

How to run a successful Annual Brand Planning meeting with your distributor

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2020 has given the beer industry its fair share of challenges, but innovation has been an unexpected gift this year. Whether it's a move to packaging, alignment with a distributor, launching e-commerce, or DTC sales, our industry as a whole has evolved into a mature consumer packaged goods industry. With this movement forward, many beer brands that have taken on the challenge of distribution in the wholesale channel are facing the elusive ABP or Annual Brand Planning meeting with their wholesaler.

A practice that surfaces every Q4 like pumpkin beers and gift packs, this important distributor ritual is usually shrouded in mystery, and the brands that navigate them successfully keep their secrets close to their chest. Well, I'm going to blow the lid off of this enigma. Why? Because we all need help right now, so grab your popcorn and keep reading.

ABP does not stand for “another beer party”

This meeting should be well organized and focused on one thing — improving sales in the wholesale channel in conjunction with your specific distributors. Remember, your relationship with your wholesaler is a partnership, which means you've got to give what you want to get out of that relationship. If you want to increase sales, you've got to be willing to put in the hard work to make it happen. Just because you're aligned with a distributor, doesn't mean your sales will magically skyrocket in auto-pilot without some effort on your part.

Your ABP meeting should include:

- detailed sales data analyses,
- specific and measurable goals for the upcoming sales year,
- how your brand performed historically in the last sales year,
- purchase order trends,
- plans to work with their marketing team and sales team,
- an outline of product launches,
- promotional opportunities and programs,
- pricing analysis,
- an overview of marketing and sales assets you bring to the table, and
- how you will work together to achieve common goals.

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Your ABP meeting should NOT be a happy hour type environment where you show up on Zoom in your pajamas and don't have a structured agenda. It should not include the phrase, "let's just sell more liquid," followed by an awkward silence where you expect your wholesaler to detail out plans for blowing up your brand this year.

If you're concerned at this point that you don't have the proper systems in place to generate those essential elements of the meeting that I've listed out for you, it's time to make that happen.

Questions to ask yourself include:

- How am I tracking my outside sales data?
- How am I using that sales data to come up with strategic sales plans?
- Do I know what's working and what's not working when it comes to SKUs, classes of trade, points of distribution, and market segmentation?

I would suggest making sure that you're using an advanced ERP system and CRM to help you answer these tough questions.

Technically you should have already completed your ABP with your distributors at this point, but don't give up hope! Some wholesalers don't take meetings until Q1 or are willing to make some adjustments early in the sales year. Your extensive sales plans are not moot just because they might be a little late.

Try this old fashioned trick: Ask them if they want to see your sales plans for the upcoming year. Mind-blowing right? You might be surprised to know that they will most likely appreciate your effort to start the year off on a forward-thinking note and that you've taken the time or personalized strategic plans just for them.

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