

# How to hire bartenders who won't steal

Overpouring, free drinks for buddies, grabbing an extra few beers or Red Bulls—Is bartender theft inevitable? No, says bar management expert Bob Johnson. Here, Johnson offers six ways to ensure that you'll hire an honest barkeep.

**M**y first book about bartender theft, written five years ago, was called "The 45 Ways Bartenders Can Rob You Blind." Now it's up to 51! Just when you think you've uncovered all the ways bartenders steal, they come up with new ways.

A bartender was caught recently at a casino in Atlantic City with a hypodermic needle injected into an overhead liquor line from an electronic inventory control system, sucking out the liquor into a six-ounce vial which he was going to take out to his bartender buddy at the pool bar. He was found with three vials in his pocket already filled. This is an advanced method of "bringing in your own liquor" (theft technique #14 in my book).

Not all bartenders are thieves, but I've caught so many bartenders stealing, I'm beginning to wonder. I am told there is no solution; that, in essence, you're always going to have bartender theft. But I disagree. I believe you can keep the theft to an absolute minimum if you simply hire right. Get the right people on board to begin with and you will have fewer problems with theft. But it's a full time job keeping your people honest.

The majority of employee theft is created by owners and managers who know little to nothing about running a bar. There's probably no inventory control system in place. No controls means bartenders now have the "opportunity" to steal unabated. If bartenders are never held accountable for their performance behind the bar and what they do with each and every drink, and how it is accounted for, then they're free to do whatever they want whenever they want.

Inventory control should be a daily regimen. It's the biggest and most important part of a bar manager's job. Therefore, if there is no daily accounting, bartenders have nothing to fear. They can give away beers/ drinks, take the money for a drink and put it in their pocket, etc., because there's no way for anyone to know for sure what's going on.

I'm going to share my ways of controlling bartender theft. It's taken me three or four decades to put all this together. The methods I use work well for me and it works for the clubs I'm operationally involved with. It will never be 100 percent, but I'm pretty close to it!

Controlling bartender theft starts with the hiring process. Here are my suggestions:

## (1) Bewary of hiring experienced bartenders.

The more experienced, the more they know, and they probably know more about running a bar than you do. As a manager, are you an experienced bartender or bar manager? If not, you should be. What are you doing running a liquor club if you don't know anything about bartending or bar management? The adult entertainment industry is full of owners and managers who don't have a clue about running a bar! So the experienced bartenders (especially the thieving ones) "play" you.

Rather than hiring an experienced bartender, let your best "house oriented" bartender do the training of a new bartender—from scratch. An "in house" cocktail waitress wanting to take a step up would make a good bartender applicant. She already knows a little about drink making and liquor. There's plenty of Internet help available in training a new bartender. Or, hire vocational school graduates. They've

got the basics down and they don't know how to steal—yet.

## (2) Find out what they know—and what they don't know.

For all bartender applicants, give them an entry level bartender test. Ask questions that are related to the bar business, such as:

- (1) How do you cut someone off?
- (2) If you caught another bartender stealing, what would you do?
- (3) Do you object to taking a drug test?
- (4) If a customer said his drink wasn't strong enough, what would you do?
- (5) What is the best way to make a Sex on the Beach?

The more you appear to be a business "under control" and the more difficult you make it to "get in," the better chance you'll have in deterring the outright thief. They'll apply elsewhere where these kinds of questions or hiring techniques are not used.

## (3) Handling cash? Do a background check.

Avoid the potential for a negligent hiring lawsuit and do background checks on your cash-handling employees. Make sure you know who, and what, you are hiring. What do you really know about a person you've never seen before in your life? Are they a fugitive from justice? Are they a convicted felon? Do they have personality disorders, mental problems, drug addictions? Do you really know?

## (4) Get references from former employers.

Don't get duped into thinking you can't give, or receive, information about a former employee from a former employer as long as it is *job performance*-related (nothing personal or slanderous). The mythical explanation I hear from so many industry "experts" is the potential for a liability lawsuit if you say anything about a former employee other than hourly pay rate and length of employment. I've researched this and haven't found one case yet where an employer was sued for giving out information about a former employee's job performance. If there's a lawyer out there who disputes this, please contact me. I need to know what you know!



