

Creating Your Sales Vision Plan

by Julie Rhodes, Not Your Hobby Marketing

When you plan an extended trip somewhere, very few people just hit the road without any knowledge of their destination or how to get there. If you didn't, chances are that you will get lost or drive around in circles without any direction. To avoid this, you need a clear destination and assistance from tools that will route your best path, like a map or GPS.

You should apply this same concept to selling your beer. Your Sales Vision Plan will be the guiding force to keep you from getting lost in the wholesale channel. This plan provides you with a destination, as well as details along the route, like who will be selling your beer, the tools you can use to sell your beer, systems to measure your sales, and what makes your brand unique.

An effective Sales Vision Plan is a repeatable system that you can use year after year as your brewery grows to plan and track your sales in the wholesale channel, so let's take a closer look at five elements you need to include in your plan.

One: Identify Your Sales Goals

How much beer do you want to sell? Obviously lots of beer, right? But this question goes deeper than that. The first step in any Sales Vision Plan is to set sales goals. You're going to need short term, as well as long term outside sales goals. Ideally you would want to project what 1 year, 3 years, and 5 or even 10 years of sales growth might look like for your brewery. These long term goals can be expressed in revenue dollars that align with your overall business goals, but you should also include what this means volume wise.

While most production-minded brewery owners measure volume in barrels, in the sales world you would want to translate this into case equivalents. One BBL is equal to 13.78 case equivalents. The reasoning behind this conversion is that you will most likely be selling various package sizes of your beer, whether it's sixtels or 16 ounce cans or 22 ounce bottles, case equivalents give you an even way to measure your sales across all your package sizes. Plus once you reach the point where you might be working with distribution partners or wholesalers, their management team will speak in case equivalents, not barrels, as a measure of your sales, so you might as well get used to this measurement from the beginning.

Your short term goals should consist of results that you would like to hit in the first year of operation. First year outside sales should also be broken down by quarterly goals and monthly goals as well. Again, your sales can be expressed as revenue dollars or as volume, but as your brand grows, I encourage you to express goals in volume. In the future, you will need to start analyzing your sales in more complex ways, such as by pack size or SKU variety or by account. It will make things easier to do this level of analysis if you're already measuring your sales by case equivalent instead of dollars.

By the time you're done with setting up your short and long term sales goals, you should have a clear picture of how many cases and/or kegs that you need to sell in order to hit your projected revenue goals for the first year and beyond.

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Two: Determine Your Market Focus

No doubt that you probably have some knowledge of how beer is bought and sold in the retail world, but you also need to be aware of the various market segments within the wholesale channel so that you can optimize your sales plans. There are two main channels in which you will sell your beer - On Premise and Off Premise.

On Premise refers to any business that is authorized to allow beer consumption “on their premises” or within their licensed territory. Off Premise refers to any business where you can purchase beer, but you must take the product “off their premises” (to go or takeaway) to consume it.

Within these two main channels, there are various “classes of trade,” such as bars and restaurants, taverns, sports bars, event centers, liquor stores, grocery stores, warehouse clubs, and so on. Not every market segment will be a good fit for your brand. The goal is to identify the segments of the overall market in which your brand is most likely to succeed and aggressively pursue those segments to increase your chances of success. When you’re first getting started, having an idea of specific market segments that will yield positive sales results for your brand will help you narrow your market focus, so that you’re not killing yourself trying to sell beer to everyone. When you attempt to sell to everyone, you will sell to no one.

Three: Identify Who Is Selling

Ideally, a dedicated sales or brand representative(s) for your brewery that is responsible for sales activities, account maintenance, promotions and customer service is one of the best ways to increase beer sales in the wholesale channel, but when you’re first getting started, this might not be financially feasible. Don’t worry, even if you don’t have a background in sales, you can sell your own beer in the retail market until you can upgrade to hiring a dedicated salesperson or recruit one of your existing employees to assist with outside sales, like a taproom employee or delivery driver.

