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Taprooms Lift Small Brewer Margins

New guidance says independent breweries can earn more by selling the right beers directly to drinkers than by chasing volume through distribution.

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Small breweries are being urged to rethink where they make their money, as new guidance says the taproom can often deliver higher margins than distribution to pubs and bars.

The advice, published through the U.S. beer platform Brewer and reported by The Drinks Business, argues that many brewers focus too heavily on volume when the better strategy is to sell the right beer in the right place. The report says the highest-margin beer a brewery sells is often poured in its own taproom, where it avoids distribution costs and middlemen. That makes direct sales to drinkers one of the most profitable channels for smaller producers trying to compete with larger global brewers.

The timing matters because access to the on-trade remains tight for independent brewers. The Society of Independent Brewers and Associates said in a recent report that 82% of small breweries can sell at least some beer to local pubs and bars, but they still say they are shut out of an average of 62% of pubs in their area because of the dominance of bigger brewing groups. In response, many independents have expanded direct-to-consumer sales. SIBA said 51% now operate a shop at the brewery, 46% have a taproom on site and 33% sell through market stalls and events.

The Brewer guidance says the most profitable taprooms do not simply move more beer. They sell beers that protect margin. That means balancing customer demand with products that perform well financially. Seasonal beers that return each year were singled out as especially useful because they create predictable demand and reduce risk. One taproom manager quoted in the report said repeatable seasonal offerings and customer-driven products consistently outperform one-off experiments.

Sam Chirichiello, taproom manager at Goat Patch Brewing in Colorado, said seasonal specials that are made well, repeated yearly and kept consistent work well for the business. He also said listening to customers has helped shape products that became strong sellers, including a hard seltzer aimed at drinkers looking for a lighter option and more flavor variety.

The report says customer feedback should be treated as a revenue tool, not just a marketing tool. When breweries align production with proven demand, waste falls and sell-through improves. Repeat visits also rise when customers find beers they recognize and want again.

Draught sales remain central to that strategy. The guidance says draught pours generate the highest margins because they keep packaging and logistics costs lower than bottled or canned beer sold through outside channels. Breweries were advised to keep kegs stocked and push draught over packaged beer when possible. At the same time, offering multiple formats can raise spending per customer, especially when taprooms pair pours with growlers or packaged beer for take-home sales.

Staff training is another part of the equation. The report says employees can directly affect profitability by steering customers toward seasonal beers or higher-margin options, adjusting recommendations based on weather or time of day and using short conversations to increase ticket size. It also recommends training staff on product positioning so they know which beers should be promoted most heavily inside the taproom.

Signage and menus matter too. The guidance says breweries should market their highest-margin beers in-house, not only through outside advertising, and should align what they promote with what is most profitable. That approach depends on tracking daily sales data closely enough to see which beers drive revenue and which ones weaken margins.

The broader message is that customer demand should guide decisions without controlling them entirely. Breweries that combine customer preferences with internal sales data and cost analysis are better positioned to improve profitability quickly, especially as competition for shelf space and taps remains limited for smaller producers.