If the question is, "Did he steal?", you don't have to say "yes" or "no." You simply state, "His cash handling procedures were questionable." The person asking will catch your drift.

Employers need to better cooperate with the industry for inquiries about a previous employee's job performance. We need to help each other out. Why would you let someone who stole from you go to another bar and steal from them (make sure you have undeniable proof they stole from you!)? When you're asked the question, "Are they eligible for re-hire?", don't hesitate to say "no" if that's the case. Give the prospective employer asking the questions a chance to make a good hiring decision based on how that employee performed for you.

I recall an experience I had in Ocala, Florida, where I opened up a country western venue and needed bartenders. After my staff was hired and we were open a week, the owner of a gift shop made an appointment to see me. He was the former employer of one of my newly hired bartenders. He had with him a video tape of this bartender stealing from him. He told her at the time that he would not call the police, but expected her to repay him. She never did, and then disappeared. He did me a great service by coming forward. I immediately fired her.

You see, once a thief, always a thief. Leopards do not change their spots. I learned this early in my bar career. If you ever stole from me, or from someone else, and it could be proven beyond any reasonable doubt, I'd go out of my way to keep that person from working anywhere else as a bartender.

### **(5) Give them the test...**

Contract with a personality profiling company and set up a profile test for all applicants to take before they are hired. At rates of \$5-7 per applicant, this is a great technique for weeding out undesirables.

### **(6) ...And let them know what you expect of them.**

You should have a Bartender Manual or a Policy and Procedure Manual that describes and documents exactly how you expect your bartenders to perform. You tell the bartender how to do their job; they do not tell you. This manual should include:

- (a) A daily supplies checklist;
- (b) Daily cleaning responsibilities;
- (c) The company Drink Recipe Manual, which includes what glass for what drink, the garnish and the price;
- (d) Procedures for using the cash register;
- (e) How to give change back correctly;
- (f) How liquor is to be poured (do not allow free pour);

(g) Procedures for the tip jar and the handling and reporting of tips;

(h) Job description form signed (what is expected);

(i) Rules and regulations of the house...and much more!

A Bartender Manual gives you accountability and control over the bartender. If they don't follow your procedures, they're replaced, that's all. But more importantly, this technique lets bartenders know up front there are "expectations" according to house policy and procedure that's already in place. This makes them less able to steal, at first. They see that the bar is being run like a business—that there is "accountability." Thieving bartenders don't like that. They'll go elsewhere.

One of the biggest problems facing the adult entertainment industry is the amount of money charged for a drink. There are bartenders out there salivating for a chance to get into these clubs because of the high prices for drinks. They only need to skim a few a night and they're making big bucks. It's so incredibly easy to do this! High sales cover up a lot of missing inventory, so no one notices.

The better your business is doing, the higher your sales, the more likely you have a house full of thieves behind the bar (and this doesn't count the "hook-ups" with the waitresses, floor walkers, security, etc.). Please do not misunderstand: there are some great, honest bartenders out there. In my 47 years of dealing with this "profession," I can count them on two hands.

I have 30 more techniques to share with you about deterring bartender theft. Next issue we'll discuss how an inventory control system can deter theft. There are definite reasons why we go to the trouble of keeping an accurate, daily, ongoing inventory of all beverage alcohol products. Doing so can weed out many bartenders who are thieves. It helps control the potential for theft. As a result, you will make a lot more money. 

*Bob Johnson has worked with several adult clubs and club chains, including Deja Vu. He is available for on-site bar management training and consulting services for adult entertainment liquor clubs, short or long term. If you sign up for Bob Johnson's Inventory Control SYSTEM, he guarantees a savings of \$30,000-\$60,000 per annum. It's available nationwide and is ideal for chains. He can be reached at (800) 447-4384, or visit [www.BobtheBarGuy.com](http://www.BobtheBarGuy.com).*

