Responsible Beverage Service Training Programmes: A Good Way to Decrease Alcohol, Related Problems

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Abstract
There is a lot of talk about Responsible Beverage Service Training Programmes and how effective they really are in combating drunk driving, social problems related to excessive drinking and the sale of alcohol to minors. Some of the obstacles to implementing the programmes include staff turnover, fear of a drop in sales and a lack of political will. A critical analysis of the effectiveness of Responsible Beverage Service Training Programmes was conducted recently by compiling the results of more than 25 research studies. Experiences in several countries highlight the most promising aspects of the programmes and most favourable conditions for their implementation.

The programmes sensitise serving staff and give them the means to take action. But the programmes cannot be effective without backing from the milieu, support from the owners and managers of drinking establishments, and appropriate legislation. While it cannot be proven irrefutably that Responsible Beverage Service Training Programmes alone contribute significantly to reducing drinking-related problems, they are nonetheless efficient when they are supported, understood and made mandatory.

Introduction
• Responsible beverage service training programmes were introduced in the 1980s in Australia, Canada, the U.S. and other countries.
• Often supported or required by legislation, they are designed to prevent the sale of alcohol to minors and excessive drinking by customers in licensed establishments.
• Do they work?
• If they do, under what conditions?
• How should they be implemented?

Methods and Results
Effectiveness
29 studies examining the effectiveness of such programs have been analysed.

I. Evaluation of serving staff awareness, attitudes and behaviours
Howard-Pitney et al. (1991): The impact of a 1-day training course on awareness, beliefs and behaviours, as well as on house rules and policy (Park City, Utah).
Results:
• Significant difference in awareness and belief that customers will be favourable towards the policies and practices of responsible beverage service.
• Little effect on the development of strategies for taking action.
• Establishments where staff had taken the course posted more notices about the availability of non-alcoholic beverages, and fewer employees were drinking on the job.

Results:
• Significant increase in awareness.
• More positive attitude towards the idea of intervening with customers.
• SIP would appear to be significantly effective in changing behaviour.
• Doubt as to support from managers and owners in establishing house policies.

McKnight (1991): Factors that might influence the effectiveness of training programmes and lead to responsible action (3-6 hours of training for 1,079 servers in 100 establishments in 8 U.S. cities).
Results:
• Significant improvement in awareness, attitudes and behaviours, as reported by serving staff.
• When observed, behaviour with intoxicated customers did not change significantly.

II. Evaluation of impact on customer drinking
Toomey et al. (1999): Ability to recognise the signs of alcohol intoxication and strategies in such cases (24 establishments studied, 68 attempted entries in an urban area of Minnesota).
Results:
• Five refusals.
• Of the 63 admitted, 20 were refused service on the first request, and 20 more were refused on the second request.
• In 8% of the 66 drinks served, serving staff said they recognised that the customer-actors were inebriated.
• Strategy: Refuse to serve alcohol (68% of refusals) or serve non-alcoholic beverage (18% of refusals).

Toomey et al. (2001): The impact of the Alcohol Risk Management (ARM) programme on the sale of alcohol to intoxicated customers.
Results:
• Two out of five establishments have set clear, written policies.
• No significant reduction in the sale of alcohol to intoxicated customers.
• No reduction in the sale of alcohol to minors.

Results:
• No significant different in the sale of alcohol to minors or to intoxicated customers, and no major change in preventing inebriation.
• Initial Increase in general practices of responsible service during follow-up, followed by a decline.
• Importance of adding "booster" sessions after initial training.

Russ and Geller (1987): Impact of a training programme on dealing with inebriated customers as they leave the bar (with actors playing the role of inebriated patrons).
Results:
• Increase in number of cases of intervention by serving staff.
• Trained staff more frequently offered water and food.
• Increase in delays before serving.
• Comments on driving while impaired.
• More checking of ID cards.
• No refusal to serve a sixth drink.
• Promising future for training programmes.

III. Evaluation of the impact on driving while impaired
Results:
• Significant reduction in the number of road accidents involving an impaired driver.
• Clear impact of media coverage of lawsuits.
• Effective in making serving staff more responsible.

