

**Ask SCORE for Business Advice**

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**Liquor Stores Recession Proof by Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt**

In a bad economy, consumers tend to cut down on non-essential purchases. While that hurts many traditional retailers, most liquor stores are finding that they are benefiting from the recession. Apparently, most consumers consider beer, wine, and liquor to be an essential purchase.

Dale Dombroski, owner of the Wine Cellar, 801 Main Ave., De Pere, agrees. He and his wife, Lori, run the family-owned business that opened in 1973. "My customers often say that they'd rather buy a nice bottle of wine to share at home instead of paying higher prices at a restaurant," Dombroski related.

His comments follow the findings of a recent Nielsen survey that showed that the declining economy had little impact on consumers buying wine, beer and liquor. The survey reported that consumers might buy less expensive brands or shop sales, but for the most part consider alcoholic beverages to be an affordable luxury. When asked where they shop, wine and beer buyers said a primary reason for visiting a specialty shop was an interesting store and product knowledge.

"Our customers know we have knowledge that isn't found in the big grocery and discount stores where on any given day, you might be talking to a produce person or other person who doesn't have our kind of experience," Dombroski explained. "I know the products and enjoy helping people find that special item."

Despite the economic downturn, Dombroski remodeled his store recently and expanded his inventory to include a wider selection. He added a larger walk-in beer cooler to make shopping easier and wood racking for proper display of wines. Flat screen televisions were installed for sport fans.

"The owner refaced the outside of the building to modernize us. Our new sign explains that we are a full service liquor store, not just a wine store," Dombroski noted.

The additional inventory means that he can reach a variety of customers. He said that some customers might be buying less, but he hasn't felt the pinch and his sales are growing steadily. It is more typical to find pinched consumers looking at lower priced brands and specials. Dombroski reaches this audience with coupon flyers, email specials, and in-store special buys. He also promotes the savings realized by socializing at home.

Dombroski said, "It might cost \$10 for a bottle of wine at my store, but the same bottle could be \$30 at a restaurant. At a bar, a beer could cost \$2.50 to \$4.50 each, but a beer at home might only cost 50 to 75 cents." This follows a trend for people to save money by staying home and enjoying beverages. Micro brews and wine are growing categories for Dombroski, and if that doesn't fit in the budget, there is beer. Even with the added selection, Busch Light 30 packs are his best seller. Dombroski knows the importance of adapting to buying patterns and offering great service to keep customers coming back.

If you'd like to learn more about succeeding in business, contact the Green Bay Chapter of SCORE. Visit [www.greenbayscore.org](http://www.greenbayscore.org) or call Cindy Gokey at 920-496-8930 for information.

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