winey' than other reps. This rep is a direct connection between the trade and the winery so he might also be tasked with building the wine brand as part of his role – which involves more consumer tastings, wine dinners and staff educationals. In the end though, he will be judged on his sales figures.

Most reps work for wine distributors; a distributor is a company who has the agency (or license) to sell certain wine brands in a certain territory (e.g. a state or country). The distributor does not own the wine brand or winery, they simply purchase wine from the winery at a discount and then on sell for a profit. A small distributor might represent only five wineries, perhaps selling 25 wines in total while medium sized distributors will represent 20 or so wineries, selling 200+ wines.

By representing wineries from different regions and countries, a distributor will generally have a number of wines which suit practically all customer needs, giving the rep a higher chance of success. Distributor reps are (or should be) real salesmen, as the distributors business is simply to sell as many wines to as many customers as possible; at the same time they do have a vested interest growing the brands they represent, so things like wine tastings and dinners are good methods of growing the brand and making sales at the same time.

Finally there are liquor wholesale reps, who often aren't pure wine reps as they might also sell beer and spirits. A wide range liquor wholesaler is a company that sells all the most popular liquor products in order to provide a one stop shop for retailers and restaurateurs – they can order their beer, wine and spirits needs from one company, receive one delivery and one invoice. Wholesalers don't get the discounts that distributors do so they work on high volume and low margin, meaning the wines that their reps push are bigger brands that move quickly. These reps in essence are not selling a product, they are selling a service.

Finally there is a new type of rep that has recently started to become more popular, a retailer rep. This rep is employed by a liquor retailer to sell product to local cafes and restaurants, operating much in the same way as a mini wide range wholesaler. For the local on premise venues it can often make sense to buy their liquor needs from a retailer as they are able to restock depleted lines quickly (eg sending the junior waiter round the corner on a busy Saturday night with a hand full of cash to buy a carton of the house white that has just run out!). Often retailer reps are just normal staff members who get promoted but still spend most of their time on the retail floor.

What does a Wine Rep do?

As a salesman, it is a wine rep's job to sell wine to anyone and everyone who can legally buy it and then on sell it – liquor retailers, bars, cafes, restaurants etc. His days are spent visiting these venues, showing his printed portfolio of wines to the decision maker and attempting to persuade him or her to on sell some of them. Those customers who already purchase some wines are encouraged to buy more volume and increase the number of wines they stock.

Each rep has a sales area for which they are responsible, this area might be geographical (eg Northern suburbs or certain streets), or a list of accounts dotted all over the place. Some reps specialise in on premise customers only (on premise refers to venues that sell products which are consumed at the place of purchase like a restaurant), others in off premise only (i.e. retail), while others might simply look after certain groups of customers (eg retailers under the same banner or a hotel chain). For the most part a rep will have a mix of on and off premise customers.

Reps generally work to a monthly sales budget, whether based on total sales, total gross profit or the percentage of gross profit made on sales. During the course of the month he will (or should) receive updates on how sales are progressing and how he is going compared to budget. A rep that regularly exceeds budget should be pushing for bonuses and extra pay, while a rep that regularly fails to meet budget should be worried about the future of his employment.

Given the number of customers a rep must visit (a sales area can range from 50 customers for key account managers to 200 + customers for off premise reps), each rep will – or should – have a well planned call cycle that ensures he visits all his customers in a regular fashion. A call cycle is broken into weeks, is usually a 4 week or 8 week call cycle (to try and match with the weeks of the month), so a customer will know to expect that rep, for example, on the second Tuesday of each month. This ensures the rep sees all his customers on the days they are available, and helps him plan his weeks thoroughly.

What else does a Wine Rep do?

