

How to Get Paid to Design Cocktails

Knowing how to Design Cocktails is just the First Step
Make your Skills Pay for Themselves!



JULIA & CHRIS TUNSTALL

A Bar Above.com

How to Get Paid to Design Cocktails

Knowing how to design great cocktails
is just the first step.

How do you take those skills and use
them to increase your income?

Working at a Bar or Restaurant

If you already work in the hospitality industry, you're at a huge advantage. Here are a couple ways you can get extra pay for working as a cocktail designer.

Cocktail design in a restaurant or bar can be a fantastic way to learn without having to buy your own ingredients.

Offer to Help with the Menu

If you're already working as a bartender, offering to design a cocktail or two for the next cocktail menu is a great step. Even if someone is currently in charge of this task, it's likely he/she would appreciate the help. This is a great first step if you haven't charged for cocktail design services before.

Unfortunately you won't make as much money as some of the other opportunities we'll discuss – often bartenders who work extra hours designing cocktails are only paid the wage rate for that time.

That being said, it can help in another way: many restaurant managers have more work on their plate than time. If you can help them get some of their time back, they may also be willing to give you better or more shifts – which will definitely put more money in your pocket.

In addition to contributing cocktails to the menu, another great way to save your manager time is to offer to help create syrups, infusions, or any other ingredients needed for the beverage program. This will give you great hands-on experience making these products, will help free up the manager's time, and will definitely pay off in the long run.

Get Yourself Promoted

Once you've demonstrated your skill designing cocktails, it's worth asking for compensation. In my experience, I've been able to negotiate a 20% to 50% increase on my hourly rate in

exchange for being responsible for updating our cocktail menu each season.

Make sure to communicate exactly what you are expected to do in this case. Are you going to create the drink menu and then support the menu for the rest of the season? Will you be expected to make all of the syrups, infusions, tinctures necessary to support the menu for the next 3 months? Are you going to be in charge of ordering produce, spirits, etc.? Make sure that you both understand the nature of your agreement, and this will have a factor when you negotiate for your final pay. The more responsibility you have, the more money you should be making.

Get Hired as a Mixologist



If your current establishment already has someone working as the cocktail designer, they may be unwilling to negotiate a pay raise for you. It may be in your interest in this scenario to look around for another bar or restaurant in your area that has an opening for this type of position.

Another option would be to seek a bartending position at a restaurant that doesn't currently update its menu regularly, and offer your cocktail design services as part of your employment negotiations. I would recommend going into the interview with a few cocktails already designed. This shows you're prepared, and you can easily make them if you're asked to go behind the bar during the interview.

Do everything you can to make saying "no" a very hard decision. I usually come in with about 4-8 cocktails designed specifically for that restaurant's environment, along with the cost to produce each cocktail. If you can show that you can create great drinks and understand the business' perspective, it will be very difficult to say no to your proposition.

Regardless, I'd highly recommend that you go into the new position with expectations set on your role and compensation.

If the establishment is hesitant to pay you more right away, you might offer to help with one menu at a lower (bartender) wage with an agreement to increase the rate after you have established your skill. Make sure to agree on the date when the pay raise will occur, and don't be afraid to remind them when that day comes. This approach is risky – it's not uncommon for the next cocktail menu to come and go without the wage increase happening. So beware if you choose to use this as your negotiation tactic.

Designing Cocktails for Private Events

Some of my favorite cocktail design work has been for private events. Some people think this work is limited to industry events, but there is a huge market for cocktail design outside of the hospitality and beverage industry.

Event planners are your gateway to event work. Be their most trustworthy, reliable vendor and you'll never run out of work.

Regardless of the type(s) of event you choose to target, I can't emphasize how important it is to act professionally and communicate clearly with the planner.

I've been hired by a large number of clients who said they choose to hire me again and again because I communicate clearly, I am professional, and I do what I say I'll do. Event planners across the board are typically juggling many different vendors. Make sure you are their easiest vendor to work with – and soon enough you'll have all the referrals you need!

