

ALL HANDS ON DECKS

by Terri Perrin



Tips and Trends for Operating Profitable Pub Patios

What's the latest trend in pub patios for 2010? After the economic turmoil of 2008/2009 where the overlying theme was survival, there is a renewed sense of optimism amongst pub owners in BC. Most are looking forward to dusting off the patio tables and chairs for another season in the sun.

Considering there are variations in the weather, geography, demographics, and rules and regulations from one municipality to the next, it is next to impossible to identify a single specific trend that is a "one size fits all" solution for success... but here are some insights into what's happening in the industry.

Hotel Online suggests that a "less is more" mentality is an important trend for 2010. Simplicity and comfort in your atmosphere, service, and menu items are key. Making your entire dining experience excellent includes customer enjoyment at every level - even with the bill at the end.

If you are looking to make some changes, Peter Klis, a furniture manufacturer, says that when it comes to patio furniture and décor, there are a variety of modern new styles available. Aluminum and stainless steel furniture is considered to be very trendy this year. While the size of patio and bar tables and chairs has not changed, the look has become more futuristic. Many establishments are successfully integrating modern designs with classic materials, creating a look that is stunning without compromising on comfort.



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Klis stresses, however, unless you are undergoing a complete re-branding or opening a new establishment, think long and hard before mixing styles. "If you have a traditional Irish pub, for example, you need to stick with tradition," warns Klis. "That's what your customers expect and that's what keeps them coming back."

Putting Off the Ritz!

"Going green" is also one of the biggest trends for 2010. For pubs, that means going beyond having green beer on St. Patrick's Day! If you are not in a position to spend a lot of money on a patio makeover, consider an environmentally friendly facelift! A fresh coat of paint or stain, combined with bright fabrics for seat covers, umbrellas and linens might just do the trick. Most customers will understand and appreciate your efforts to "reduce, reuse, and recycle" furniture and accessories, rather than completely reinvent your pub.

In addition to using reclaimed materials in the décor, consider installing energy-efficient solar lighting and, where possible, introduce other green initiatives in the operation of your pub. For helpful hints on going green, check out the Green Restaurant Association at www.dinegreen.com.

Function Over Fashion

If you are in a position to do a major renovation or are setting up a new pub, there is more good news for you! With industry sales down across North America in the past two years, restaurant and pub furniture sales are down too. Now is a great time to take advantage of discounted pricing. There is healthy competition amongst suppliers, so be sure to do some price comparisons and ask for discounts.

Whatever products you choose, adds Klis, it is essential you follow the manufacturers' instructions for care and maintenance closely. If you are unsure how to clean and protect a particular item from the elements, contact your furniture sales representative for advice. If you want outdoor furniture to last you have to maintain it.

When buying new patio furniture, you should also consider whether the design enables you to change the layout quickly in order to accommodate special promotional events or private functions. When it comes to patio tables and chairs, functionality and customer comfort should be your primary concern.



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Weather Woes

With a fully enclosed and garden patio, the Royal Coachman Pub in Campbell River is popular with residents and visitors alike. The pub's owner, Theresa Marson, says that trendy or not, they elected to use traditional wooden tables because they fit in with the Royal Coachman's garden theme. Seating is maximized by using both round and square tables. "It is easier to squeeze an extra chair or two around a circular table," says Marson. "The downside is that if you have a really large group, the tables don't fit together.. so that's when the square ones come in handy." Marson adds that her best guide to the latest trends is her customers... and the weather! She says that her staff pay close attention to both.

Rose Sexsmith of Rose's Waterfront Pub in Kelowna agrees. She knows that to protect patrons, staff, and the furniture, one has to keep a close eye on the weather at all times.

"Because we are on the water, strong winds can pick up alarmingly fast," says Sexsmith. "If it looks like there's a weather system rolling in, our staff are very aware of the importance of getting out to the patio to close the umbrellas and pull them off the tables. This is especially important for our second level deck. A breeze at street level can be like gale force winds upstairs! Although no-one has invented the perfect patio umbrella, we do find that the ones with venting near the peak are better at withstanding wind than fully enclosed ones."

Dan Hendrickson, owner of Wicklow Pub in Vancouver, also faces challenges with the ever-changing weather. He has installed freestanding, portable patio

heaters and even has blankets available to offer chilly patrons. (A special touch that's greatly appreciated.)

To solve the problem of umbrellas being carried off in the wind, he uses non-tilting umbrella poles and anchors them in concrete.

Raising the Bar

Whether it is a trend or just a fact of life, Bob Savage, owner of Rusty Gull in North Vancouver, says the introduction of outdoor patios in establishments like the Cactus Club and Earls has set a new standard that the industry as a whole now has to rise to. Pubs have had to increase food quality because the days of the "beer parlour" are long gone. Pub food now has to be on par with any casual dining restaurant and you have to be aware of - and responsive to - changing food trends, such as international influences and dietary restrictions. Although the perception is that pub food is less expensive than restaurant fare, customers still expect excellent quality.

"In the past, a lot of pubs were busy all of the time, in spite of what they did - or did not do," observes Savage. "In the last 10 to 15 years, however, pub operators have had to work harder to be successful." Savage believes that pubs are set apart not by having big screen TVs and pool tables, but by the staff. Pubs are renowned for being friendly community gathering places with repeat clientele - not just week after week but even year after year. And that's a trend that is never going to change. ☺

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