



# Preventing Sales of Alcohol to Minors: What You Should Know About Merchant Education Programs

## What are merchant education programs?

Education and training of merchants and servers who sell alcohol are intended to promote voluntary compliance with laws and regulations governing the sale of alcohol to minors. Education programs can be provided both for off-sales outlets (such as liquor or grocery stores) and on-sales outlets (such as bars and restaurants). These programs may also be conducted as part of a more general approach to responsible beverage service training. Educational approaches can take a variety of forms, including:

- Distribution of materials to alcohol retailers summarizing the laws and penalties regarding sales to minors;
- Visits to retailers by representatives of regulatory or enforcement agencies or by community groups concerned about sales to minors;
- Training programs offered to managers and employees; and
- Mandatory education programs for establishments or employees in violation of youth access laws.

## What can merchant education do?

Merchant education can serve a variety of purposes, including:

- **Provide information** about laws and penalties that might help merchants to understand the risks they take when they sell to minors;
- **Persuade** merchants that selling to minors is dangerous and violates not just the law but the norms of the community;
- Help owners and managers **establish responsible management policies**; and
- **Teach skills**—such as how to recognize a false ID—that can help prevent sales to minors.



## How effective is merchant education in reducing underage alcohol sales?

Merchant education should be conducted *only* as part of a comprehensive and integrated enforcement effort. Enforcement of laws against sales to minors is the key to reducing underage sales. Well-publicized, vigorous use of compliance checks has been repeatedly shown to reduce sales to minors. Merchant education programs can help to generate public and business support for enforcement and can enhance enforcement efforts. They have *not* been shown to be powerful interventions on their own.

## What are responsible beverage service programs?

Responsible beverage service is one type of merchant education program, generally implemented in bars, restaurants, and other on-sales alcohol outlets. These programs provide overall instruction in safe and responsible beverage service and sales. Considerable research demonstrates that a well-implemented, responsible beverage service program can be effective in reducing the sale of alcohol to intoxicated persons and in preventing impaired driving. However, little research currently exists to indicate whether these programs can be effective in reducing the sale of alcohol to minors. In general, we can

assume that responsible beverage service or other merchant education programs can be a useful component of an overall enforcement effort.

## What components should a merchant education program include?

Educational programs for merchants should include the following elements:

- Information about laws and penalties;
- Information indicating the importance of avoiding sales to minors to protect the health and well-being of everyone in the community;
- An emphasis on proper management techniques and policies to encourage compliance with the law;
- Information about how to recognize false IDs; and
- Tips on how to refuse a sale safely and comfortably.

Perhaps the most important component—and one that unfortunately is often neglected—is the emphasis on proper management techniques. Clerks and others who carry out direct sales to customers may have difficulty adhering to the law *unless* they have appropriate management support.

## How does merchant education fit within a larger community effort?

Educating alcohol merchants can be a community effort that goes beyond any specific training program or distribution of materials. Some community groups visit merchants and talk to them about the importance of avoiding the sale of alcohol to minors. Sometimes young people make these visits themselves, asking merchants to help protect them and their peers. Some communities reward merchants who refuse to sell alcohol to minors with small prizes or by sending and publishing letters of commendation.

Merchants need more than just the facts about the law. They need to feel that the community supports them in their efforts to do the right thing.



## Where can I get more information?

### Research

Buka, S. L., & Birdthistle, I. J. (1999). Long-term effects of a community-wide alcohol server training intervention. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 60*, 27–36.

This study presents encouraging results regarding the effectiveness of alcohol server training. More than 1 year after participating in a “Responsible Alcohol Service” curriculum, trainees continued to report significantly higher levels of acceptable serving behavior, such as checking IDs, dealing with patrons showing the early effects of alcohol, and dealing with intoxicated patrons. The study found that these positive effects were most pronounced for young or inexperienced servers, wait staff, and those working in facilities without written service policies. It is important to note that the effects did diminish over time, suggesting that repeated, periodic training may be useful.

Toomey, T. L., Kilian, G. R., Gehan, J. P., Perry, C. L., Jones-Webb, R., & Wagenaar, A. C. (1998). Qualitative assessment of training programs for alcohol servers and establishment managers. *Public Health Reports, 113*, 162–169.