Event Services

Cocktail design for weddings can sometimes be as simple as just that – designing a cocktail and providing the recipe to the caterer or bartender that will be working the event. It can also be much more involved, all the way to you creating the recipe, pre-batching the drink and then serving it at the event.

Communication & Expectations

Be very deliberate when communicating with the event planner to ensure you are aligned on exactly what you will be providing, and when. If you will be preparing ingredients or working the event, you will almost certainly need to work closely with other event vendors like equipment rental companies or caterers. The event planner should know this information, and if they don't, they will be glad you asked! Remember they don't necessarily understand bartending and cocktails, so they may not know that

you'll need a lot of ice, batching containers, etc. It's much better to ask early on than be surprised and unprepared at the event.

Whenever you work an event that has a caterer, make sure that you get the contact information of the caterer and set up a time to have a phone call as soon as possible. This will help to create a picture of who is responsible for what and there may be a way for the caterer to order some of the products that you will need for the event.

Business Licensing & Insurance

If you will be preparing ingredients or working events, you may need to check with your local authorities to see whether you will need business or food safety licensing. If you're in the US, a great place to start for this would be to contact your local Small Business Administration, which is a government agency created to help people with these kinds of questions.

If you will be physically working the event, check with the event planner to see if there is an Event Insurance Liability policy in place, and if you will be covered. If not, it's worth researching event liability insurance to make sure you are protected. There are some reasonable single-event policies available online. Calling a local business insurance agent is another great way to learn about your insurance options.

Getting Hired

The next section discussed a couple different event types, and ways that you can reach out to the right people to start getting hired as a cocktail designer.

Weddings

Weddings are usually the first type of private event that comes to mind when people think of cocktail design. Custom cocktails can be created to tell a story, feature a special ingredient or even to match the event's color scheme. Furthermore, if done



*Serving pre-batched
Custom cocktails at a
wedding instead of
hiring a full bar can
save the wedding
party a lot of money -
and still be great for
the guests!*

carefully, featuring a wedding cocktail instead of a full bar is an option that can save the planner quite a bit of money.

If you're interested in offering event wedding design, you should reach out and build relationships with three types of people: wedding planners, caterers and the folks who run large wedding venues.

Wedding Planners

Wedding planners are the gatekeepers – they will be the first one a Bride will ask for advice. And they may be the one who suggests the idea of a Custom cocktail to the bride as a way to save money. Speak to a couple wedding planners and consider offering them a referral bonus for any work they refer in your direction.

In general, cocktails designed for weddings will need to be pre-prepared as much as possible, but make sure you discuss the project with the planner, bride and / or caterer to understand exactly who will be serving the drink and what their skills are. If the bride's 21-year-old nephew will be serving the drinks, you'll want a simpler cocktail than if they have hired a skilled bartender to man the bar.

Caterers

Unless you are working the wedding, you will need to work closely with the caterers. They may be responsible for serving the cocktail or sourcing some or all of the ingredients. Understanding their skill level, capabilities and limitations will help you create a cocktail that will be a success.

Wedding Venues

Often wedding venues will include the bar as part of their packages offered to a bridal party. It's worth having a conversation with them to see if there is an opportunity to work together. If they can offer custom cocktail design in

one of their bar packages and refer the work to you, it can be a great win-win for everyone.

Event Planning agencies are a great place to get your foot in the door for Corporate events.

Corporate Events

Some of my favorite events have been for large corporate clients planning employee gatherings. In my experience the event planners are typically looking for cocktails that support an overall event theme or use local ingredients.

Very large companies will have their own internal event planning departments, but small to medium companies will rely on event planners or venues to take care of the planning.

Event Planners

It's really tricky to connect with large company's private event planners, so I'd start by getting to know the event planning companies first. Reach out to them with a clear pitch on what you offer and how you can benefit their clients. The more precise your offer is, and the clearer you can communicate it, the better your chances will be. Consider putting together a packet that outlines your services, along with beautiful pictures of cocktails and their recipes. Once you establish yourself as a good vendor they can trust, they may refer you to their event planner colleagues at large companies.

