Staff and customer perspectives of the Australian cellar door experience: Discovered with eye-tracking and in-depth interviews

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Research Questions
What aspects of the cellar door experience build brand attachment for customers and staff?
Does cellar door design influence visual attention during the cellar door experience?

Introduction
Cellar door sales provide higher returns than wholesale to domestic and export markets. Cellar door customer-focused research has established that enjoyable experiences are essential to building brand awareness, creating enduring customers, and increasing online and post-visit sales. Converting brand awareness to customer loyalty requires brand attachment, and positive experiences generate greater attachment than product sales. It is therefore imperative to gain a holistic understanding of cellar door experiences. Customers co-create cellar door experiences with staff, each approaching with unique realities guiding their perceptions. Our research takes a novel approach to understanding the cellar door experience by using data from staff and customers. We determine what captures and holds visual attention with wearable eye-trackers. In-depth semi-structured interviews delve deeper into staff and customer perceptions and memories of cellar door experiences.

Method and Materials
Working in cellar doors and wineries gives the lead researcher a unique perspective to the research. Rather than attempting to remove bias, a constructivist approach allows their knowledge to influence design construction and data interpretation. Constructivist grounded theory was appropriate given the applied nature of the research and allowed eye-tracking data to be analysed alongside interview data. The influence of the winescapes and built structure of the cellar door on experiences was measured by eye-tracking in three different cellar door styles: lively, simple, and stylised. Five staff members and 28 customers consented to record their experience. All cellar doors were located on a main tourist road, within 30 minutes of a major city on the east coast of Australia. Snowball sampling provided 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews. Participant wine involvement ranged from novice to highly involved enthusiast. Thirteen of these participants were also staff with a range of cellar door experience. All participants shared their memories and perspectives of cellar door experiences.

Results and Discussion
Visual attention of customers
These pie charts show distribution of visual attention for customers and staff. Not all customers observed the view during their cellar door experience, but the visual attention of staff was drawn by the window. Kaplan’s restorative attention theory would support that gazing at a bucolic scene would reduce cognitive load and provide a moment of cognitive restoration. The emphasis on human elements was supported in the interview data:

- “It’s like a family, just wonderful...the whole place is just lovely the way they treat people...it’s nothing super flash...but it’s always stuck in my mind because it was such a pleasant experience.”
- “I do like nice interesting architecture but the personality of the person you’re dealing with makes a difference”
- “a lady came through and said ‘I only like sweet wines’ and I said you’re going to hate the next half hour and so we all had a laugh at that”

Visual attention of staff
Visual attention of staff focused on faces, both staff and fellow team members. However, staff attention can be captured by other tasting areas and groups, tasting bottles, and view. These three hotspot snapshots taken from the recordings show, visual attention is predominantly drawn by faces, bottles, and logos.

Conclusion
Our project has highlighted the importance of respect and developing a connection during the cellar door experience to build brand attachment and maintain customer loyalty. A co-created connection between staff and customer born of shared lived experiences and knowledge occurs when staff become the conduit through which the story of the business is communicated. The connection creates positive memories from which customer loyalty grows and word of mouth recommendations flow. The winescapes and built environment have not been diminished, rather the role of cellar door staff has been elevated to a position of importance. Investment should be focused on development of cellar door staff as an asset, as is often the case with bricks and mortar currently. Industry-standard training is urgently required to elevate cellar door experiences to a level complementing the excellence of the wine presented. Respect of all elements of the experience is paramount.

“I’ve just spent $1.3M on my cellar door because that’s what everyone told me I had to do... all I needed was a table and a fridge on my back veranda.”

Interviews
Analysis found the happiest recollections were when customers had made a personal connection with staff members. Customers respect honesty and authenticity and prefer intimate experiences. Negative experiences created a lasting impression: participants recalled incidents in visual and emotive detail at least 40 years after the event. Widespread exclusivity was also discovered, with age and ethnicity assumptions negatively affecting the interactions required to create positive cellar door experiences. Respect for all elements of the business is required to maximise profitability. Staff respect the status of an industry-wide title but labour with an emphasis on sales. Sales permeate the experience: staff feel pressured to focus on selling, reducing connection building "chit chat". Professional development opportunities were requested by staff. The flow chart to the right provides the how-to of positive cellar door experiences, and highlights areas creating dissonance for staff and customers.

"They’re trying to lure people in with things other than wine and to me it’s just lost it”