



Successful Strategy:
Print special cards to hold
bar stools for patrons who
step outside to smoke.

**Just out for a smoke—
I'll be right back!**

Successful strategies for going smoke-free, whether by choice or by law

Operators find ways to make everyone welcome

by Sonya Bice

In recent years, many Wisconsin restaurant operators have found themselves going smoke-free in a variety of circumstances, either voluntarily or as the result of a smoking ban. They've seen which strategies work at making the transition smooth and have the most success in keeping smoking customers. Some who were most apprehensive about the change now call it the most positive step they have ever taken and say business has either been unaffected or has actually grown.

Due to public health concerns over second-hand smoke, smoking bans have passed in more than 30 communities, with Marshfield enacting a comprehensive smoke-free ordinance in April by referendum, and Eau Claire passing one in recent weeks. Last year WRA announced that it would work for a statewide ban on the grounds that it would be more fair to businesses than an ever-changing patchwork of local ordinances. The local bans "create winners and losers," says Pete Hanson, WRA government relations director, "especially the restaurant-only bans that are not comprehensive." WRA's position is a result of the proliferation of local bans throughout Wisconsin, which the association continues to oppose.

Driven by changing public attitudes toward smoking, 24 states have passed laws



making all restaurants and bars smoke-free. Minnesota, Illinois and Iowa all have statewide smoke-free laws already, while Wisconsin and Michigan are both very close to passing one.

The approaches to going smoke-free that have found success have been tailored to individual operations and their clientele. Some operators make the change

with little fanfare; others use it as a high-visibility promotional event. Some make elaborate accommodations of smokers in outdoor areas, while others are more low-key about their smoking area options.

Among the successful ideas some operators have tried:

- **Setting up an outside area for smokers.** Outside adaptations can include roofs or awnings, patio heaters, cocktail tables, TV screens, and other amenities to be more attractive. (Local ordinances and zoning may affect the changes that can be made outdoors.)
- **Using creative ideas for holding bar stools for patrons who step outside to smoke.** One creative idea used in Chicago is having the bartenders issue cards that say "cigarette break, be right back" to smokers when they step out. Other techniques are to create a signal, such as a coaster set atop a glass, to indicate that a customer has stepped outside but will be back.
- **Surveying customers ahead of time on what they like about the establishment.** Customers frequent an establishment for specific reasons, and smoking is usually one of the lesser reasons. After all, they could be smoking in front of the TV at home, and that would be more convenient than going out. But they're not. A

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restaurant owner who asks what regular customers like best about the restaurant is then able to position the business as the place to go for that item, whether it be a menu item, ambiance, or personal friendly service.

- **Updating and increasing marketing of menu items.** According to WRA's Hanson, many businesses have reported that smoke-free laws have the effect of shifting revenue somewhat toward food items.
- **Resolving to cater to the 80 percent of citizens who are nonsmokers.** There is inherent opportunity in making nonsmokers feel welcome and offering them a unique experience at a newly smoke-free establishment.

Dennis Heyde has experience with both scenarios: he owns businesses that have gone smoke-free both voluntarily and by mandate. His bar, Arizona's, in Shakopee, Minnesota, allowed smoking until September 30 of last year, when the state's smoke-free workplaces law went into effect. And Fanny Hill, a fine dining restaurant located just outside the Eau Claire city limits, went smoke-free voluntarily after the city of Eau Claire passed its smoking ban.

The two businesses presented different clienteles, and Heyde took different approaches.

Moving quickly to make smoking customers feel welcome

At Arizona's, the focus was on retaining smoking customers as the smoke-free workplaces legislation became law. "There was a fairly large smoking crowd we had in that lounge," he said, "so we wanted to make some accommodations." The bar had a patio, and Heyde put up a tent on the patio and installed large propane gas heaters. There are tables outside, and wait staff delivers food to the tables. The changes were in place October 1 – the first day after the ban took effect. "We made immediate accommodations," Heyde said. Throughout the winter months, the strategy worked. "Our business was up 35 to 50 percent depending on the month. The worse the weather got, the more smokers we had out there." As the weather improved, he said, the increases leveled off, but he still is seeing a ten percent

increase in business over the previous year.

According to an article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, "[Minnesota] law does not address smoking outdoors, but some local ordinances may prohibit smoking near entrances. The law does not prohibit cities and counties from enacting stricter prohibitions. Bars and restaurants can install outdoor patios with service for smokers, if local ordinances do not prohibit it."

"We expected it to be much more subtle, but it was amazingly positive. Measurement of the effect was obvious in the bottom line – sales just simply increased."

Heyde would prefer that there be no smoking bans, and especially no local bans. "A local ban is just a very unfair ban," he said. "They need to leave it free choice [of the operator] or go with a statewide ban. But I don't think the cities are going to back off, and all it is going to do is hurt the operators."