Prior to hitting the market, you do need to have some basic knowledge of sales in general. I would strongly encourage you to take a few online courses or read a handful of sales books in order to boost your sales process knowledge. Attending a sales workshop or learning from a sales consultant is also a great way to increase your knowledge base. Some principles to learn include prospecting for new business, nurturing your existing customer base, account management, route planning, consultative selling techniques, active listening, how to provide brand support, the concept of a sales pipeline, how to measure your sales, and how to analyze your sales data.

Even if you start off by selling beer yourself, at some point you will need to recruit or hire some help. You’ve got to be aware of what this means for your brewery business. Part of your Sales Vision Plan should include how you plan to compensate your salesperson, what their responsibilities will be, how you plan to measure their success, and a plan to hire additional sales personnel as your brand continues to grow.

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Another factor to include in your plan is how your sales will be affected if you decide to align with a distributor or wholesaler. You can learn more about what this decision means for the business side of your brewery by visiting the Distribution portion of StartABrewery, but note that working with distribution partners will drastically change your sales goals, market activities, planning, data collection, sales materials and personnel needs.

Four: Measuring Your Sales Data

A huge mistake that most startup breweries make is that they don't have a reliable and relevant way to measure their sales data. If you're selling beer outside of your taproom, you must have some kind of tool, usually a software program, that will help you measure sales data like volume, revenue, customers, and items sold. Whatever your method of data collection, the goal is to track your outside sales in real time, as well as collect historical data that you can use for projections in setting the next year's sales goals. Even if you can only afford to track sales with a spreadsheet and customer invoices, it's better than not tracking anything at all.

Another common way to track sales data, as well as sales activities and buyer preferences, is to use a CRM or customer relationship management software tool. A simple CRM will keep records of your sales activities out in the market, as well as contact information, buyer preferences, and products sold. CRM's range in price from free to thousands of dollars per month, depending on how much sales data you want and how many people you have on your sales team. Only you can decide what will work best for your brand and the size of your brewery business.

When you grow to a point where you are working in conjunction with a distribution partner, you will be able to gather sales data and analyze sales reports from a system that is synced with your wholesaler. Wholesale sales data is difficult and expensive to come by, so you need to be clear about how you plan to collect and interpret account level and product sales data from your wholesaler or distributor partner.

Five: Identify Your Unique Selling Proposition

One of the most important elements of your Sales Vision Plan is to identify and define the unique selling proposition for your brewery. Unique selling propositions or USPs are the things about your brand that you do better than anyone else in the market or what differentiates your brand from all of your competitors.

The best way to figure this out is to think about all the things that make your brand special and highlight how those elements provide a benefit to your customers. Remember, you're not just listing attributes or features of your brewery, but directing attention to the ways in which you meet a need for consumers or supply them with a result that they want. For example, if your specialty is German inspired lagers and your brewery is in the midwest, your USP might be "a trip to Munich in every sip via midwest hospitality" or "a taste of Germany in the heart of the midwest."

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The craft beer industry is a crowded place, so one of the best competitive advantages that you can give to your brand is to clearly define your unique selling proposition. Your USP should be something that you do really well and want to be known for in the beer community. Formulating your USP might take some time, but once you nail it down, it will lead the way for all your sales efforts, initiatives, and materials.

Final Notes:

To make it easy on yourself, I would suggest creating a Word document or spreadsheet that houses all of these elements in one easy to find document. Your Sales Vision Plan will also be something that you need to update on an annual basis, just like your overall business plans. Maintaining an up to date plan also makes it easy to share your brewery vision with your sales personnel, financial institutions, and wholesalers. And finally, make sure that you're incorporating the concepts in your Sales Vision Plan into your monthly, weekly, and even daily sales initiatives. This is not just a startup document that can fall into the depths of your filing cabinet. Your vision plan is something that needs to be translated into your everyday sales activities to grow your beer brand for the long haul.



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Drawing from a decade of experience in the specialty beer business, Julie is an authority on beer sales, marketing, sales team management, and distributor partnership management.