Many people believe that wine reps are brand ambassadors, wine marketers or wine educators, and certainly a rep will perform aspects of those roles during the course of doing business. However, marketing and brand building activities are the responsibility of the winery, so are generally only performed by reps to facilitate sales; a wine dinner, for example, is a great way for a winery to connect directly with consumers, hold their attention for several hours and hopefully get them to bond with the brand. This is great brand building but does nothing directly for the rep (in terms of sales) unless those consumers purchase wines on the day or the restaurateur supports the brand by keeping a couple of wines on the wine list ongoing.

A rep might hold staff educationals with restaurants or retailers to get the workers endeared to the wines, with goal being they then push those wines to consumers. The same is true for consumer wine tastings, whether in a retailer or at an event. The rep isn't doing it for his love of the wine and because he wants you to share in such a delicious beverage - it's because he wants you to buy a glass or bottle of wine from him, both then and there and then hopefully down the track. If he's spun a good enough sales pitch and if the wine lives up to expectation, you might become brand loyal and continue to buy that wine from venues that source it from him, adding to his sales figures.

What makes a good Wine Rep?

There is no quick and simple answer to this question, but there are certainly a number of important characteristics good sales reps have that separate them from the rest.

Organisational skills. As well as planning his day, week and month, a good rep keeps accurate records of customer details and keeps his diary filled with appointments and job deadlines. Writing down tasks as soon as they come up and coming through with promises to customers are vital to sales success.

Personality. At the end of the day a rep is continuously interacting with managers, owners and decision makers and therefore must be able to converse with them in a professional yet personable manner. Injecting some passion and fun into conversations with customers is a great way to break down barriers and get past their defensive walls. Customers who like a rep will buy more from them, simple.

Confidence. A confident rep breeds success by seeming in control and being able to convince the customer that if the rep's so confident in the product, the retailer can be too. Stuttering and nervous reps make buyers uncomfortable and are easily forgotten.

Relationships. Long term business is developed through building strong relationships with customers based on trust and mutual reward. Good wine reps have developed powerful working relationships with most of their customers and are careful to keep these relationships strong and fruitful for both parties.

Reliability. Good reps endear trust from their customers by being reliable, never promising what they can't deliver and always delivering what they promise. Reliable reps get called first when sales opportunities arise; reliable reps also build the strongest relationships.

Horses for courses. This great phrase describes being flexible, basing all selling activities on the unique characteristics and needs of each customer. You don't have to

personally like the customer to sell to him, but if he's a fanatical football fan, talk about football. If he's a smarmy wine snob, act like a wine snob too.

Wine knowledge. Some wine knowledge is obviously vital as a rep needs to know his product better than the customer (or at least look like he knows it better), but you'd be surprised how many good wine reps really don't know too much about wine. It really depends on the sales area – reps looking after quality restaurants will need plenty of wine knowledge to explain the intricacies of each vintage to the well informed sommelier. On the other hand, your average suburban retailer has little interest in how long a red has matured in lightly toasted French oak hogsheads.

Salesmanship. Clearly to be a salesman, the rep needs to have some skills in this area – but these skills can be learnt on the job if the rep's manager is any good at mentoring. The process made very simple: identify a customer's needs, identify the wines in your portfolio that satisfy those needs, match the two together in a clear and positive fashion, ask for the sale, follow up to determine success.

Wine trade and retail/hospitality experience. The wine trade is where distributors and wineries sell their wares and is a complex mix of suppliers and buyers, groups, alliances, contracts and deals. Retail/hospitality is where consumers purchase wine, and it has its own unique characteristics. Good wine reps understand the competition, needs, wants, internal and external forces of both the wine trade and retail/hospitality; this understanding only comes from working within these fields.

Conclusion

Hopefully the above information gives you a broad overview of what a wine rep does and what makes a good rep. There is no simple way of becoming a wine rep except to be working in a related field (eg liquor retailer, restaurant, bar, winery) and to keep plugging away at reps coming through the door, or talking to their companies directly. A good way to get more information about wine reps in your area is to visit your local specialist wine retailers and ask them about the reps that visit them.

Please visit www.TheWineRep.Com for more articles and guides on selling wine.