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KNOWING THE CUSTOMER

The Boulder Liquor Mart Sells Beer and More Beer



Photos: Geoffrey Wheeler/Black Star

Building Markets: Jack Stoakes, general manager of Boulder Liquor Mart, inset and above, has scored success by creating markets for unusual beers.

by Shawn Waggoner

Every day, customers remind Liquor Mart general manager Jack Stoakes of his promise to stock Andechs, one of Germany's few remaining monastery-produced beers, on the

shelves of his Boulder, Colorado liquor store. Stoakes can only blame himself for local demand for the "rich, mellow, user-friendly" beer. Several years ago, he took 25 of his best customers on a European beer and wine tour. The group discovered Andechs at the monastery, near

Munich. The intrepid travelers have been singing praises of the double bock ever since. Much to Stoakes' chagrin, however, the monks can't seem to get the beer past Frankfurt.

But the beer's popularity only grows in Boulder. "Now we're getting requests for Andechs from people I've never seen before," Stoakes says. "There's a local following built up for this stuff, and nobody even knows what it is."

Stoakes muses about the whims of his Boulder customers, but when it comes to fulfilling their fancies, he's dead serious. Boulder buys beer, and Stoakes, the owner of Boulder Liquor Mart, knows it.

1,000 Bottles Of Beer On ...

One thousand kinds of beer are stocked on Liquor Mart shelves; 75 varieties are available by the keg. Cases, six-packs, cans, bottles and kegs are stocked at a brisk 40 degrees Fahrenheit in the store's 5,000-square-foot beer cooler. On any given business day, the store's more ambitious customers can be found rummaging around in the icebox, searching through tall stacks of cases of unusual beer labels, lagers, ales and stouts from around the world and around the United States.

Empty kegs – Liquor Mart sells 2,000 kegs of beer weekly – are piled in a fenced-in yard at the rear of the free-standing 41,000-square-foot building. "It's tough to stock this much beer. The average liquor store wouldn't," Stoakes says, wrapping up a too-long tour through the store's chilly walk-in beer cooler. Stoakes notes that beers, particularly imports, are more price sensitive than wines or spirits, and that stocking a great beer selection requires a huge selling floor. But Stoakes can't, and won't, ignore the impact beer sales make on his bottom line.

Stoakes' 1991 sales projections target \$15 million, a 7 percent increase over 1990. Beer sales account for more than 40 percent of Liquor Mart revenues. The percentage is impressive, considering a domestic six-pack costs about three dollars, compared with higher-ticket wine and spirits purchases.

Liquor Mart is rewarded handily for attention paid to Boulder's beer guzzlers. According to beer manager Mark Cervantes, beer sales at the store have grown about 25 percent yearly.

Mystery Case

Particularly quick to spring from Liquor Mart shelves are microbrewery-produced beers, imports and non-alcoholic brews, Cervantes says. Nearly half the brands the store stocks are imported. "This region is really high on the microbrewed section, as well as the import section," Cervantes says. "People are willing to pay the price to get a good beer."

Although Heineken and Molson still dominate import sales, Liquor Mart also stocks rarities such as Russkoye Lager and Moscova beer from Russia, Lindemann's Kriek dessert beer and Chimay Red Ale from Belgium, and the Jamaican-

Liquor Mart serves a faithful following of customers who routinely buy mystery beer cases comprised of 24 randomly assembled single cans. The store only stocks the sealed mystery cases when single-can supplies accumulate, but they are



Great Deals: Stoakes pursues a high-volume buying strategy that allows him to pass along big savings.



produced Dragon Stout. Domestic brews such as Boulder-produced Buffalo Gold, Red Tail Ale from California and Utah's Slick Rock Lager are also big sellers. Cervantes is currently trying to get Blackened Voodoo Lager from New Orleans, which was involved in an interstate war between Texas and Louisiana this past summer.

Liquor Mart sells so much beer it buys it by the container load, or 1,200 cases. Purchases of that size usually convince suppliers to make less-popular brands available, Stoakes says.

High-volume buying also allows Liquor Mart to get great deals from its suppliers. The store passes its savings along to customers in the form of weekly sales, which are well publicized on Wednesdays with full-page advertisements on the back page of the first section of the local newspaper.

frequently requested and quickly snatched. "Customers are always asking, 'Got any more mystery cases coming out?'" Stoakes says.

Boulder's preoccupation with beer – particularly imports – doesn't surprise Stoakes, a marketing tiger who's got his finger firmly planted on the demographics and desires of his customers. Bimonthly beer tastings, sponsored by Liquor Mart at a local pizza joint, keep Stoakes in touch with his customers' tastes and give him a chance to tease local beer connoisseurs with the store's latest offerings.

His latest tout? A line of low-priced beers created by the Joseph Huber Brewery in Monroe, Wisconsin, and packaged under Liquor Mart's own label in returnable bottles.

Doing His Homework

Each year Stoakes enlists help from the marketing department at