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Branding Southern Oregon

By *Janet Eastman*

There was something instantly impressive about the Southern Oregon Wine Marketing and Sales Conference.

Sure, it was the first time a conference focused on wine marketing for those south of Eugene. And yes, it quickly sold out to 100 winery owners and grape growers, who gathered early on June 14 in Central Point, greeted old friends, then got down to the serious business of selling more wine.

Making the day memorable were two other factors: There was a stellar lineup of speakers who offered advice from designing labels that serve as branding billboards to maximizing the latest social networking phone app. And the cost was only \$35, thanks to five local trade associations collaborating as equal sponsors for the first time.

But the most telling snapshot of the event took place quietly, at a table inside Oregon State University's Extension Service Auditorium. Sitting side by side, taking notes and believing this was really going to help their business were two women on different marketing tracks:

Hilda Jones of Abacela, a Roseburg winery recognized as pioneering some of the region's most notable varietals, came with two employees to learn more about using social media to promote the sale of 10,000 cases a year.

To her right was Carla David of Wild Wines, who hand crafts and sells 230 cases of herbal, flower and fruit wine at her Jacksonville facility. She was there to learn more about sales and distribution.

There was something for everyone at SoWine.

"The 'know your audience,' 'know your product' and 'know what sets you apart' messages are ones that every business needs to have answers to," said David, who started making dandelion and other wines in 2002.

Several speakers emphasized the need to distinguish a wine from everything else on the shelf. "Family owned" is always a great message," said Dixie Huey of Trellis Wine Consulting in Vancouver, Wash. "But what more can you say that tells your compelling story? Wine is about an experience."

Eugenia Keegan of Keegan Consulting in Newberg said Southern Oregon wineries are lucky in that they already have tourists coming for theater, artisan food, outdoor sports and other activities. "There were no tourists in Napa Valley in the '60s," she said.

She added, however, that without great reviews, "No one will buy your wine unless they can taste it. So if it's not being sampled, it's not being sold."

Don Morgan, of GMA Research Corp. in Bellevue, Wash., steered the group to do-it-yourself marketing research tools to stay in touch with customers. He recommends tasting room questionnaires and surveying wine club members. "The only question you really need to know is: 'Would they recommend you?'"

Rachell Coe of 4 the Grapes in Eugene said tasting notes should be easy to download from a winery website. Restaurant staffs and party hosts like to print them before selling or serving a wine.

Chris Oggenfuss of Oggenfuss Wine Marketing in Napa spoke on how best to use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media outlets. He astounded conference-goers with this fact: 78 percent of consumers trust other consumers' comments the most. He says the top 20 wine bloggers have a larger audience - and more influence - than Wine Spectator.



Dixie Huey of Trellis Wine Consulting was one of many speakers at the Southern Oregon Wine Marketing and Sales Conference.



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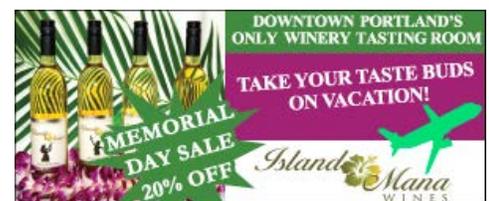
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He thinks tasting rooms should encourage the newest cellphone social app, Foursquare, in which people are named mayor of a place if they "check in" and tell the world what they're doing there.

The day ended with speaker Porscha Schiller, a marketing and events-management consultant for wineries, such as South Stage Cellars in Jacksonville. She gave practical tips on hosting events that deliver the unexpected. Seconds after she said the word "surprise," a dance group suddenly appeared and performed.

The speakers' PowerPoint presentations are posted on the Rogue Valley Winegrowers Association's website www.rvwinegrowers.org.

Earlier, attendees were encouraged to join that association and the other sponsoring groups: Southern Oregon Winery Association, Umpqua Valley Winegrowers Association, Southern Oregon Wine Institute and the Southern Oregon Visitors Association. Michael Donovan spoke for the Oregon Wine Board.

Dandelion winemaker David said she was impressed with the day of support, educational offerings and community-building efforts. "Everyone must realize that the success of an individual winery contributes to the success of tourism and the reputation of the region as a whole."

Janet Eastman writes for national publications and covers Southern Oregon wine for www.examiner.com. Her work can be seen at www.janeteastman.com.



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