Holder and Wagenaar (1994): The impact of mandatory training sessions for serving staff on road accidents occurring at night and involving impaired drivers in Oregon.
Results:
• As serving staff became trained, the number of accidents decreased.
• Server training proved effective.
• 68% of serving staff who completed the training reported positive changes in their awareness, attitudes and behaviour towards customers.

Results:
• Reduction in human costs, including suffering, loss of quality of life and health care costs.
• Reduction in financial losses.
• Reduction in consequences for others.
• The mandatory responsible beverage service programme in Washetenaw is paying off.

IV. Difficulties implementing and applying rules and policy
Saltz and Stanghetta (1997): Implementation criteria to maximise the effectiveness of responsible beverage service programmes in three locations in inland California, coastal California and South Carolina.
Results:
Public opinion is important in implementing programmes and awareness must be raised among managers.
Wittman (1989): The experience of alcoholic beverage-related strategies developed for university students of Greek background in the western U.S.

Results:
Serious resistance to establishing the programme, but three solutions suggested by fraternity representatives:
- Influential individuals likely to oppose the project should be identified and advance action taken before the programme is implemented.
- Organisations with decision-making power within the community should participate in applying a system for controlling the consumption of alcoholic beverages.
- Value conflicts with community opinion leaders should be resolved.


Results:
- Significant improvement in staff awareness of their preventive role.
- Some difficulty putting the programme into practice.
- Staff continue to serve intoxicated customers for the following reasons:
  - don't want to lose profits and tips
  - customers who are refused service are not pleased
  - pressure from managers to maximise alcohol sales and keep customers happy and satisfied.

McKnight (1996) also concludes that responsible service programmes are often used to shift responsibility from managers to serving staff, and this tendency is encouraged by the law limiting manager responsibility if serving staff have been trained.

Single (1990) believes that
- responsible beverage service programmes can be effective in reducing drunkenness;
- such programmes should receive more support from management policy that is more preventive than legal-oriented;
- the success of such programmes cannot be extrapolated to a reduction in social problems related to alcohol abuse.

Holder et al. (1993) also conclude that the degree of responsibility in the United States is linked to publicity about responsible beverage service and the degree of awareness among the owners and managers of licensed establishments.

Turrisi et al. (1999) analysed the perceptions of bar owners and serving staff with regard to responsible beverage service policies.

Results:
- No significant difference between the attitudes of owners and serving staff.
- Policies that are designed to do customers a favour are perceived as positive.
- Those limiting the sale of alcohol were not well received.

Discussion
- The programmes are effective for increasing awareness and changing the attitudes of serving staff.
• Results are not as clear with regard to behaviour.
• Various factors can affect the effectiveness of the programmes.
• After training, serving staff know how to deal with an inebriated customer or someone they suspect is a minor.
• This knowledge does not get put into practice.

The issue is to identify the factors that limit and facilitate responsible service:
• The server is often portrayed as the person whose job it is to provide pleasure.
• That leads to ambiguity when he or she must stop serving drinks.
• Customers will be unhappy if they are refused service, and servers then have to deal with the situation and the fact that they will not get a tip.
• If the establishment does not support responsible beverage service practices, servers who follow them risk being reprimanded or even fired.
• Some servers wait longer between drinks, offer coffee and make comments about impaired faculties, all while pouring the customer another drink.
• Responsible service practices cannot be implemented without support from the environment, i.e. the manager or owner:
  - who encourages training
  - who sets clear house policy
• Programmes are effective when they are mandatory and backed by sanctions (studies in Oregon, Texas and Michigan).
• Media coverage of lawsuits against servers is a key factor in applying responsible service practices and reducing alcohol-related road accidents.
• Programmes are more effective if they are supported by public opinion, if managers adopt clear, written house policies and if employees are encouraged to implement them.
• Effectiveness also depends on the type and duration of the training, and the training objectives.

Conclusion
• The effectiveness of responsible beverage service programmes cannot be demonstrated conclusively, but some factors cannot be ignored:
  • Serving staff cannot be held solely responsible.
  • Governments must promote the programmes and make them mandatory.
  • Owners and managers must participate actively in implementing them.
  • Public opinion must provide support.
  • Programmes must continue to be evaluated in order to remove obstacles to their implementation.

• Éduc’alcool and its partners have launched a new program in Québec, Service in Action, taking all these aspects into account. Evaluation and results are yet to be determined. A brief presentation of the program is made.

References


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