When Jim Christensen, owner of Kurtz's Pub and Deli in Two Rivers, made the decision to go smoke-free voluntarily, he said he broke the news "gently" to the regulars at the establishment that has been run by his family since 1904. Most of the smokers, he said, are usually at the bar, and he works behind the bar, so he had opportunities to talk to them about the decision prior to the change, which occurred April 15.

"The smokers see the reasons for it," he said. "And other customers like it that they don't have to walk through a smoky bar when they come here. Overall I think it's been a net gain."

He also made clear that he welcomes the smoking customers by telling them that he will soon be installing a special overhead heater in the overhang outside the restaurant where customers go to smoke. "They will be able to press a button to turn on the heater to keep warm when the weather is cold. They're happy that I'm going to do that."

A low-key response to non-smoking customers

At Fanny Hill, the impetus for going smoke-free did not actually come from the government. "Our customers really did drive that decision," Heyde said. "The non-smokers did not like walking through the bar area. The non-smokers are the protesters – they are very vocal."

When Eau Claire's city ban took effect, Fanny Hill joined in, even though it was not subject to the ordinance, posting signage at the front entrance. "It was just pretty much a non-event," Heyde said. "I don't think we had even a comment."

He said there has been no noticeable effect. "We didn't see an increase in business or a decrease in business."

When Draganetti's Ristorante in Altoona went smoke-free at the beginning of last year, it did so in a low-key way. Having decided a few months prior, owner Joanne Palzkill posted signs ahead of time to let customers know of the coming change. Customers' response was mixed, but she said that they have not lost even those customers who smoke. "The overall majority of our customers were elated," she said. "We did have several regulars who were lounge customers only, not dinner patrons, who expressed dissatisfaction. They were also very heavy smokers. In both cases they have returned to be regular customers."

There were some immediate positives.

She prefers working in a smoke-free environment herself, for one. But Palzkill said the effect of going smoke-free was a definite increase in business. "We expected it to be much more subtle, but it was amazingly positive," she said. "Measurement of the effect was obvious in the bottom line – sales just simply increased."

A big splash, and a focus on communicating with customers

The owners of Titledown Brewing Company in Green Bay made their announcement about going smoke-free anything but a non-event.

Brent Weyker, president of the company, said the two-story restaurant allowed smoking on the second floor bar area. The option of going smoke-free in the bar had been considered, but no date

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had been set to do so. Then in January, a group booked a room in the restaurant for a rally in support of a statewide workplace smoking ban. "It was the perfect opportunity, so we decided to go ahead and announce it," Weyker said. "It's probably been one of the best things we ever did."

The rally created a built-in media opportunity, and Titledown's announcement received extensive press coverage, both in newspapers and on television. And Weyker said that sales in the past few months were up over the previous year, though he stopped short of attributing the increase to going smoke-free.

His high-profile change in policy was accompanied by a great deal of customer contact, as he made an effort to communicate personally with regulars so that they would know the change was coming. "A few that I missed were upset to be taken off guard, but I'm not joking – we had maybe four or five negative comments, and the positive response was overwhelming."

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Starting fresh, and smoke-free

It may be a sign of the shrinking number of smokers that many restaurants are opening their doors as smoke-free establishments. Perhaps even more a sign of the changing times is that some restaurants don't even put up signs.

Haute Taco, Brookfield, opened in April smoke-free, and the response has been almost exclusively positive, said co-owner Karen Replogle. "I get calls from people about the restaurant, 'Is there smoking?' and when I say no, they say, 'great.'"

She said that when the other restaurant she co-owns, Jake's, surveyed its customers 17 years ago about smoking, the response was 85 percent in favor of going smoke-free. "That was from both smokers and

non-smokers," she said. "You know, we lost a couple of people, but that clientele is kind of shrinking." She noted that ironically, some of those customers have come back in recent years, telling her that in the meantime, they have quit smoking anyway, so the point is moot. "They say, 'We used to go out only where we could smoke, but now it doesn't make a difference anymore.'"

At Haute Taco, there are no posted signs prohibiting smoking, but neither are there any ashtrays on the tables. "If anyone asks about smoking, we say, 'oh, no, but we have a bench and an ashtray outside,'" Replogle said. "The less attention you draw to it, the better. We're not making a big deal out of it."

Milwaukee restaurateur Marc Bianchini this month opened an upscale wine room that an early reviewer described as "100 percent smoke free and 100 percent style." The restaurant, Indulge, will feature chocolates, wine, and imported meats and cheeses. Cigarette smoke is not on the menu. **WR**

WRA gives me the chance to learn from other restaurateurs.

NAME: Doug Kruschke

PROFILE: Owner/Manager of the Haymarket Grill in Eau Claire

FIRST JOB: A clerk at my local grocery store

WHY I LOVE THIS BUSINESS:

I have the opportunity to talk to people face to face, get them to try new things that they have never heard of before and make them happy

MY MEMBERSHIP IS VALUABLE BECAUSE:

The WRA is there to support my growth and answer any questions that I have

MEMBER BENEFITS I ESPECIALLY VALUE:

I value the ability to network with other restaurateurs and learn from their experiences

MEMBER SINCE: 2006