Event Venues

Just like wedding venues, large corporate event venues often cover the food and bar as part of their overall venue offering. These facilities tend to be much larger and often have a chef overseeing the food and beverage program, so it will likely be more difficult to pitch a cocktail design service directly to the venue.

In my experience the Event planners are the best way to book cocktail design jobs for corporate events, as they are

coordinating all of the vendors. As such, I'd focus your networking and outreach efforts on event planners.

Beverage Industry events are a great way to show off your best cocktail skills – spirits brands are often interested in more advanced cocktail designs.

Industry Events

Last but not least are industry events. By far the most common events I've worked with are for spirits brands doing events to support product launches, charity events or other promotional activities.

While the event might be underwritten by a large spirits brand, in my experience they are not necessarily planned by the brand's own staff. Not unlike large corporate events, these are also typically run by event planners and planning agencies.

Industry Connections

I have had great success in being asked to design cocktails for large industry events by building relationships with the brand sales team in my area. If you are currently working in a restaurant or bar and have purchasing power, use this to your advantage and build these relationships now! They will be extremely helpful if you choose to start doing cocktail design gigs on the side.

When the brand started planning an event and asked their sales staff for mixologist suggestions, my name came up because I had a strong relationship with a rep. Get to know your local sales reps through industry events, your local Bartender Guild, or even at your own bar. These relationships will absolutely pay off in the long run.

If you happen to have a venue that you could offer up as an event space, that's definitely something to tell the event planner. They are always looking for private event spaces and may ask you to design a few cocktails for the events as well. This will help to build your relationship with vendors as



you are providing them with something that makes their life easier.

Event Planners

Once again, a great way to get the phone call to support one of these events is to get to know the event planners. For all of the same reasons as for Weddings and Corporate events – these planners are often the gate-keepers and sometimes the final decision-makers on who gets hired for what.

Designing Cocktails for Brands

How often do you see Spirit brands using ingredients in their promotional activities? Someone has to create these cocktails – and it can be you!

The last (but certainly not least) of the common ways to get paid for cocktail design is to offer cocktail design services for spirits and other beverage brands.

How frequently do you see brands advertising their product with cocktail pictures and recipes? Massive companies like Diageo can hire their own Mixologists to create these cocktails, but smaller brands and local distilleries can't afford to have a mixologist on staff. There is tremendous opportunity for mixologists to support local brands and get some freelance work as well.

Selling a spirit on its own can be challenging – that's why there's an opportunity for you to design cocktails that show the ingredient in its best light!

Cocktail Design Services

Brands may need cocktails designed for any number of reasons, but here are the ones that I see most frequently.

Cocktail Design for Events:

We already talked about Events above, but I thought I should briefly mention it here as well, as it can certainly lead to some of the other work discussed in this section. Working on cocktails for spirit brands' events is a great way to prove your skills and open the door to other services.

Cocktails for Sales Activities

Spirits brands make a large portion of their profits from finding a position in bar and restaurant wells and cocktail menus. In order to do so, their customers must understand the product, and must know how to use it in cocktails.

Sales Sheets

A great way to open the conversation is for the sales representatives come prepared with a “Sales Sheet” or other printed documentation with example recipes. These cocktails will need to align with the brand’s marketing message but stay relatively simple so restaurants can consider implementing something similar on their own menu.

Menu Work for Customers

Spirits brands will sometimes sponsor or assist with the creation of cocktail menus for restaurants and bars that are likely to go through a large volume of their spirit. It’s a win-win for the brand and the restaurant.



In this case, the spirit brand may contract with a freelance cocktail designer to act as a menu consultant for the restaurant on their behalf. The mixologist’s job is to create a menu that aligns with the establishment’s theme, capability and preferences while giving the sponsoring brand a significant presence on the menu.

This can be a challenge if the brand and establishment’s preferences are not in alignment. Be sure to discuss expectations with the brand before meeting with the bar or restaurant so you understand how much flexibility you have. Since the spirits brand is paying for your services, they are the ones who you are ultimately trying to please.

Advertising

When advertising their product in print and digital media, often spirits brands will want a cocktail recipe and picture to feature in the artwork. When working on these types of projects, expect to provide professional quality photographs and / or work with a photographer hired by the brand.

