



*Kelly from her bartending days.*

# REV Up Your Beverage Program

*with*

**KMA**  
CONSULTING GROUP

It's been a while since we've talked about beverage, so thank ED Publisher Dave Manack for reminding us in May that "beer and boobs" won't get it done—the bare minimum never yields maximum results.

In KMA's Next Level Leadership course, we suggest that the key element of a successful business is pride—in your venue, your hospitality *and* your product. Beverage is a leading revenue center for most of us, yet we exhibit zero passion for cocktails, beers, spirits or wines. This communicates to the guest, "We don't care what you like to drink, because we have what you *really* want."

Except they don't want it as much as they used to ...

That's not a knock on our beautiful performers; their success is our success, and vice versa. It speaks to the increased expectations of a generation of guests who want more for less, who are conditioned to be courted rather than taken for granted, and who have no reason to be enthusiastic about a product we, as operators, display no enthusiasm for.

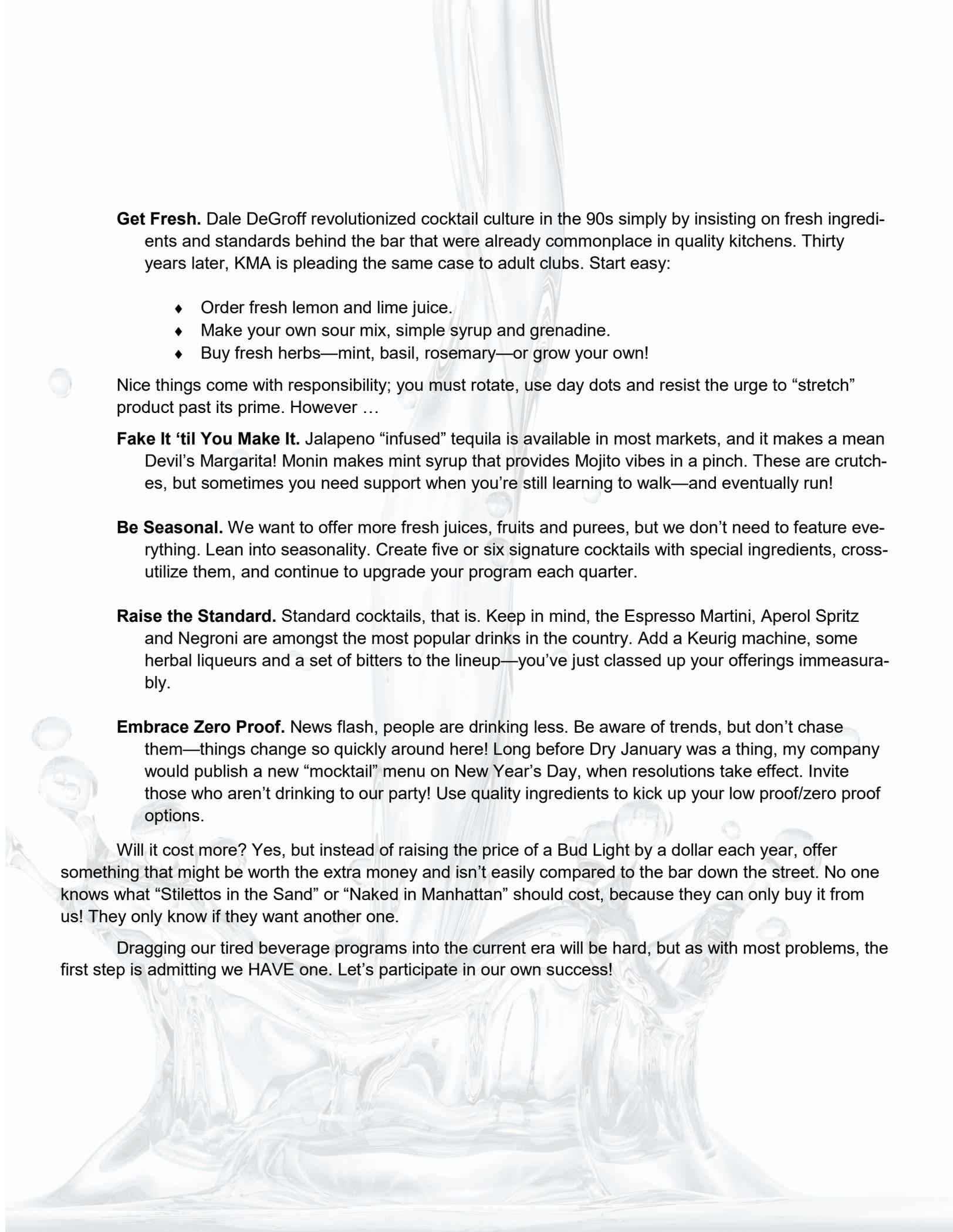
But why AREN'T we enthusiastic? Curating a beverage program with *intention* is an adventure! It invites us to learn about history, science and culture—without even meaning to. Not compelling enough?