This study, conducted by members of the University of Minnesota’s School of Epidemiology, reviews 22 national and local training programs for alcohol vendors and servers. Though the study does not actually list the programs, it features a valuable discussion of the components of effective training. The results also indicate that few programs incorporate most of these components.

### Materials and Programs

The Century Council. (n.d.) *The “Front Lines” campaign*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.

The Century Council, an advocacy group funded by major distillers, developed this program to raise clerks’ and servers’ awareness of the importance of checking for a valid ID. The “Front Lines” campaign consists of both point-of-sale signs and training materials, which are available at no charge in both English and Spanish. Visit The Century Council Web site (<http://www.centurycouncil.org/underage/retailer/index.html>) to learn more about the program.

Health Communications. (1999). Training for Intervention ProcedureS [Web site]. Available at <http://www.gettips.com> (visited June 18, 1999)

Training for Intervention ProcedureS is a popular training program for alcohol sellers and servers. Better known as TIPS, the program aims to prevent intoxication, drunk driving, and underage drinking. Different courses are available depending on the type of establishment in which the server works—On Premise, Off Premise, Social Functions, and University, to name a few. All courses cover basic information about behavior, alcohol effects, effective responses to problems, laws, and IDs. This is supplemented with skills training and role playing/rehearsal. TIPS training is available throughout the country. (A cost may be involved.) Consult the Web site for details.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (1997). *Retail oriented best practices for underage drinking prevention: An exemplary selection of retail oriented programs and practices aimed at reducing underage drinking and related drinking and driving* (DOT HS 808 618). Washington, DC: Author.

This report, developed in conjunction with the National Alcohol Beverage Control Association, includes a section on “Seller and Server Training.” The section briefly describes the nature and content of a training program and then provides greater detail about three programs deemed exemplary: Licensee Education on Alcohol and Drugs (California), Alabama Responsible Vendor Program (Alabama), Seller and Server Training (Virginia). The report contains contact information for each of these programs, and the final section on “National Resources” includes additional contacts for seller and server training programs.

Prevention Research Center. (1996). *Responsible alcohol sales & service: Off-premise licensee, manager, & clerk training*. Berkeley, CA: Author.

The Prevention Research Center provides highly practical information in its manuals, which address clerks and licensees/managers separately. Training participants review important definitions and laws; and they learn about the strategies that minors use to distract or persuade clerks and the procedures that management can establish to prevent illegal underage sales. Methods for checking IDs and successfully refusing sales also are presented. The appendix of

relevant State laws—that can be adapted for any State—is an example of a useful reference tool for those involved in alcohol sales.

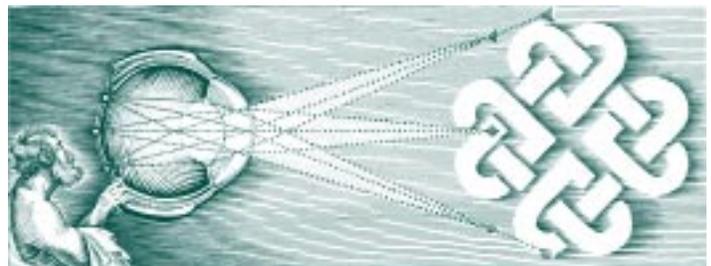
## State Resources

Because State laws differ with regard to training requirements, one of the most practical steps for learning more about merchant education is to contact the Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) office in your State. Some States sponsor specific programs. California, for example, offers both Licensee Education on Alcohol and Drugs (L.E.A.D.—practical information on responsible sales and prevention, offered in a training setting) and Informed Merchants Preventing Alcohol-related Crime Tendencies (I.M.P.A.C.T.—a cooperative program that identifies areas of noncompliance and provides crime prevention information to licensees during educational, in-store visits). Other States can provide lists of approved training programs and contact information. The World Wide Web is a convenient way to access this type of government information. Visit <http://www.atf.treas.gov/core/alcohol/info/lcb.htm> to view a list of links and contact information for State ABC offices.

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