The picture will almost certainly be most widely publicized, so in this case presentation is just as important (if not more so) than the actual flavor of the drink.

Getting Hired

This type of work is perhaps some of the most difficult to find, primarily because brands will find mixologists they like and stick with them. So I would say there are three main things to focus on when trying to build your reputation and portfolio of work for brands.

Relationships

Not surprisingly, this is probably the most important and effective way to start working with brands. Attending industry events and making an effort to build your network of industry contact will be helpful.

When you do start working with brands, don't be afraid to ask for referrals to other spirits brands in the same portfolio. I wouldn't recommend asking a brand to refer you to their competitor, but if they have other products that may need your services, it's a great idea to make sure they know you're happy to help.

PR Professionals are already working with the folks who would be your customers. Build relationships with them and treat them like gold!

Public Relations (PR) Professionals

Beverage Industry –specific PR professionals are some of the most connected people in the business. They work with spirits brands to get their products featured in print, television, radio and digital media – and are often closely connected with brand marketing people.

Use LinkedIn and Google to find PR professionals and firms in your area who specialize in the Beverage industry, and reach out directly. Remember – you have services that are valuable to

them! I'd recommend setting up a coffee meeting to let them know what you do, tell them about your experience, and give them your card. I have always found PR people extremely open and willing to meet.

Cocktail Competitions

It may sound odd, but cocktail competitions are a great opportunity to get your cocktail skills featured in front of brands. They are also a great venue to practice your presentation and networking skills. Chances are very good that the marketing team sponsoring the competition will be present – make a point to find them and introduce yourself. If you do well in the competition, that relationship could be a long-term opportunity.

When competing, focus on following the rules closely and creating drinks that support the brand's marketing messages. This will likely help you in the competition and will absolutely position you well for future work with the brand.

Closing Thoughts

When working as a cocktail designer, remember that you aren't working with Restaurant or Hospitality people. Be as professional as you would be in an "Office" job, because that is what they are used to.

Now that you have some ideas for cocktail work you might be interested in, how do you start to market yourself as a freelancer and professional beyond the bar?

When starting to build your reputation and portfolio doing freelance cocktail design, it's very important to take the work as seriously as you would a job. Referrals and introductions from existing clients are gold, so make sure every client gets a first-rate product.

Professionalism Short-Cuts

That being said, there are some other "short cuts" you can take to look very professional, right from the very beginning. Here are a few easy ones.

Business Cards

Get professional business cards made. This can be done for as little as \$10-\$20. Since you will be giving these cards to event planners, marketing people and PR firms, try to get simpler, more professionally designed cards with less imagery.

Website

There are quite a few services available to help you create very easy, simple websites for free. I recommend Weebly.com but have heard good things about Wix.com as well.

A one-page website with a good picture of you, a picture of a great looking cocktail and a quick overview of your experience and contact information is really all you need – and makes you look much more prepared than most.

Communication

Great communication is free for you to provide but will be absolutely priceless for your business. Here are a couple simple rules to live by:

- ***Follow Up:***
After any meeting, send a follow-up thank you email. This reinforces the other person's memory of you and gives them your email address in case they misplaced your card.
- ***Prepare:***
Once you've decided what kind of services you will offer, make a checklist of the types of questions you'll need to ask your clients when working with them. This will help you get all the information you need from the first phone call and will make you look experienced and well-prepared.
- ***Set Expectations:***
You are the professional who knows what you need to be successful. Help your clients understand that by setting clear expectations of what you will do, by when, and what you need their help with.

Conclusion

I hope you have found this guide helpful, and that you are excited and inspired to start working as a cocktail designer! Your skills are incredibly marketable to the right people – so go out there and start building those relationships and creating fantastic drinks!



About the Authors:

***Chris Tunstall** is an experienced Mixologist, Cocktail Consultant and Blogger who has more than 10 years of experience behind the bar. **Julia Tunstall** is a cocktail blogger, podcaster and author who has written extensively for their blog.*

Find Chris and Julia Tunstall at: <http://www.ABarAbove.com>