Revvng up our beverage programs also accomplishes the following:

- ◆ **Differentiates our venues from others**
- ◆ **Competes with non-adult venues, because they ARE competition**
- ◆ **Speaks to multiple demographics**

Before you turn the page for more pictures of Lauren Phillips—not that I blame you—I know we aren't mixology bars. We can't spend two hours prepping and twenty minutes making a drink while the bar is three deep. (Although I challenge you to remember the last time your bar was three deep. Still thinking?) My friends and clients know my love-hate relationship with today's cocktail culture, because mixing magic portions will never cast a spell as surely as genuine guest interaction!

Do this instead ...



**Get Fresh.** Dale DeGroff revolutionized cocktail culture in the 90s simply by insisting on fresh ingredients and standards behind the bar that were already commonplace in quality kitchens. Thirty years later, KMA is pleading the same case to adult clubs. Start easy:

- ◆ Order fresh lemon and lime juice.
- ◆ Make your own sour mix, simple syrup and grenadine.
- ◆ Buy fresh herbs—mint, basil, rosemary—or grow your own!

Nice things come with responsibility; you must rotate, use day dots and resist the urge to “stretch” product past its prime. However ...

**Fake It ‘til You Make It.** Jalapeno “infused” tequila is available in most markets, and it makes a mean Devil’s Margarita! Monin makes mint syrup that provides Mojito vibes in a pinch. These are crutches, but sometimes you need support when you’re still learning to walk—and eventually run!

**Be Seasonal.** We want to offer more fresh juices, fruits and purees, but we don’t need to feature everything. Lean into seasonality. Create five or six signature cocktails with special ingredients, cross-utilize them, and continue to upgrade your program each quarter.

**Raise the Standard.** Standard cocktails, that is. Keep in mind, the Espresso Martini, Aperol Spritz and Negroni are amongst the most popular drinks in the country. Add a Keurig machine, some herbal liqueurs and a set of bitters to the lineup—you’ve just classed up your offerings immeasurably.

**Embrace Zero Proof.** News flash, people are drinking less. Be aware of trends, but don’t chase them—things change so quickly around here! Long before Dry January was a thing, my company would publish a new “mocktail” menu on New Year’s Day, when resolutions take effect. Invite those who aren’t drinking to our party! Use quality ingredients to kick up your low proof/zero proof options.

Will it cost more? Yes, but instead of raising the price of a Bud Light by a dollar each year, offer something that might be worth the extra money and isn’t easily compared to the bar down the street. No one knows what “Stiletto in the Sand” or “Naked in Manhattan” should cost, because they can only buy it from us! They only know if they want another one.

Dragging our tired beverage programs into the current era will be hard, but as with most problems, the first step is admitting we HAVE one. Let’s participate in our own success!

# The TL;DR from Neil



**Make friends with distributors.** Support is available in your market, no matter what you've been told. It's more challenging today than it was yesterday, but you'd be amazed at what you can get by asking.

When you make deals, vendors will ask you to place certain products. Don't accept things without a clue how to sell them! If you end up with **dead stock**, however, use it in cocktails or nightly shot special—unless it sucks! Don't serve stuff that sucks.

**Up your presentation game.** I've seen a Woodford Reserve poured into a plastic thimble and an Old Fashioned served in a solo cup. I'm not a liquor snob by any means, but that ain't right. Also, you can't run a program with a big glass and a small glass. The amount of liquor and mixer needs to make sense. Ice is your friend—fill the glass to the top, and then some!

**Be good to garnishes.** Throw out the nasty limes. Our guests deserve fresh fruit, because we're charging for it. Don't cut a mountain of lemons late night, but if you run out, you can't stop garnishing drinks. Create your standards, print them and enforce them.

We see a lot of underutilized kitchens on our travels. Use your **kitchen** for prep if you have one. But you don't need a full kitchen to make simple syrup.

Don't buy that disgusting mix that tastes like a bartender's spill matt. A **Long Island Iced Tea** and its many relatives consists of all your white spirits and house-made sour, topped with soda. It can be poured with two hands in five seconds.

The most important ingredient in your cocktails is your **cast**. Involve the team every step of the way, to whatever degree that makes sense. It will always be up to us, as leaders, to kick it over the goal line, but be sure the cast buys in. That way, they can't help but match your enthusiasm for your product and share it with the guests!